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**AN INTRODUCTION**

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CHAPTER SIX

# Innovations in Ecospiritual Practice

Spirituality is a mode of being in which not only the divine and the human commune with each other but through which we discover ourselves in the universe and the universe discovers itself in us.

—Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century*

Just as greening spiritual practice requires imagination and thinking outside the box of traditional expressions of religious ritual and ceremony and devotional engagement with sacred texts and concepts, so do innovations occurring outside such traditions. Deep ecology as a self-understanding of humanity as thoroughly a part of our natural world requires that we implement our special gifts as humans, such as self-reflection, imagination, and empathy, to respond to the ways the natural world offers us lessons in how to be human. One thinker especially important in applying the insights of biomimicry to human change and social transformation is adrienne maree brown.<sup>1</sup> Biomimicry refers to design details drawn from the natural world. Engineers use principles discerned from patterns in the natural world to streamline aerodynamics and to improve forms of human transportation and habitation. Though this might be a novel adaptation within scientific modeling, our growth as human beings within our spiritual dimensions has always drawn from examples in our neighbors'

emergent and changing lives, as evidenced by numerous examples in sacred scriptures. One example is the opening of the book of Psalms with its evocation of the tree flourishing beside an ample water source to indicate human flourishing when devotionally and regularly connected with the word of God mediated through law. Another example comes from the Tao Te Ching and its evocation of how water gently and powerfully shapes all that it comes into contact with as an indication of how nonforceful action can be just as if not more transformative in human behavior than force. The energies implicated in nonforceful action are routinely employed in physical action (such as in the martial arts) and in interior movements (as in nonviolent communication within oneself and with others).

adrienne maree brown's work engages biomimicry strategies in order to discern in what ways animal and plant populations work together as species to offer lessons to her human readers about their own potential. Certainly, this requires perceptive awareness of the natural world and imagination to apply what we see to what we do ourselves and to who we are. This is actually an ancient technique, as we might recall the fourth-century desert Christian who spoke about the seed in sand that might not grow if tropped all over and who recommended withdrawing from the busyness of our lives in order to let what is in us grow. This is an insight this desert Christian drew from their observation of the natural world, and this person discerned a likeness between themselves and the seed in relationship with the land. This is precisely what adrienne maree brown is doing too as she points out particular natural processes as emergent—that is, they change and can change in large ways because of smaller interactions or smaller components of the whole that create large shifts. The relationship between the small and big gets its fullest attention with brown's focus on emergence.

A few examples may suffice to give us an impression of what brown helps us understand. She writes about how certain birds fly together, altering their collective movement by a subtle signaling between individual members of the flock and modeling emergent, nonhierarchical relationships as no individual bird is in the lead. She

writes of mycelium who form an underground network of communication and support, modeling relational interdependence within the species and across species. She writes of the wave-particle duality that resists either/or identity and instead models hybridity and a both/and reality new and challenging to human consciousness. Some thinkers have also used this example from our new knowledge of quantum reality to explain other forms of intelligent movement beyond the human that we signal we do not yet understand by labelling random.<sup>2</sup> In these examples drawn from the natural world, brown suggests that the emergent qualities of human communities, as well, arise from individual, small-level interactions that enable movements on a larger scale. The whole is larger or more significant, then, than the sum of its parts. Other principles that she draws from her minute attention to the natural world and the forms it offers us for imitation include the following:

Small is good, small is all. (The large is a reflection of the small.)

Change is constant. (Be like water.)

There is always enough time for the right work.

There is a conversation in the room that only these people at this moment can have. Find it.

Never a failure, always a lesson.

Trust the People. (If you trust the people, they become trustworthy.)

Move at the speed of trust. Focus on critical connections more than critical mass—build the resilience by building the relationships.

Less prep, more presence.

What you pay attention to grows.<sup>3</sup>

Innovations in ecospiritual practice draw from principles that brown identifies as consistent with emergent strategy. Consideration of zero waste as a spiritual practice, for instance, draws its force from deep investigation of what pollution really means and does. Forest therapy

requires that a person slow down and intentionally engage their sensory perception of the sylvan world and regard presence in the forest as therapeutic. The Council of All Beings draws on the imagination and the conviction that there is a creaturely continuity between human and all life on Earth allowing us to live more fully into our identity as members of the Earth community come to consciousness. As Thomas Berry writes, "The Earth is acting in us whenever we act."<sup>4</sup> According to Berry, Earth has even "[taken] a certain amount of control of itself in its human mode of being."<sup>5</sup> This identification of the human species as a form of the universe or Earth come to self-consciousness invites us to new and exciting self-understanding and use of our unique skills to repair the damage we have done on Earth so far.

## **ZERO WASTE AS ECOSPIRITUAL PRACTICE**

Zero waste is a concept used by manufacturers to explain how by-products emerging from the manufacturing process are repurposed to ends that allow them not to be wasted. In the early decades of the twenty-first century, individuals in households have adopted this ideal to frame their own activities of use and repurposing. A principal proponent of this practice is Bea Johnson, a California mother whose book, blog, videos, and appearances to international communities have enabled the practice to be adopted by a wide variety of people all over the world. One reason this practice has emerged and been adopted so quickly is practitioners' use of social media and online community tools to collaborate with one another by sharing ideas and resources. Another reason also draws from online tools: the visibility of waste. Many of us may not live near enough to a landfill to really see, marvel at, or feel concerned about how much waste we routinely deposit there. But others who do have such experiences have shared their experiences online. Further, those who live near unofficial polluted sites have also made these degraded places in nature visible to the rest of us so that we might do something about it.

Among those who have raised awareness of the issue of pollution and its impact on the natural world is the photographer Chris Jordan, whose *Midway* photographs of bird bodies ravaged by plastics and open to disclose their bodies' plastic contents have been profoundly moving to many—urging them to reconsider using a plastic straw or other products that are so easily disposed of and might end up the unappetizing and unnourishing food for creatures elsewhere in the world. Bea Johnson and Chris Jordan are both activists working from their own sources of pain at seeing the natural world so compromised in its integrity, and they are working to evoke others' consciousnesses and compassionate responses to unnecessary uses of plastic and other disposables.

An interesting aspect of this very practical activity of zero waste is its characterization as a spiritual practice. What makes such a practice as recycling or zero waste *spiritual*? To ask this question is to continue thinking of the spiritual as something that refers to something done in religious spaces or for some religious purpose, however we typically define such things. But in our twenty-first-century context, we need to think and act beyond such distinctions and to consider what things we do that contribute to the flourishing of members of the Earth community as *spiritual practice*. In that way, zero waste becomes an important expression of one's spiritual life. It prevents contributing to the problem other parts of creation face when flooded with waste, and it helps us foster alternatives to the kind of "throwaway culture" that we have formed, which extends not only to material objects but also to our relationships and other more intangible aspects of our lives that we may too easily disengage.<sup>6</sup>

Many practitioners of zero waste also reflect on how the practice brings them into community more readily with other activities. Purchasing items without wasteful packaging often means interacting with the producers themselves, such as at a farmers' market or through community-supported agricultural co-ops.<sup>7</sup> Like eco-halal and eco-kosher, this practice impacts so many activities of one's life. Starting with food, we might resist packaging that is disposed of by opting for whole rather than processed foods. This contributes to our

bodily health, as well as mediating health to our ecosystems. Another activity, such as the choice of clothing we purchase and wear, might involve thinking about the waste incurred by having to care for and maintain such items and opting for possibilities that will not require wasteful practices of water use or cleaning products. Waste in transportation choices can be eliminated as we make decisions about walking or biking in areas close to us or making one's trips to other places efficient by grouping them in one day.

Scientists affirm the precept that "in nature, nothing is created and nothing is destroyed, but everything is transformed."<sup>8</sup> Nature models an overabundance of resources, and though some aspects of it may seem wasteful, there is a reason, for instance, a fruit tree will produce more blossoms than become fruit. Such abundance expresses the means by which reproduction will occur, and in some ways, our own processes have gotten away from such sensibilities when we focus on scarcity. However, we are invited to be mindful that our natural systems are closed and whatever we throw away goes somewhere and is stored there until it breaks down and is reintegrated into another part of our natural systems. In the case of some substances, this breakdown can take centuries or even millennia. Fortunately, humans are learning from nature how nature disposes of surplus and how everything is fundamentally recycled. What one element of an ecosystem does not need anymore another might use. We can see this balancing out in the simple reciprocal action of respiration that plants and breathing creatures share in: breathing in oxygen that plants provide for us, we then breathe out the carbon dioxide those plants need. Many trees lose leaves seasonally to enter a period of preparation for new growth, and their leaves provide nourishment for soils that feed other inhabitants of a forest, for instance. These models might help us calibrate what forms of waste we tolerate creating in our own lives and what we refrain from creating.

For Christians, the truth of transformation implicit in the practice of zero waste also resonates with resurrection. For Buddhists, a similar resonance may occur between zero waste and reincarnation. Attending to the cycles of renewal that our own bodies experience

in the context of our Earth community trains us to see the nonperishability of aspects of our material culture. Similarly, though often resurrection or reincarnation may appear as abstractions to us, experienced in ways we do not thoroughly understand, attending as well to the concrete evidence of the renewal of material culture around us also has the potential to green and deepen our understanding of human experience.

### **FOREST THERAPY: ELIDING SACRED SPACES**

In recent years, the transformation of “forest bathing” (*shinrin-yoku*) in Japan has been recognized worldwide as forest therapy. Originally, forest bathing was developed to counter the ennui that accompanied industrialization and was a social movement to effect a reconnection between human populations and with the natural world. In more recent years, forest therapy has emerged as a name for the same activity, and certification programs for becoming a forest therapy guide have been developed in order to respond to the resurgence of interest in cultivating a person’s sensory experience in the wild as a method of therapeutic engagement with the natural world. There could be something a bit troubling about the commodification of the training process for becoming a certified forest therapy guide, and though I will not investigate further the ethical components of the marketing and consumption of programs like forest therapy certification, I do mention this aspect of the practice as something warranting further critique. Is it right to pay someone to guide one through a forest therapy session? After all, many people pay for counseling and other therapeutic interventions. Is it right to pay to become a certified guide? What does it say about the activity when training in it requires monetary exchange?

However we answer these questions, the fundamental insight offered by the transformation of the name “forest bathing” to “forest therapy” is that it indicates a woundedness on the part of the human



community. Something about human identity has been and is being wounded when not in touch with fundamental aspects of the natural world as sacred. Restoring that connection is understood to lead to a healing of one's woundedness and thus to constitute therapy rather than bathing or cleansing oneself.

An important aspect of forest therapy is that the forest is the therapist, not the person who might guide one through a forest therapy session. The forest setting is primarily responsible for the healing work that occurs when people slow down to engage their senses in the sylvan setting. The guide, certified or otherwise, is trained in leading others to slow down and to use their senses—two activities that might be thought to be natural to us and yet so often are not—and so guides I know are very careful to identify themselves as forest therapy *guides* and not forest therapists themselves, leaving the work of therapy to the forest.

Kimberly Ruffin, a licensed forest therapy guide, writes about the drawing together of the Christian church community and the forest space as holy in her essay "Bodies of Evidence: A Forest Therapy Guide Finds Her Church."<sup>9</sup> In this essay, Ruffin claims, "Faith is the method we use to support the spirit of our human animality," and she says, "Nature is my church, and church is in my nature." Both of these claims help us think beyond the places where we typically locate faith expression and also contest the distinction between the human and our sacred earth home. In an online article, Ruffin also offers guidance to an experience of forest therapy that requires us to pay close attention to the ways our senses apprehend the natural world and locate us in a life-giving relationship of belonging.<sup>10</sup> Notably, though "therapy" has in a sense taken the place of "bathing" in terms of this practice's recognition, the refreshing immersion that bathing suggests can also resonate with what therapy accomplishes for a person.

Much of what occurs during a forest therapy session involves focusing in on key sensory ways of engaging the natural world—by attending to texture and movements that one sees, small or large, or by listening to sounds close to one or farther away and noting the

difference. One might sit for a while in one space and allow one's interior noisiness to quiet in response to the subtle and lively noises around one. When therapy is being accomplished, the person begins to experience the reintegrating of their fundamental identity as one member of the Earth community amid many other members. So often, we tend to enter a forest on a trail and purposefully go our way, hiking, but forest therapy is an ecospiritual practice that invites us to resist staying on the trail (though to be safe in our going off-trail, so to speak) and to resist the urge to cover ground quickly. John Muir said, echoing Henry David Thoreau's reflections in his essay on "Walking," "People ought to 'saunter' in the mountains [or forests]—not hike! Do you know the origin of that word saunter? It's a beautiful word. Away back in the middle ages people used to go on pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and when people in the villages through which they passed asked where they were going, they would reply, *A la sainte terre*, 'To the Holy Land.' And so they became known as sainte-terrers or saunterers. Now these mountains [and forests] are our Holy Land, and we ought to saunter through them reverently, not 'hike' through them."<sup>11</sup> We express our experience of the natural world as sacred when we are able to be present regarding all we see and hear, smell and feel, as sacred, as holy land. A friend of mine who is a pastor organizes "Sacred Saunter" experiences for the members of the faith community they serve. Regularly, these members engage the natural world in ways that expand the boundaries of their recognized sacred space, the church building, to comprise the neighborhood parks and woods surrounding that space. As this practice continues, our sensibility concerning the pervasive holiness and sacred quality of all our Earth community will be affirmed and celebrated.

This ecospiritual practice of forest therapy invites us to reconsider where it is we are most nourished and healed. Early Christian theology posited the church or faith community as a site of personal and communal healing and partaking of the eucharistic meal as a medicinal activity that not only might remediate past uncleanness, in the form of sinful behavior, but could also equip or nourish one for more virtuous activity in subsequent times. When I have experienced forest

therapy with a guide, part of the time spent together in a small group has involved eating foods like dried fruits or nuts that come from trees, nibbling on wood sorrel, and drinking tea brewed with pine needles or some other dimension of the particular forest in which therapy was unfolding. For many Christians and other people of faith, this ingestion of a meal together may parallel what they celebrate together in a liturgical setting. It also reminds us of the ways in which we are nourished quite physically, just as we are psychologically and spiritually, by the forest as the forest becomes us and we live out the forest's life in our own bodies. John Muir wrote presciently of this engagement in a letter about "Lord Sequoia," whose blood or wine he consumed sacramentally. He seemed to mean the presence of the trees and mountains and other creatures intoxicated him, and his ecstatic sensibility of transposing going to church to an attitude of responsive fidelity to the forest and mountains that called him can inform our own apprehension of the sacred. "There is balm in these leafy Gileads," Muir claimed. "Sick or successful, come suck Sequoia and be saved."<sup>12</sup> Just as Muir modeled an awareness of the forest's therapeutic nature, so may we become increasingly aware of the larger dimensions of this space that can heal as we spend time in forests. Further, that other sacred spaces like the coastline or prairies or desert also promote healing when engaged to the fullest extent through our sensory experiences renders an openness to those places and ways we can experience healing. That forests offer a privileged place of healing may draw from trees' long-standing association with shrines. The sacred groves of long ago are being again restored in our collective memory as we encounter the diverse communities living in forests and experience the unique respite such spaces offer.

## **THE COUNCIL OF ALL BEINGS**

The Council of All Beings is a ritual developed by Joanna Macy and John Seed to enable participants to experience their own creaturely continuity with other beings and to access the wisdom these other

life-forms have for the human community. The Council of All Beings does not draw from any existing ritual, though it uses language of “council” to indicate a gathering of a truly extraordinary kind: that of the human community using imagination to summon the persons of other life-forms and aspects of our universe to speak their experience and even to offer the human community gifts from their experience. While the greening of spiritual practices in the past chapter involved drawing on the wisdom of instructions in sacred scriptures and traditions for how the practice might be activated in one’s life, the Council of All Beings draws from a surprising source: a novel by T. H. White published in the late 1950s, *The Once and Future King*. This novel fantasizes about the life of King Arthur and his childhood years before drawing the sword Excalibur from the place where it was lodged in stone, an act that reveals Arthur’s identity as future leader of the British Isles. What is so fantastic about this book is how White depicts King Arthur as a child, learning wisdom. Likely drawing on the biblical ascription of paramount wisdom to King Solomon and his own study of natural species (1 Kgs 4:29–34), T. H. White has his fictional child Arthur be mentored by animal species whom he actually becomes through the magic of his friend, the wizard Merlin. Joanna Macy, an ecophilosopher, Buddhist scholar, and one of the creators of the Council of All Beings ritual, describes this background in her own experience from which she drew to create the council: “Knowing that great responsibilities were in store for the boy, the wizard changed him for periods of time into various creatures—a falcon, an ant, a badger, a wild goose, a carp in the castle moat. As we [Macy’s family] read each of Arthur’s adventures in learning, they stretched our minds and enlarged our perceptions and perspectives beyond what we were accustomed to as humans.”<sup>13</sup>

Joanna Macy read this book with her children when they were young, and the idea that one learns best from stepping into the shoes of another, or the paws or wings or another, inspired her to create the Council of All Beings with John Seed. Her later commitment to Buddhist spirituality and to the early tales of the Buddha’s lifetimes

as animals told in the Jataka tales must have also informed the creation of this ritual.<sup>14</sup> The reading of *The Once and Future King* to inform her approach to this ecospiritual practice is unusual certainly, but it also allows us to think about the sources of our own understanding and practice: fiction might inspire, maternal and family life might inspire. We might be surprised by the places in our own lives that yield some kind of new thinking for creating and reframing ecospiritual practice.

The Council of All Beings is a ritual integrating human ecodespair at the condition of our natural world while also empowering participants to live more fully their embodied dimension of the universe itself. They work from a premise that values "thinking like a mountain," a phrase coined by Aldo Leopold that means valuing the interests of the biotic community, inclusive of the human, rather than the interests of just the human. In fact, the Council of All Beings arose from Macy's work with developing a set of "Despair and Empowerment" rituals that require or invite participants to acknowledge their deep grief at what is happening to our earth home and concurrently empower them to act anew as members enlivened to their identities and to their capacities to live in ways that would not necessarily contribute to the devastation of Earth.

Instructions for the Council of All Being appear in an abbreviated description in Joanna Macy's *World as Lover, World as Self*.<sup>15</sup> Fuller instructions for hosting a retreat or a gathering of individuals to prepare for and enact a ritual of the Council of Beings can be found in *Thinking Life a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings* by Joanna Macy with John Seed, Pat Fleming, and Arne Naess.<sup>16</sup> Stages of preparation for the council involve mourning, telling stories and meditating on deep time, and honoring endangered and extinguished species. Then one lets a life-form choose one for representation at the council, one engages one's creativity to make a mask that would allow one to visually represent the life-form at the council that has chosen them, and one speaks for that life-form at the council. The council involves participants taking turns alternately speaking for the life-form that has chosen them and being a human who receives the words of other

participants speaking for the life-forms that have chosen them. Here are excerpts from student writing that express identification with life-forms other than human. One student, Meg, writes,

I live in the dense forests with my family. Most of the day I spend eating to maintain my body mass. My family and I eat all the different parts of plants in our lands, with some occasional bugs. We stay around the same altitude year-round because our food is plentiful there. Life as a mountain gorilla is extremely social. Our family groupings are based on social bonds between male and female adult gorillas. The forests offer us tools for our whole lives, from food to places to sleep at night.

However, life isn't always easy as a mountain gorilla. One problem we face is poaching. People trap smaller animals to sell them on the black market and we'll get caught in the traps, either injured or killed by them. Sometimes our children will be stolen from us and we will be killed in the process. We also face habitat loss. Thankfully, some national parks protect us but as human settlements grow, we lose our lands. We lose contact with other groups of mountain gorillas, reducing the genetic diversity of our groups. To increase conservation efforts, humans come to see us and learn about us. But, they then spread diseases to which we are vulnerable. As humans fight amongst themselves, we lose our homes to people fleeing conflict and we are used as a source of meat for refugees. Slash and burn agriculture also contributes to loss of our habitat and lives.<sup>17</sup>

This writing that expresses the life of a mountain gorilla gets quite detailed in its consideration of the pleasures and pains of gorilla life in contact with humans. A gift the mountain gorilla might offer humans is the gift of social bonds and pleasure in each other's companionship, which humans also know and might revitalize as a way to meet their own needs rather than impact upon or harvest aspects of the mountain gorilla's life. This practice of giving voice to a life-form might remind

us of the green lens we explored when engaging the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. Here, we look about the world and pay attention to what draws our compassion and listen for what that life-form has to tell us about ourselves even from the midst of that creature's pain. We already have access to this information, but drawing on our capacities to imagine and empathize, we more readily evoke insights for the work of repairing the world. This practice thus enables participants to rewild their imaginations by considering what life is like from another point of view that, despite being different from a human point of view, taps into some parts of our consciousness able to identify and empathize with other life-forms. Another student, Madison, writes, beginning with a litany of negative human impacts on the life of this creature,

Dams block my travels. Overfishing prevents my proliferation. Logging erodes the banks of the streams and ruins the shade that keeps them cool. Toxic pollution from pesticides, fertilizer, waste dumping, and boats accumulates in my cells and biomagnifies through the natural beings who consume me. Humans try to help by farming hatchery salmon, but this destroys the resilience of my community more. Genetic variation is key to the survival of any species. When more than half of our population comes from the same hatchery fish, there are fewer mutations in our genome that are required for the adaptations needed to persist through ecosystem disruptions.

Nonetheless, humans can learn from our ways of living to help them make the changes necessary for ours, as well as the entire Earth's, survival. The most notable feature of our lives is our dedication to returning to our roots. The wonder I hold around how I am able to swim to an entirely new place and find my way home through the rapids can be uplifting. Humans should strive to return back to their roots of how to live in touch with nature. Humans once respected and honored nature. That respect and honor has been lost in their current ways of living, but that doesn't mean they can't return to that

same outlook. Even if it means struggling to swim upstream, through whitewater and over waterfalls, it is possible. If I can do it, so can you.<sup>18</sup>

Another student, Macey, writes,

I love my home. I'm able to do as I please, grabbing fish from the rivers to eat as I roam free. There are caves and burrows where I can hibernate, staying warm throughout the winter. I am also a regulator for my ecosystem. By preying on deer and other small woodland creatures I keep their populations from overwhelming the forest. I keep the balance. Lately, things have been different. Daily, light and noise are getting closer to where I like to roam. It's harder to find something to eat. There's less water flowing through the rivers, meaning fewer fish. I'm forced closer to the noise and light. When I walk near human habitation the ground feels different with no grass or dirt. I'm forced to eat plastic and weird-colored food. Humans try to scare me away but I'm so hungry. This food doesn't make me feel good and it's scary when I see humans kill others like me.

Maybe someday humans can respect my boundaries a little more so that I have space to wander in my own home. I don't mind gentle hikers but cars and buildings closer to my home make it harder for me to live a normal life. I hope that humans will become thoughtful. I hope they will make this change so that we can all keep living. I know that they can fix our planet before it's too late.<sup>19</sup>

This third writing ends by anticipating the hope that humans might themselves keep the balance, as bears do within their own ecosystem. We, too, might learn from bears to be good regulators of our habitats and not encroach on other's domains nor overuse the resources available to us where we live.

Writing these tales of creaturely experience offered students ways to package their scientific understanding, often gleaned in environmental



studies courses, within a creative form giving expression to the life of a gorilla, salmon, and bear. These wild animals have their own experience of the human, and we learn more about our impact on them when we imagine life from their points of view. We also learn more about ourselves in continuity with these others—we can do the creative work of imagining and empathizing with their experiences when we learn, for instance, as Madison's writing demonstrates, that just as salmon return to "roots" or homeland streams and rivers, so we might return to our own roots. Sharing this metaphor with plant beings reveals how interconnected all our creaturely existence is. We all belong and we all have places to which we particularly belong.

## CONCLUSION

Emergent strategy offers us a way to consider our everyday, interpersonal relationships and decisions to be significant because they signal shifts that contribute to the larger-scale movements that are emerging today. The natural world models such emergence every day, and our human tendency to work quickly and become impatient at the rate of change may be tempered when we pay attention to the real ways that natural systems work. A particular reconfiguration of our thinking that might be helpful for us as we experiment and innovate with new practices is to critique our goal of sustainability. Surely, sustainability is a really important goal and one that students studying environmental ethics and policy bring to our class discussions of ecospirituality. One of my teachers helped me question that goal or at least to consider it merely a minimum, as sustainability speaks to how our ways of being might not pillage resources from future generations. However, when we think of relationships in terms of sustainability, we might be disappointed if we think of sustainability as our only goal or ideal. My teacher asked us to consider a human partnership and how we might react if we asked about the relationship and were given the answer, "It's sustainable." That might be good, but it does not reflect likely all the gifts exchanged by those people in a partnership

or community. Rather, flourishing may be a better idea to characterize what we want to sustain and work for. Our innovations then in eco-spiritual practice must not stop at sustainable behavior but facilitate thriving and flourishing of our own human populations and of other populations we live among.

The work of creating and enacting innovative ecospiritual practices like zero waste, forest therapy, and the Council of All Beings draws on human ingenuity and empathy. Indeed, innovating requires our imaginations to be employed as we thoughtfully regard what life might be like from the perspective of another being. Surely this work has its origins in the social justice movements of our past history and of our present as we gain fuller pictures of what reality is like for another person and from their point of view. We begin to understand the systemic relationships involving power that result in oppression and suffering and to question their legitimacy. The same is true for those whose sympathies for the natural world enable them to apply their imaginative faculties to understanding the plight of an animal or plant living in a compromised, polluted habitat; to imagining the forest as a place where essential healing might happen; and to ritually bringing to voice the perspectives of Earth community members so as to remind humans of their own deepest potential to act with courage and resilience.

### Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- How wasteful are you in your everyday life, and how do the ways you treat material objects relate to your treatment of people and relationships, or even of yourself?
- What kinds of landscapes do you find most restorative of your spirit, and why? Think about childhood and where you felt most at home outdoors.
- What or where is “church” to you? If outdoors, what spaces most express the sacred? If indoors, what elements of nature exist there to remind you of your larger sacred home?
- If you were to practice the Council of All Beings, what viewpoint would call to you? How could you begin to express something from that being’s perspective?
- What other practical eco-actions do you take in response to the ecological crisis we experience now, and how might those actions be understood as “spiritual”?

### Suggested Ecospiritual Practices

Adopt the perspective of an animal or a feature of the natural world that might participate in a Council of All Beings. Do you find that your imagination is a bit creaky or out of practice as you do so? Though practices before this also invited you to use your imagination to honor the perspective of another being, this particular practice enables you to discover new knowledge about yourself. What advice might another creature offer you for living your life in the best manner possible? Further, what actions on behalf of this other creature might suggest themselves to you as a result of this identification? How will you put them into practice? What new knowledge about yourself as a member of the human species do you discover as a result

of your ability to “tune in” to this other being’s perspective? Do they offer you a gift that, in fact, you already possess, though it is unrecognized and unutilized? To invite accountability, share this exercise or ecospiritual practice with another person, or even a small group. Have some fun with the practice and design masks to wear while you voice the perspective of these animal others or features of the natural world. Fuller guidance and descriptions of past councils can be found in the sources cited in this chapter. Consider this an invitation to play with a part of your human nature that may have been hibernating for too long and be ready to awaken.

One exercise that forest therapy guides offer participants is to look for something in the forest that they understand as something the forest is offering the participant as a gift. As part of a tailored experience of forest therapy alone or with just one or two other people, walk slowly in a forest setting looking at the ground or around you with attentive eyes and a receptive heart open to the gifts of the forest. If you take a leaf or twig with you away from the forest, keep it in a place that reminds you of the giftedness of all the forest offers and plan to return that gift when you are next in that place. This can also be done in other settings, such as on the beach, prairie, or desert. Consider this an invitation to practice respect for a natural place and to share in the pleasure of receiving its gifts while experiencing also the fullness of the cycle of taking and giving by returning the gift, literally and figuratively.

### **For Further Reading**

*Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* by David Abram  
(Vintage, 2011)

*Coming Back to Life: The Updated Guide to the Work That Reconnects* by Joanna Macy and Molly Brown (New Society, 2014)

- Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* by William McDonough and Michael Braungart (North Point, 2002)
- How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* by Eduardo Kohn (University of California Press, 2013)
- Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* by Alexis Pauline Gumbs (AK, 2020)