

Ecology workshop: "The Spiral that Reconnects to Life and the Earth"

Written by true dedication
Friday, 31 October 2008 19:59

A two-hour workshop inspired by Joanna Macy

This Summer, during the young adults' retreat, Sister Chau Nghiem (Sister Jewel), Ernesto, Sr. Hai N., and Chloe (now Sister Su Nghiem!) offered an ecology workshop. Here they share with us their notes to enable others re-create the workshop, wherever you may be in the world!

Materials:

- Branches, or other material for creating spiral
- Bowl of water with flower petals, or fresh flowers
- About 30 small candles
- Dried leaves
- Stick
- Empty bowl
- Rocks
- Bowl with different kinds of seeds
- Quotes/poems from various environmental/spiritual leaders
- 1 paper leaf for each participant, with a string attached
- pen/pencil for each participant
- artwork or object that connects us to our ancestors
- copies of the Earth Peace Treaty (Find them at Deer Park Monastery's [website](#) or

directly

[here](#)

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Preparation: about 1 hour

- Choose a place to do this workshop where there is some outdoor space in nature that you can walk in, like a park, garden, greenhouse, backyard, etc. You can do the workshop indoors or outdoors, but the walking should be outdoors.
- Create a spiral shape on the floor or ground out of branches, you can use whatever is available if you don't find branches.

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- Create the first point on the outermost edge of the spiral: GRATITUDE. Put a bowl of flower petals or fresh flowers here.
- Continue inward on the spiral a few feet for the next step: HONOURING OUR SHARED SUFFERING. Here place a stick, rock, dead leaves and an empty bowl.
- Continue inward on the spiral a few feet for the next step: INTERBEING. Here you can place a painting, or any object that will connect participants with their ancestors and future generations. (We made a painting of cave dwelling images of people and animals and plants.)
- Continue inward on the spiral **until you are at the center of the spiral** for the final step: GOING FORTH. Here you can place the branches of an already cut tree in a bucket with soil or stones. Or it can be another structure for hanging paper leaves on if branches aren't available.
- Once the 4 steps of the spiral are complete, you can place small candles along the whole spiral that you will light as you go from one step to the next.
- Set up chairs or cushions for participants around the spiral.

Format: (It is very nice to have several people facilitate together, like four, and one can introduce each step of the spiral. But one person is also fine)

Introduction: Greet and welcome everyone. You can begin with a few moments in silence, listening to the bell and returning to your breathing. Then you can share that the origin of this workshop is the Deep Ecology work of Joanna Macy, an environmental activist and Buddhist practitioner. It will take roughly 2 hours and go through 4 steps of reflection on our relationship with life and our world. You can briefly explain each step.

1st step: The importance of GRATITUDE in our life (30-35 min). Give a short introduction, explaining that we will go barefeet outdoors and experience nature, listening and looking with the soles of our feet, not only our eyes and ears. Really touch the earth with your feet and kiss mother earth with each step. Enjoy your connection to the earth, walking slowly, mindfully,

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tenderly. Then go to a place in nature that you find attractive. It may be a tree, a spot in the sun, a bench. Then before sitting there or entering that place, stop and silently ask nature for permission. Listen and see if you feel nature invites you to enter or not. If you get permission, enjoy being quietly in that spot for a few minutes. If you don't get permission, move on to another place that attracts you and ask permission again. When you hear the sound of the bell, come back to your seat. (Give 20 minutes for the exercise and 10 minutes for those who wish to share their experience.) You can ask them to share how they felt walking barefoot. And how did they experience nature giving permission or saying 'no'?

It's good to explain that sometimes nature gives us a 'no' answer because the area is not safe, there may be harmful plants or animals there, or there may be something there that needs protection. Sometimes people report feeling a warm feeling in their chest, or a swaying of leaves or a birdsong that they feel communicates welcome to them. They may also feel an unpleasant feeling if the answer is 'no'.

We ask permission of nature to get in touch with the reality that we belong to nature, not nature to us. We have been conditioned to see ourselves as dominators over nature and this has brought about many disasters in the world and in our own psyches. This exercise helps us to see that we are a child of nature and do not 'own' her. It develops our humility before nature.

(now light the candles leading from the 1st to the 2nd steps)

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2nd step: Well grounded in gratitude we enter the next step: HONOURING OUR SUFFERING ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT (30 minutes). It is not our own suffering, it has to be clear, its a SHARED suffering, but sometimes we forget it and that is why we suffer more than we need too, we feel lonely. We can realize we are part of the same extended organism, big Mama Earth, that it is actually breathing through us, and crying through us.

In this stop of the spiral we find four elements: the stick represents Anger, the rock represents Fear, the dead leaves represent Sadness, and the empty bowl represents feeling Helpless or powerless.

We need to acknowledge these main four elements in our conciousness so we can have a healthy flow in our mind. We can introduce Thây's teachings on mind and store conciousness, that if you block or suppress your sadness or difficult emotions you are creating an obstruction and numbing yourself. Many of us do feel deeply disturbed about our world's situation but we numb ourselves because we are afraid of being overwhelmed by the pain. But we can embrace it mindfully together, to give it space to circulate, so that it won't overwhelm us.

These four emotions also have a counterpart:

Anger: means Passion for Justice and Peace, deep care for things.

Fear: acknowledging our fear is in fact a very courageous action.

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Sadness: We are sad, because our joy and appreciation for life is still very strong and we cherish the beautiful things being lost.

Powerless: When we feel empty or powerless we are creating a big space so something can fill it soon.

So we need to share these difficult emotions. Pass out a paper leaf and pen to each participant and ask them to write **ON ONLY ONE SIDE OF THE LEAF** something that make them suffer in our Earth or our Society right now. What do we feel angry, fearful, sad or helpless about with regard to the environment? After everyone has written, ask 3 or 4 people to share what they wrote. Each person keeps their leaf.

(To help hold and calm the intensity of emotions that can arise, we planned to have a 10 minute group circle massage after this second step, but we skipped it because we were running out of time.)

(now light the candles leading from the 2nd to the 3rd steps)

3rd step: INTERBEING with the Earth and all beings and with the future and past generations (15 min).

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Here we honour our connections to our ancestors and future beings, and our connection with all life on Earth in the present, with our family and even with the atmosphere. So you can hold up the object that you've placed here connecting you to ancestors and future generations and pass them around the circle for all to enjoy.

Then the facilitator(s) pick up the bowl of seeds. (Give an empty bowl to the person to the right of the facilitator.) The seeds represent the future. Carefully pick up a handful of seeds and pass them to the person to your left. Invite each participant to pass these seeds to their neighbor with utmost care, so that none drops, to represent our reverence for life and caring for our future. When the last person receives the handful of seeds, s/he places them in the empty bowl. (If the circle is larger than 20 people, pass seeds in both directions around the circle simultaneously and give the empty bowl to the person on the other side of circle directly opposite facilitator.

As people pass the seeds, you can speak about/read quotes/poetry from our environmental ancestors to honor them. You can share about Joanna Macy from the US, Abbé Pierre of France, Wangari Mathai of Kenya, and other courageous people, our spiritual or land ancestors, that worked or that are working right now for peace, justice and sustainability, they give us a sense of hope, connection, and strength. Thinking about the future generations can make us be more connected with the healing of the Earth. We come to understand better that what we do has an impact on not only the next generation, but countless future generations. We want to work for the health and safety of the many to come, our children, our grandchildren and their grandchildren.

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(now light the candles leading from the 3rd to the 4th steps)

Final step: GOING FORTH

(20-25 minutes) With all we have learned and experienced, we make a commitment based on kindness and love to live more simply and mindfully and to honour our connection to the our Grandma Earth. Pass around copies of the Earth Peace Treaty. Allow people time to reflect on the many small steps they can take to care for the earth in their daily lives. Now invite each person to fill out the other side of their paper leaf with one or several commitments they can put into practice right away. You can sing the song "We are all the leaves of one tree" as everyone stands up to hang their leaves on the branches of the tree placed in the center of the spiral.

Once everyone is seated again, close the workshop with mindful breathing to three sounds of the bell and some moments in silence.