



## Sources Religious Professionals 13: Nature as Spiritual Guide

### Email to Participants

At our next session on [date], we'll start our exploration of the 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.

*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. –UUA*

As a part of our exploration of this source, we'll learn a little bit about three different earth-centered philosophies: Transcendentalism, modern paganism, and religious naturalism. None of the readings are very long, so if you find yourself intrigued by one (or more!) of the philosophies and want to go deeper, there are optional suggestions for further study of each.

The readings provide much-needed context for this source and for transcendentalism, paganism, and religious naturalism, so start with those. But since having a purely intellectual discussion about earth-centered spirituality would go against the very heart of this source, we will also seek out experiences that take us outside of ourselves and that bring us into the world of nature, intuition and awe. After all, Thoreau wouldn't want us to just read his words, but to live them.

### Background Readings

- An [Earth-Centered Tradition](#) sermon about this source by Rev. Carolyn Brown to help give context
- Owen Lyon's remembrance of a [discussion with his grandfather](#) about who he is. Filmed by the Sacred Land Project.
- A short selection from [Thoreau's Walden](#) by Henry David Thoreau. (Optional: the book [Thoreau as Spiritual Guide](#) published by Skinner House Books is part history, part philosophy, and part meditation manual. Highly recommended.)
- The [text of a brochure about modern paganism](#) within Unitarian Universalism. (Optional: for those who are interested in learning more about modern paganism in a UU context, go to the website for [CUUPS](#), the Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans.)
- An introduction to [religious naturalism](#) by biologist Ursula Goodenough. (Optional: for those who are interested in learning more about religious naturalism, [this website](#) is filled with information and inspiration. Goodenough's book [The Sacred Depths of Nature](#) is also highly recommended as a classic religious naturalism book that blends science and spirituality.)
- Optional: For deeper reading on Paganism: <https://atheopaganism.wordpress.com/> and <https://humanisticpaganism.com/>

### Poetry

The following poetry is from indigenous peoples and interfaith leaders around the world. You can learn more about indigenous people's struggles to retain their sacred grounds from [Amnesty International](#), the [United Nations](#), and the [UU Service Committee](#).

- Writer and spoken word poet, [Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm](#), an Anishenaabek from Ontario, Canada, shares her identification with nature in "[sturgeon](#)."

- Explore the poetry in the [Indigenous Poets](#) section of Poetry Foundation.
- "God's Tears" (p. 64) from *Voices from the Margins: An Anthology of Meditations* edited by Jacqui James and Mark D. Morrison-Reed.

### Pre-Work

Take some time and go out in nature (or as close to nature as you can get given your life surroundings and the weather). Sit. Breathe. Notice. Your task is simply to experience your divine connection to the natural world.

Do this as often as possible before our session. Notice what it is like for you to be in nature and then journal about the experience. Come to our group ready to share your reflections.

### Reflection Questions

- Do you embody nature as part of your spirituality? How does that affect how you live your life because of this?
- Have you had a “religious experience” in nature? How does nature and/or Earth-centered traditions inform your spirituality?
- What similarities do you see between transcendentalism, paganism, indigenous spirituality, and/or religious naturalism and your own faith?
- Reflecting on the pre-work: What was it like for you to sit in nature and experience it explicitly as a source of UU religious inspiration? What did you notice? How did it affect you?

I look forward to hearing about your experiences with nature, Transcendentalism, paganism, and religious naturalism!

Your Facilitator(s),

## Session Plan

### Chalice lighting and silence (10 minutes)

Our opening words are by Mary Oliver - her poem "[Going to Walden](#)" or

Robin Wall Kimmerer from *Braiding Sweetgrass*:

Breathe it in and you start to remember things you didn't know you'd forgotten.

*Kimmerer, Robin Wall. Braiding Sweetgrass. Milkweed Editions. Available in the [UUA Inspirit Bookstore](#).*

Let's take a few minutes of silence to bring ourselves fully into this circle.

### Check in (20 minutes)

What are you carrying in your heart tonight? How is your spiritual practice or spiritual companioning going?

## **Covenant Review (5 minutes)**

Use whatever process your group has established to stay current with the covenant.

Is there anything in our covenant we should address?

## **Spiritual Practice Presentation (10 minutes)**

### **Reflection (60 minutes)**

- Have you had a “religious experience” in nature? How does nature and/or Earth-centered traditions inform your spirituality?
- What similarities do you see between transcendentalism, paganism, and/or religious naturalism and your own faith?
- Reflecting on the pre-work: What was it like for you to sit in nature and experience it as a source of UU religious inspiration? What did you notice? How did it affect you?
- Regarding the opening reading: What does it mean to find Walden where you are? How might you do this in your life?

Turning to our ministries:

- How might we help others find Walden in/through our congregations?
- How do we respond to those who might choose to forgo congregational activities (worship, classes, fellowship, etc.) in favor of being in nature? Should we?

### **So what? (10 minutes)**

How does this reflection relate to your spiritual journey? Your ministry?

What are you inspired or challenged to do next?

### **Gratitude and closing (5 minutes)**

Invite everyone, as they are moved, to say one or two words about something from this session for which they are grateful or how they are feeling in this moment. After everyone has said a word, close with a brief statement of thanks and appreciation such as, “For all this and more, we are grateful.”

