

Connecting Nature, Faith and Health

A spiritual guide for encountering nature





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Listening for God

An excerpt from *Renewal in the Wilderness:
A Spiritual Guide to Connecting with God in the Natural World*



People do not spend time alone, on purpose, any longer. Perhaps we never did, because we're social animals by nature, meant to be in community. And yet, as nearly every religious tradition knows and teaches, there is much to be gained from intentional solitude, with no other agenda than to spend time alone with God and oneself, searching with heart for both. Type A personalities often feel that spending twenty-four hours alone doing "nothing" is a waste of time, but I try to reframe the statement (or complaint) with a "yes but": Yes.....but....you're wasting time with God. This is what the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the 4th century told Type A's of their times.

So, with appropriate gravity and ceremony, we go silently to our solo sites. Equipped with a journal and pen, a tarp, a sleeping bag and pad, some food and water, rain gear and some simple readings to enhance the experience, the next twenty-four hours are between us and God; our "assignment" is to be silent and open in the hope of hearing the same small, still voice of God that Elijah heard in the cave (I Kings 19:1-15a). And in this frame of mind, soul and body, we begin this important time of solitude.

When it ends, and we've come together again in the same solemnity and silence with which we began, we sit in a circle to talk about our experiences over the past twenty-four hours. Everyone has stories to tell, but Frank is breathless, squirming like a kindergartner, and says instantly, almost yelling:

"I think I saw God this morning!"

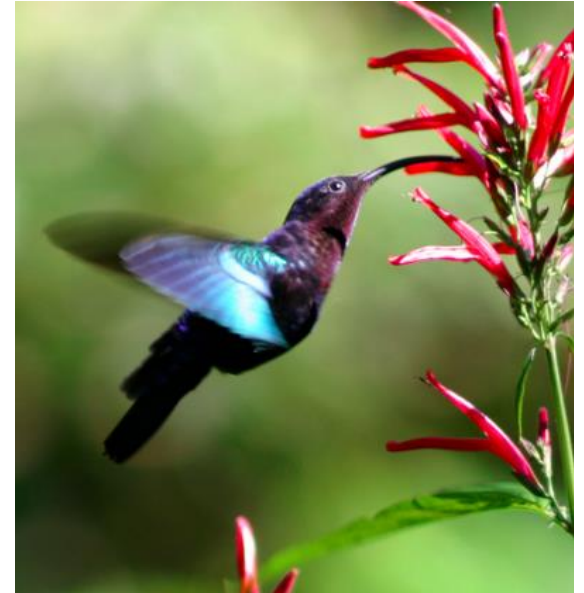
He needed no encouragement to continue.

"It was the craziest thing! I was sitting on the bluff wondering if I would ever personally experience God.... thinking it would have to be something big and spectacular, like a burning bush for me to recognize it.... when I heard a whirring sound right down here." He pointed at a particularly beautiful flower on the right side of his Hawaiian shirt, just above his belt.

"It was a HUMMINGBIRD, for God's sake, and it was hovering right here!" He continued finger-stabbing at the flower. "It stayed there for about thirty seconds before it took off, but for thirty seconds this incredible, tiny, iridescent creature and I were ten inches apart, and...." His voice trailed off and he suddenly seemed far away as his face clouded. Very quietly he said, almost in a whisper: ".... and how can I say I saw God in that hummingbird?" He looked downriver, then slowly, quizzically back at us.

"But how can I say that I didn't?"

".... how can I say that I didn't?" In that one short sentence Frank told us all—the people on that trip and you reading this—why we need to go to the wilderness: we need, truly need, to be startled by God in ways that mostly don't seem possible in our civilized lives. As an ancient spiritual practice, this is why we've always gone to the wilderness: to leave the everyday, to simplify, to open our lives to the possibility of God's personal interest in us, and to experience the transcendent through the physical.



From Renewal in the Wilderness: A Spiritual Guide to Connecting with God in the Natural World by John Lionberger. (SkyLight Paths, 2007) www.renewalinthewilderness.org

The Summer Day

By Mary Oliver

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black
bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the
grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my
hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth
instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous
and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and
thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and
floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to
fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the
grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll
through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too
soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

Recent scientific studies suggest that spending time in nature is really good for us. When we connect with nature, our breathing changes, we shed stress, we feel more focused. It helps us be more physically active, but it also does something to our bodies at the cellular level. Being in nature has been shown to help with depression, lower blood pressure and regulate cortisol, a stress hormone that affects our blood sugar levels, immune system, and blood flow.

All faith traditions recognize the power of nature to touch our spirits. Symbols and metaphors from nature are in all scriptures. Somehow, when we slow down and connect with the natural world, we feel God's presence more keenly and better understand who God is.

This guide is a tool for individuals and groups to connect spirituality with nature. You can use it for individual reflection as you spend time outdoors or you can use with a group from your house of worship or community. It intentionally draws from the scriptures and practices of all faiths and offers an opportunity for us to be enriched by the wisdom of other spiritual traditions.

This booklet includes 5 units on broad concepts:

- Water: The Source of Life
- Interconnectedness: The Web of Life
- Seasons: The Cycle of Life
- Migration: The Course of Life
- Vastness: The Wonder of Life

Each unit includes an introduction, suggested sacred texts or readings, three reflection questions, a silent sensory awareness meditation, and suggested activities that can be used for individual practice or for groups.

More resources can be found online at:
www.faithhealthtransformation.org.



Water : The Source of Life



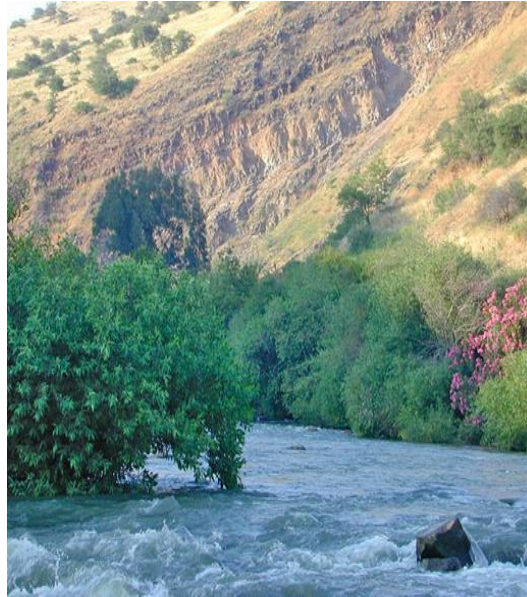
Water means life. In the Judeo Christian tradition, the first creation story says that God's voice hovers over the waters, and then separates the waters to form sky, sea, and brings forth land. Qur'an declares that 'we have everything created from water.' [Qur'an 21:30] In the Lotus 'Sutra,' Buddha is presented metaphorically as a 'rain cloud,' covering, permeating, fertilizing, and enriching 'all parched living beings, to free them from misery to attain the joy of peace, joy in the present world and joy of Nirvana...everywhere impartially without distinctions of person.' The sacredness of water receives perhaps the greatest emphasis in Hinduism. According to its teachings, the 'water of life' is believed to bring to humankind the life force itself."¹

Water is the source and sustainer of physical and spiritual life. Is it any surprise that it holds spiritual importance in many religions?

Life springs up around water. Wetlands, swamps and riverbeds often hold the largest variety of life. Water is required for germination, maturation, and pollination. Water is often used as a metaphor for cleansing, as in Amos 5: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." It is used in many religious rites: ritual bathing in ancient Judaism; baptism in Christianity; ablution before worship in Islam; spiritual cleansing in Hinduism; death rites in Buddhism. Water can also take away life as in a flood, dissolve minerals like in the Dead Sea, or carve through rock like in the Grand Canyon.

On mountains, by rivers, in valleys, in hidden recesses, there grow the plants, trees, and herbs; trees, both great and small, the shoots of the ripening grain, grape vine and sugar cane. Fertilized are these by the rain and abundantly enriched; the dry ground is soaked; herbs and trees flourish together. From the one water which issues from the clouds, plants, trees, thickets, forest, according to need receive moisture. All the various trees, lofty, medium, low, each according to its size, grow and develop roots, stalks, branches, leaves, blossoms and fruits in their brilliant colors; wherever the one rain reaches, all become fresh and glossy. According as their bodies, forms, and natures are great and small, so the enriching rain, though it is one and the same, yet makes each of them flourish.

The Lotus Sutra



Psalm 104: 10-13

You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst. By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches. From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways is water holy to you?
2. Where in your life or surroundings do you see the miracle of life?
3. How do you give thanks to the source of life?

Silent Sensory Awareness

Find a natural location near water or after a fresh rain. Close your eyes, relax, and breathe through your nose for 10 minutes. Listen, smell, and touch the water if you can. Feel it slip through your fingertips. Smell how it changes the air. Feel, and be aware of, how the moisture in the air wets your breath. Imagine water flowing through your body – in your blood, in your organs, in your breath, in your stomach, in your skin. Offer gratitude for the water that keeps you alive.

Activity

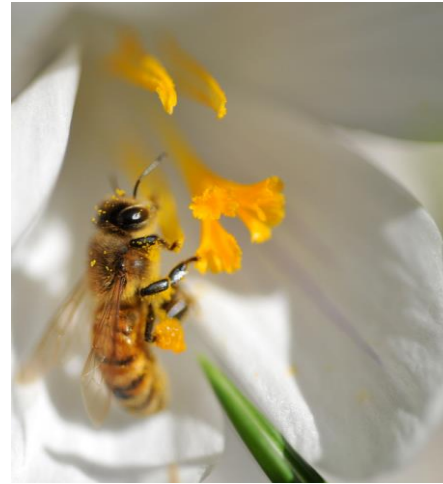
With a clear cup and magnifying glass, collect a cup of water from a river, lake, stream or puddle and analyze what living and non-living organisms you can see. If you can, collect a partial cup of mud or earth from the bank, and do the same analysis. Do you see the same things or different things? (When finished, remember to return the water to its source for good stewardship.)

Think of a song or hymn from your tradition that uses water as an image. Hum it to yourself as you walk or sit. Or, if you are in a group, sing it together before and after your nature activity. For example, sing a verse from the Christian hymn "All Creatures of our God and King:

Cool flowing water, pure and clear, make music for your Lord to hear;
O praise ye! Alleluia!
Earth, ever fertile, day by day, bring forth your blessings on our way!
O praise ye! Alleluia!



Interconnectedness: The Web of Life



'I see the bees buzzing, collecting a little nectar here and a little nectar there. Never too much. Never a flower has complained that a bee has taken too much nectar away. Human beings go to nature and take, take, take, until all natural resources are depleted. Honey bees never do that. If I can learn that lesson of frugality and simplicity, I will be learning the art of living.'

The fundamental lesson of ecology is that all living organisms are interconnected. An ecosystem is a delicate balance of interdependent life forms. When one thrives, it provides life to other living things, and harm to one ripples through the others. When you encounter nature in trouble, such as a dying forest or a lake with a toxic algae bloom - it is because the ecosystem is out of balance.

Interconnectedness is echoed in religion. The definition of Enlightenment in Buddhism is 'an awakening to the interconnectedness of all things'. According to Rabbi

Zalmon Schacter-Shalomi, the Jewish concept of 'kosher' has to do with both the individual and the universe. "Helping to take care of the business of the universe begins with taking care of ourselves. The Jewish tradition is very clear about this. Each of us is part of the whole, and we matter."

One of the core teachings of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is that "we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." As people of faith, we recognize that this principle can be in sharp contrast to a culture that is often individualistic and fragmented. When we learn we are part of a web of life, and that each of us not only impact others' lives, but also depend on the wellness of others to thrive, then we begin to approach the mutuality and interconnectedness of nature.

*To the Creator, for the ultimate gift of life, I thank you.
To the mineral nation that has built and maintained my
bones and all foundations of life experience, I thank
you. To the plant nation that sustains my organs and
body and gives me healing herbs for sickness, I thank
you. To the animal nation that feeds me from your own
flesh and offers your loyal companionship in this walk of
life, I thank you. To the human nation that shares my
path as a soul upon the sacred wheel of Earthly life, I
thank you. To the Spirit nation that guides me invisibly
through the ups and downs of life and for carrying the
torch of light through the Ages. I thank you. To the Four
Winds of Change and Growth, I thank you. You are all
my relations, my relatives, without whom I would not
live. We are in the circle of life together, co-existing, co-
dependent, co-creating our destiny. One, not more
important than the other. One nation evolving from the
other and yet each dependent upon the one above
and the one below. All of us a part of the Great
Mystery. Thank you for this Life.*

Reflection Questions

1. What do you feel in your deepest heart when you're surrounded by nature?
2. How do you feel connected to life around you?
3. What do you find most surprising about the web of life?



Breathing in, I know that I am
breathing in.
Breathing out, I know that I am
breathing out.

Breathing in, I see myself as a flower.
Breathing out, I feel flesh.

Breathing in, I see myself as a
mountain.
Breathing out, I feel solid.

Breathing in, I see myself as still water.
Breathing out, I reflect on things as
they are.

Breathing in, I see myself as space.
Breathing out, I feel free.
Thich Nhat Hanh, Buddhist Monk

Silent Sensory Awareness

Close your eyes, relax, and breathe through your nose for 15 minutes. As you breathe in, let yourself experience the reality that each inhalation you are receiving is a life-giving gift from the biosphere – a literal gift of life-renewing oxygen from the plant communities around the planet that generate it. With each exhalation, realize that you are exhaling the life-giving gift of carbon dioxide to the oxygen-producing plants that they must receive to life, blossom, reproduce, and produce oxygen. Continue and experience your life-sustaining interdependence with all other living things.

Activity

Try reading the landscape. Take a walk and find something in the natural environment. Look for signs where the natural features have adapted to natural or human impact. Why do trees lean or fall? What signs can you see of where water has created an impact in the earth, or lack of water? What signs of human activity do you see that have affected the environment you are in? How does nature adapt to change?

What are some things you can do to better care for God's creation? Can you commit to do an action step for 30 days?



Seasons: The Cycle of Life



In hope of Spring. Like a drought in Summer. An Autumn pregnancy. The Winter of our lives. The seasonal cycle is in our language and teaches us about abundance, patience, and renewal. Just as in the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, 'For everything, there is a season,' our religious traditions draw on the cycle of life so visible in nature to help make sense of our time on earth - and when our time draws to an end. The Blackfoot Tribe has a common proverb; "Life is not separate from death. It only looks that way."

Parker Palmer reminds us that fertility and the sprouting of new life, so firmly rooted in spring, is also representative of our time to learn. "I love the fact that the word "humus"— the decayed vegetable matter that feeds the roots of plants – comes from the same word root that gives rise to the word "humility." It is a blessed etymology. It helps me understand that the humiliating events of life, the events that leave "mud on my face" or that "make my name mud," may create the fertile soil in which something new can grow."

While germination reminds us of spring, the paradox of autumn is that seeding happens while plant matter decays. "As I explore autumn's paradox of dying and seeding, I feel the power of metaphor," says Palmer. "In the autumnal events of my own experience, I am easily fixated on surface appearances – on the decline of meaning, the decay of relationships, the death of a work. And yet, if I look more deeply, I may see the myriad possibilities being planted to bear fruit in some season yet to come."

In times of grief, we are often reminded that we are dust, and to dust we will return. Spending time in nature can help us make sense of death, endure grief, and deal with loss. Pioneer naturalist and Sierra Club Founder John Muir observes, "On no subject are our ideas more warped and pitiable than on death. Let children walk with nature, let them see the beautiful blendings and communions of death and life, their joyous inseparable unity, as taught in the woods and meadows, plains and mountains and streams of our blessed star, and they will learn that death is stingless indeed, and as beautiful as life, and that the grave has no victory, for it never fights. All is divine harmony."

*In the rising of the sun and in its going down,
 we remember them.
 In the glowing of the wind and in the chill of
 winter,
 we remember them.
 In the openings of buds and in the rebirth of
 spring
 we remember them.
 In the blueness of the sky and in the warmth of
 summer
 we remember them.
 In the rustling of leaves and in the beauty of
 autumn,
 we remember them.
 In the beginning of the year and when it ends,
 we remember them.
 When we are weary and in need of strength,
 we remember them.
 When we are lost and sick at heart,
 we remember them.
 When we have joys we yearn to share,
 we remember them.
 So long as we live, they too shall live
 for they are now a part of us, as
 we remember them.*

-Jewish Prayer

Reflection Questions

1. Death in God's creation brings forth new life. Have you experienced renewal after grief in your own life?
2. Where are you laying seeds for the future?
3. Is your spiritual life in blossom at this moment?
Germinating? In decay?
Lying in dormancy?



Silent Sensory Awareness

Choose a 1 square-foot piece of natural ground (preferably not a lawn) and spend 15 minutes watching all the life, growth and decay that exist in that small plot of earth. What living things are supporting other living things just in that plot of land? What living things have seeds? Where are they in their life cycle?

Give thanks for any creatures you see and reflect on the cycle of life that supports you.

The Blossom Gives Way to the Fruit

Passing, passing
 The blossom gives way to the fruit.
 Both are necessary.
 One passes into another
 Bread exists to be broken
 To sustain its purpose,
 The grape on the vine
 Is wine in the making,
 Crush it and it comes alive.

Jalal ad-Din ar-Rumi, Sufi Mystic

Activity

Use crayons or colored pencils and draw what you see of the changing seasons. Find some natural material on the ground to create leaf or bark rubbings.

Find a recording of the song, *Turn, Turn, Turn* by The Byrds and listen to it before or after your encounter with nature. If you are with a group, sing it together.

Excerpt from The Byrds, *Turn, Turn, Turn* (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

Refrain:

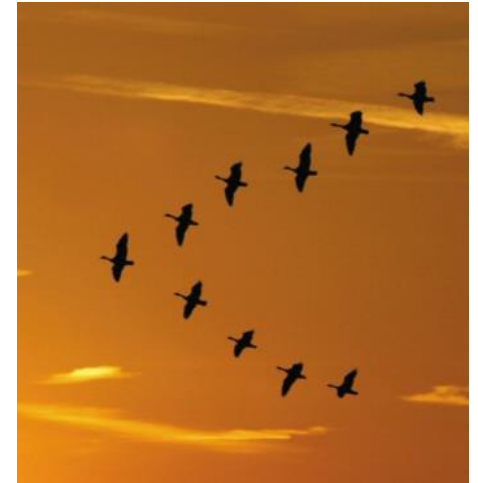
*To everything – turn, turn, turn
 There is a season – turn, turn, turn
 And a time to every purpose under heaven
 A time to be born, a time to die
 A time to plant, a time to reap
 A time to kill, a time to heal
 A time to laugh, a time to weep*



Everyone has a migration story, whether it is one's own story or one that has been inherited from loved ones or friends. Human beings, monarch butterflies, birds, mammals, fish and other ocean species all seek welcoming places to eat, rest, and live along the migration journey and at the destination. Historically human beings and other species have migrated for survival - either away from danger, in search of food and livelihood, or for mating and marriage.

The North American monarch butterfly is unique among butterflies; it is the only butterfly known to make a two-way migration as birds do. Unlike other butterflies that can overwinter as larvae, pupae, or even as adults in some species, monarchs cannot survive the cold winters of northern climates. Using environmental cues, the monarchs know when it is time to travel south for the winter and travel along air currents and thermals for long distances. Some fly as far as 3,000 miles to reach their winter home!

Migration: The Course of Life



The annual Jewish holiday of Passover commemorates the exodus, or migration, of the Jewish people from Egypt for their freedom from slavery. Passover is a reminder of the experience of being a stranger and living without the protection of citizenship.

The Qur'an also speaks of oppression and suggests that people migrate to another land of God - and that they should be welcomed. "Was not the earth of God spacious enough for you to flee for refuge?" (4:97). Since Adam, the father of humanity, migrated from heaven to earth, the tradition of Islam considers all human beings as immigrants. Therefore, the primordial fatherland of humanity is heaven, while the earth is a place for temporary relocation. Similarly, the Prophet likens himself to a traveler who stays for a short time to rest under the shade of a tree and then continues on his journey.

Migration is a factor in nature and human history, and brings with it discovery, prosperity, and vulnerability to predators and other dangers during the journey. That may be why most religions command hospitality for the stranger and refuge for those in need.

Psalm 105: 12-15

When they were few in
number, of little account,
and strangers in it,
wandering
from nation to nation, from
one kingdom
to another people,
he allowed no one
to oppress them;
he rebuked kings on
their account,
saying, "Do not touch my
anointed ones; do my
prophets no harm."



I have been to
the end of the earth.
I have been to
the end of the waters.
I have been to
the end of the sky.
I have been to the
end of the mountains.
I have found none
that are not my friends.

Navajo Proverb

Reflection Questions

1. What types of living things migrate?
Why? (Don't forget 2-legged mammals: humans!)
2. How do we discover God in new places when we migrate?
How does it present new opportunities for growth?
3. How does migration affect our spirit?

Silent Sensory Awareness

Sit silently for 15 minutes, outside, and feel the air gliding across your body, and the sensations it evokes. Listen to the sounds the wind makes through the trees, how it "chuffs" in your ears, how it ruffles your hair. How does that feel? Think about where that breeze has been, what other life forms and what other places it has touched, and how that helps sustain life.

Sit silently and watch the patterns of movement of animals around you. Think about where they are going and why. If it was three or six months into the future, how would things be different?

Activity

Think about what living beings are moving now, because of weather or some other reason. Create a short poem or story describing their journey, where they are going, why, how long they will be there, and what they will do when they arrive.

Use this poem as a guided meditation:

*Stand still. The trees ahead and the bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called HERE.
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger.
Must ask permission to know it and be known.
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,
I have made this place around you.
If you leave it, you may come back again, saying, HERE.
No two trees are the same to Raven.
No two branches are the same to Wren.
If what a tree or bush does is lost on you,
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find you.
David Wagoner*



Vastness: The Wonder of Life



"There ain't no atheists at the Grand Canyon" was the title of a 2013 Time Magazine article in 2013. In the interview, Psychologist Piercarlo Valdesolo said, "many historical accounts of religious epiphanies and revelations seem to involve the experience of being awe-struck by the beauty, strength or size of a divine being, and these experiences change the way people understand and think about the world."

How many of us can stand next to Niagara Falls without thinking about the Divine? Or the impossible power of thunder in a summer storm, the breathtaking beauty of a mountainside, the height of ocean waves, the innumerable stars in the sky, the majesty of an old growth Redwood Forest, or the force of gale winds? From the grandest heights to the most minute organism, God is there. The incredible majesty of the earth we inhabit and its mysterious forces can only reinforce our sense of wonder at the vastness of the universe.

"We are all born with a belief in God. It may not have a last name or a face. We may not even see it as God. But it is there. It is the sense that comes over us as we stare into the starlit sky or watch the last fiery rays of an evening sunset. It is the morning shiver as we wake on a beautiful day and smell a richness in the air that we know and love from somewhere we can't recall. It is the mystery behind the beginning of time and beyond the limits of space. It is a sense of otherness that brings alive something deep within our hearts." - Kent Nerburn, Simple Truths.

*I believe a leaf of grass is no less
than the journey-work of the stars.*
Walt Whitman, Poet

*The Cosmos is all that is or was or
ever will be. Our feeblest
contemplations of the Cosmos stir
us -- there is a tingling in the spine,
a catch in the voice, a faint
sensation, as if a distant memory,
of falling from a height. We know
we are approaching the greatest of
mysteries.*

Carl Sagan, Cosmologist

*There's as many atoms in a single
molecule of your DNA as there are
stars in the typical galaxy. We are,
each of us, a little universe.*
Neil DeGrasse Tyson, Astrophysicist

Reflection Questions

- 1) What part of God's world brings you to your knees in awe and wonder?
- 2) What takes your breath away?
- 3) How, and where, can you get more of this in your life?



Silent Sensory Awareness

Watch the clouds in the sky for 15 minutes. What do you see, and how does it make you feel?

Reflect on each word in this hymn from the Christian tradition.

O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder,
consider all the works thy hand hath made.
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,
thy power throughout the universe displayed:

Refrain:

*Then sings my soul, my Savior God; to thee,
How great thou art, how great thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Savior God; to thee,
How great thou art, how great thou art!*

When through the woods and forest glades I
wander, and hear the birds sing sweetly in the
trees;
when I look down from lofty mountain
grandeur, and hear the brook, and feel the
gentle breeze.
Refrain

Activity

Pick up a blade of grass, leaf, stone or piece of bark. Smell it, feel it, look at it very slowly and closely. Imagine you can shrink yourself and go into the leaf itself. Go as far as you can in your imagination...all the way down to the atoms that make up the leaf. Then start moving outward. Imagine stepping further and further back from your object until you are high above the earth. Keep moving outward as far as your imagination will take you.

*We stand somewhere between the mountain
and the ant. - Onandaga Proverb*