

Preparation for Nature

The relationship between humans and nature is complicated. We are part of nature; we are animals whose lives depend on nature. Yet we have often defined our humanness in opposition to nature. Throughout our lives, we make choices that weave us in and among these complicated interactions.

Do humans belong to nature? We often separate ourselves from nature by seeing it as a “resource” – a way to grow food or extract materials for our use. This utilitarian view blinds us to nature’s realities. We separate ourselves from nature psychologically as well. If we look at fairy tales told to children, we can see that nature is often presented as dark, wild, and frightening. We all know what happens in those tales when a child wanders into the dark woods.

This sense of fear and “otherness” contributes to a common cultural theme of pitting humans against nature in a struggle for survival. We often project our own feelings of struggle onto animals, and modern life removes us from nature’s cycles so that we may see nature as cruel. The harshness of a predator hunting and killing its prey conjures up sympathies for the preyed upon bunny, but is the coyote hunter truly demonstrating a darker side to nature? Could a coyote have ill intent in her heart to go out and hunt in order to feed her hungry pups in their den?

But humans can find themselves and their place in nature. Spiritual leaders in many traditions have gone to nature to seek their inner sense of mission: Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree, Jesus wandered in the wilderness, Mohammed meditated in caves. The transcendentalists (mostly Unitarians) found inspiration in nature. The Unitarian 7th principle teaches us to see nature as the “interdependent web of existence, of which we are a part.” Science, art, and our own observations can help us understand that interdependent web and learn how to be wiser in our relationship with the Earth. We can also consider the UU 6th wisdom source: “spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.”

Earth-centered traditions teach us that Nature is not cruel but balanced and abundant. The Navajo understanding of the hunt includes time to pray and give thanks to the animal’s life that is about to be taken. There is a promise made to give back to the environment in support of the kin of this rabbit, a promise that makes hunting more of an exchange. For us, living in cities, a hunter’s tradition may not be available, but we can still eat our food with intention and care.

Similarly, pagan traditions teach us about nature and nature’s cycles, cycles that include darkness and wildness as well as light, life, birth, and growth. Earth-centered traditions may lead us to honor nature as a living being – Gaia, our Earth Mother, the source of life. Openness to nature can include the stars and the Universe – an undeniable, creative force that even those of us who do not believe in a personified “god” have to respect as a power greater than ourselves.

Humans are part of nature, but humans do not own nature. We have irresponsibly damaged the balance of nature through overpopulation, pollution, and degradation of the wilderness, so that droughts, pandemics, and rising seas may seem like nature is fighting back. Nature will persist long after we are gone, but restoring balance to our relationship with nature is critical for our own survival. We can live in harmony, humility, and spiritual union with Mother Earth to celebrate and honor her for the life and abundance she gives us.

Below are a variety of thoughts for you to consider as you ponder the subject of nature.

The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way. Some see nature all ridicule and deformity... and some scarce see nature at all. But to the eyes of the man of imagination, nature is imagination itself. *William Blake*

The healing of our relationship with place begins with the preservation of the natural environment. We cannot go to the wild for renewal if no wilderness is left. *Starhawk*

It's been proven by quite a few studies that plants are good for our psychological development. If you green an area, the rate of crime goes down. Torture victims begin to recover when they spend time outside in a garden with flowers. So we need them, in some deep psychological sense, which I don't suppose anybody really understands yet. *Jane Goodall*

The control man has secured over nature has far outrun his control over himself. *Ernest Jones*

Before this world existed, the holy people made themselves visible by becoming the clouds, sun, moon, trees, bodies of water, thunder, rain, snow, and other aspects of this world we live in. That way, they said, we would never be alone. So it is possible to talk to them and pray, no matter where we are and how we feel. *Luci Tapahonso, first poet laureate of the Navajo Nation*

The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness. *John Muir*

Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature – the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter. *Rachel Carson, Silent Spring*

Questions to Ponder

1. Reflect on a recent experience of nature – a bird or bug or other creature, a plant, some clouds, a landscape ... If nature is a teacher, what could you learn from this encounter?
2. What was your family's relationship with nature while growing up? How has this affected your own engagement with nature?
3. Reflect on a time when nature was frightening. What was that like?
4. How do you reconcile Nature as beautiful and life-giving with its harsh or frightening aspects – predators, hurricanes, fire ... ?
5. Think about places in nature that have been special for you. Consider some of the details of a special place and how you felt.
6. In what ways is nature a part of your spiritual life? Are there nature-related spiritual practices that are meaningful to you?

Words of the Day

Before coming to the Gathering, reflect on what comes to mind when you reflect on the word “nature” – a place (actual or imagined), a description, an idea, or a feeling. For the Words of the Day, you will complete the sentence “When I hear the word ‘nature,’ what comes to mind is ...”