

# **Return to Reverence:**

A 4 week Study on Earth Stewardship  
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## **Foreword**

When I'm not working as Regional Minister for the Christian Church of Mid-America, I'm living the life of a micro-dairy farmer, which is a humble life. In years of drought, we exhaust our cisterns to water all our plants. In years of abundant rain we are often unable to bale hay to put up for the winter--and large gullies wash out planted crops and erode topsoil. Our living room ceiling springs a leak where the roof meets the chimney, and the grass grows too tall to cut. In the harsh winter, our milking machine freezes up, doors freeze shut, water freezes over, and chilling winds cut you to the bone. The stifling heat of August begins to wilt plants, and the flies are constantly chewing on the cows. There are calves born too late and die, others eat something harmful and die, they get pneumonia, pink eye and sometimes gash themselves on sharp objects. I recently built my grandson Kaisyn a tree house where he can go and wonder and play and be free only to later have a limb break in a storm and demolish it. In short, the life of a farmer is a hard life.

Yet, there are times when it is pure bliss. This past spring, we witnessed our cows give birth to 3 healthy heifers and 2 healthy bull calves. The joy of watching the cow become a mother and lick that baby and help her rise to her feet within a short time is immensely satisfying. Having an endless supply of fresh milk assures we will never go hungry and makes the best ice cream. Watching the bees do their pollinating and gather their honey and work together in a great orchestra of creation's majesty is a balm for the soul. Attending to the chickens scratching and pecking and preening and all the wonderful things they do is better than reality TV. The wonder of planting seeds and watching them become fruit-producing plants is too much for my mind to comprehend.

The life of a farmer is a sweet life, and I wouldn't trade it for anything. I often push my granddaughter Serenity on her horse swing in our backyard and she always wants to go higher and have me try to get her. We jump on the trampoline and she shows me all her tricks of somersaults and falling backwards. My grandson Kaisyn loves to ride on my John Deere mower and help me mow the grass, but especially use the blower machine to blow off all the clippings

when we are done. These two are my future farmers; they love to get my tools and try and fix things with them. They love to gather the chicken eggs and count them. Life on the farm is especially wonderful when you have grandchildren to share it with. And they need the farm life as much as I need them.

At Heavenly Acres we enjoy an abundance of fresh food, hard work, and family celebrations. Life is good, God is great, and I'm grateful to be living this life of a regenerative farmer. I hope each of you have similar memories from your childhood that nurtured you and taught you the blessings of God's creation alive and the benefits of hard work and living close to the land.

### Introduction



“All human beings are descendants of tribal people who were spiritually alive, intimately in love with the natural world, children of Mother Earth. When we were tribal people, we knew who we were, we knew where we were, and we knew our purpose. This sacred perception of reality remains alive and well in our genetic memory. We carry it inside us, usually in a dusty box in the mind's attic, but it is accessible.” **John Trudell**

Welcome to this study on Earth Stewardship. I pray this might serve as a guide to help 'dust off' this ancient memory as you seek to walk lightly and abundantly in God's many gifts. It is intended to give readers a personal, theological and indigenous perspective to encourage reverence for living close to the land. My prayer is that the Church would be on the leading edge of sacred understandings and practices that serve as a training ground for others to follow.

I grew up farming with my Grandfather in the summers, driving his grain truck, unloading fescue seed (with a large scoop shovel), hauling hay and feeding cows. He was a rugged individualist and taught me the discipline and value of working hard and a deep sense of place that leads to a long term view of caring for the holy ground God entrusts to us as steward.

In 2009, I was living in Columbia MO where my wife and I attended the True/ False Festival and saw Food, Inc. This documentary traces the source of our food supply and it's not always a pretty picture. As we were walking out of the theater, we looked at each other and both agreed we needed to return to the land where we could grow as much of our food as possible. We had little clue as to what this entailed, but we had set our minds and intended to go where there was good soil. We ended up buying a small ten-acre farm in North Central Missouri that had lovely soil and began mapping out a 10 year plan to be as self-sustaining as possible. And what a journey—and learning curve—it has proven to be! We had big dreams, a small wallet and a holistic vision of what it might look like to live in a way that honors the land and animals. We began by planting 100 blueberry plants and later adding a high tunnel over them. The Ph level of the soil required for blueberries is very precise especially with alkaline soil. I regret to say we only have two remaining of the original 100 plants.

To further complicate it, we had committed to using no chemicals on our farm, so our choices were limited not only to feed the plants but to control the weeds. For newbies, please be aware that weeds are constant in an organic system, and I've probably pulled or dug over 10,000 weeds from this farm. But I can tell you there's something strangely satisfying about that process that allows one to be very hands-on with the care of the earth as opposed to sitting on a tractor spraying chemicals. It has proven to be the right choice for us. Finally, we secured Delilah, our Great Pyrenees guard dog to keep everyone safe.

One learning for us was the need to build community of providers and helpers: one blacksmith installed a pump jack for our well under the windmill; we source our organic alfalfa hay from a local Mennonite; our local veterinarian respects our desire to use steroids and antibiotics on a necessary basis only. We have a local plumber, carpenter and electrician who help keep things running. We also have employed high school students over the years to help with our low skill labor needs. My neighbor across the road helps keep my lawn mower running. The local USDA and NRCS offices help us with planning and small grants for infrastructure needs. Over the years, we have attended the Missouri Organic Conference and the MOSES national conference where we not only gain valuable knowledge but build like-minded connections. This unexpected blessing of community has proven invaluable to our flourishing.

I am writing this booklet for 3 primary reasons: 1—I believe the Church should be leading the way in Earth Stewardship and sustainable practices, and as such provide a study booklet for small church groups, 2—to lessen the learning curve for new beginners desiring to create and live this lifestyle, and 3—to recover a reverence for God's Creation that we all may live more in tune with the blessing and abundance God intends for us—what Scripture calls 'The Promised Land.'

I know of little in this life that satisfies body and soul like planting a seed and watching it grow. This goes for plants as well as people. And I have the privilege of engaging in both, as a Minister and Farmer. It is such a joy to live deeply rooted in soil and soul and deliberately toward reverence. Such a life has proven nourishing as I assume this God-given role as caretaker of creation. I pray this book will inspire and guide you on that journey.

## Chapter 1: Crisis in Reverence



“Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.” **Jesus, Luke 12: 27**

“We must protect the forests for our children, grandchildren and children yet to be born. We must protect the forests for those who can’t speak for themselves such as the birds, animals, fish and trees.” – ***Qwatsinas, Nuxalk Nation***

Growing up in the 60’s and 70’s, I can remember times when it was commonplace to toss wrappers of all sorts out the back window while driving down the highway. It wasn’t even really frowned upon, after all, what could one wrapper hurt? Cars would frequently stop at an intersection so the driver could empty out their ash trays full of cigarette butts. No one even seemed to care. In the 1980’s we had a dump on the back of our wooded property in SW Missouri, as did most others in that rural country. Whenever we had trash of any kind, we didn’t have curbside pickup or recycling we simply took it back to the dump which was established generations before we lived there.

In the 1990’s during an economic boom, I remember the pleasure of shopping for clothes. It was our family entertainment to visit the local mall or shopping strip and fill our trunk with new clothes which, I now suspect, were produced in impoverished countries with unfair wage practices and child labor. And those practices were widespread, with little consideration for environmental effects. And it doesn’t end there--the denigration of creation goes far deeper than the practice of polluting and consuming.

Dr. Rick Smith a prominent Canadian author, environmentalist and Executive Director of the Broadbent Institute suggests,

“We are guinea pigs in a massive, uncontrolled chemical experiment, the disastrous outcome of which is measured in disease and death. Ours is a time of unprecedented toxicity. For the last 75 years, we have been digging up, drilling out, and unearthing the primary resources necessary to run an industrialized civilization. We continue to release toxic matter into the waterways which cycle us life, and into the fragile biosphere which maintains all living systems. We are now facing atmospheric and soil toxicity to the point where our own bodies are the canary in the coal mine of Planet Earth, and our health is a direct indicator of the living system which sustains us all. We all know the symptoms of such maladies: mass cancer, obesity, ADHD, apathy, depression, gut problems, reproductive problems, and the list goes on.”

This reality is not only affecting us but will affect our offspring for generations to come. Offshore drilling, fracking, coal mountaintop removal mining, metal and mineral ore mining are all accelerating rapidly. The viability of earth’s fragile systems and our own health will correlate directly with how well we consider the interaction between geosphere and biosphere. The ‘take-make-waste’ operating system of modern industrial practices has developed an enormous challenge for us in this moment. And the decisions we make, and lifestyles we choose in the next few years will have an irreversible impact, one way or another.

This book is not about naming all the degenerations—many other resources have put forth the global problems we now face—it is about naming the primary impetus we now need to create a system of regeneration. The very nature of spirituality focuses on the gift of life and the sacredness of the life gardens we cultivate. ‘Consider the lilies’ Jesus said. Thus, the premise of this book is that all life is sacred and harm to one part of creation is harmful to all of us. This ethic is informed by Indigenous Wisdom which teaches us to consider how our actions today will affect our offspring seven generations removed. This teaching urges us into a greater reverence for life, that what we pass on will be better, not worse, to those who inherit our legacy. To accomplish this we need spiritual wisdom, loving connection, engaged discussion, and living examples about what to do and how to collaborate our actions.

From the author’s perspective, there are three primary ways to affect change in the world as we know it: 1—**Educate**, where we develop books and hands-on curriculum to share with a wide audience to bring information and motivation for change; 2—**Advocate**, where we engage the political and social institutions and work to change policies ‘up stream’ to lessen negative impact; and 3—**Create** an alternative reality which can serve as a model or tangible picture of what could be. On Heavenly Acres, we are seeking to provide an impact at all three levels. What that demands is humility to learn from others, intellectual exploration, and hard physical work. And few concerns take precedent over this adventure.

Everything we call "Creation" is the very thumbprint of the Divine Lover for our enjoyment and stewardship. Creation is blessing-centered as Divine Gift which flows from the very womb of Life itself. Our soul-less story of consumerism and materialistic living takes our life energy, robs our Earth of vital components, and steals our very soul as a human species. We are programmed to want more and more in a way that is unsustainable. We are lured into obsessive consumerism that denigrates the fabric of our ecosystem which supports us all.

Thus, we are caught in irrational behavior that is severing our umbilical cord to life on this planet. What we need is a new story that guides us. By constructing a new story of interdependence and interconnectivity, we can celebrate an incredible diversity of creation, an interwoven pattern of unity that breathes the same breath of life. A story built on cooperation rather than competition emanating from the One Divine Source. Sacred living recognizes this oneness, this shared energy, which is organic in every way.

Some have literalized the creation story to the extent of creating an impasse between science and religion. This literalization leads to a loss of spiritual imagination and mythic consciousness toward impoverishment. To allow both science and our primal stories to inform our understanding of the world is to gain a wholeness which neither can do on their own. What began as Gift experienced in a lush garden has now been desecrated to the point where we are experiencing many micro-crucifixions of the entire ecosystem. Whether the Gift expresses itself as life-giving or suffering depends on the legion of choices we each make every day.

Thomas Berry was a Catholic priest, cultural historian, and scholar of the world's religions who later, as he studied Earth history and evolution, called himself a "geologist." Berry wrote about the new story to counter the entrancement of greed, consumption, and a monoculture of the mind toward something new yet something ancient that lives in reverence of all that God has provided. And it is our task to tell it-- not just to tell it, but to live it. The message includes forgiveness for yesterday's errors, abundance for today's living and hope for our tomorrows.

Consequently, the philosophical and theological grounding of this book is formed from an alchemy of Indigenous and Judeo-Christian wisdom coupled with the integrity of living the principles of regeneration. As such, we find ourselves both observer and participator in the resilient design of all interdependent systems of life. Our survival depends upon participation and communion rather than withdrawal and separation--we are all part of the unfolding creation Story. What we are up against is fundamentally a spiritual crisis based on a materialistic vision of what it means to be human, leading inevitably to emptiness, despair, greed and violence.

For many people, the lyrics to the old hymn “this world is not my home” is not just a metaphor. Many orthodox believers sincerely and fervently believe that this life is just a proving ground, a temporary way station on the road to a far more important destination. The theological and biological implications to this vision are legion. Holding this belief, actions cannot help but follow suit: feeling detached and disconnected from this world, and missing out on all the richness and wonder it has to offer. Believing that this world is just an imperfect reflection of what is to come inevitably engenders the capacity to live without concern for the health of planet Earth. Yet, this world *is* our home, and its well-being has direct consequences to ours. Rabbi Lawrence Troster was a Jewish eco-theologian who noted, “The great numbers of species in the world are the words in God’s Book of Nature. When we bring about the extinction of species, we are erasing pages from God’s Book of Nature. Our response to Creation should instead be wonder, awe, love, and humility at its beauty, variety, and mystery.”

I look out at the moon and stars at night with my Serenity and we wonder in awe at the beauty and vastness of creation. She has become my teacher in learning to “consider” creation. And there is no better way to live than this! Jesus said, “Consider” the lilies of the field, the birds of the air and I hear that in a new way now that I am a recovering destroyer. I now live as one who considers creation, and it makes all the difference—for creation, for me and for her.

#### **Questions for Reflection:**

- 1— What do you believe is the biggest challenge facing our planet today and why?
- 2—In what ways is modern life incompatible with stewardship for the planet?
- 3—How can your faith community effect change through the 3 areas mentioned:  
Educate, Advocate & Create?
- 4—Go online and get the Creation Care Toolkit at [faithward.org](http://faithward.org)

#### **Action Steps:**

- 1—What kind of activities could an Earth Stewardship Team be engaged in to make a difference in your congregation/ neighborhood? Sign up for the Green Chalice newsletter. Green Chalice has many great resources to peruse.
- 2--Educate your community on the benefits of recycling and begin an intentional program to recycle everything possible, including food scraps. Plant a garden.
- 3—Discuss this deeper understanding of a garden by Charles Dudley Warner, 1870:  
“The principle value of a garden is not understood. It is not only to give the possessor vegetables and fruit, but to teach him patience and philosophy, and the higher virtues—hope deferred, expectations blighted, leading directly to resignation, and sometimes to alienation. The garden thus becomes a moral agent, a test of character as it was in the beginning. I mean to have a moral garden, if it is not a productive one—one that shall teach the great lessons in life.”

## Chapter 2: Creation Stewards



“Then God said, Let there be light; and there was light.” **Genesis 1: 3**

Treat the earth well: it was not given to you by your parents, it was loaned to you by your children. We do not inherit the Earth from our Ancestors, we borrow it from our Children. – *Tribe Unknown*

The story of the Garden of Eden is not about a place, but a communion. The narrative says that man and woman walked with God in the cool of the day. There was no shame, no guilt, only joy and abundance. Eden is the conversation between human and Divine, and it is the reverberations of that conversation that create a sense of place. To live in Eden is to live in plenty, trust, beauty, harmony, biodiversity, and in right relationship with God, neighbors, and all living things. Eden is a sacrament, not just a paradise backdrop for humans to take center stage. We are a part of Creation, not apart from it.

According to the Biblical narrative, in the beginning God created Light, but what is that light created on the first day? Many assume that is sun, moon and stars, but those are created on the 4<sup>th</sup> day of creation. It is the author’s position that the light created in the beginning is the very building block of all reality—Energy. Quantum physics is showing us that what is at the base of reality is not inert material, but inspirited matter. Nature clearly reveals itself from within, and there exists an innate intelligence that causes seeds to grow into trees, bees to produce honey, and water to do its work in a never-ending cycle. Furthermore, the energy in the universe exists primarily in the dance between particles, the way the cells feed and give feedback to one another—what we might call Energetic Relationality.

The essence of all created reality is this divine energy. Einstein posited that energy can neither be created nor destroyed, so there is this never-ending cycle of energy as foundational to all things. Nothing escapes this cycle. All things coalesce, spark new life, fall apart, die, and emerge in new ways. Every living thing is a gust of God’s breath unfolding in the great energy that surrounds us.



Genesis teaches that we begin in a garden, and by the time we get to Revelation we return to a garden. Within both gardens stands the Tree of Life whose 'leaves are for the healing of the nations.' Through the garden runs the River of Life and we share the same river, so if we pollute the one river we share, we all suffer. The great Philosopher Heraclitus says we never step in the same river twice. It is always moving, purifying, and nourishing all life as it goes. That river flows beneath us and through us and makes the Earth one living organism. The water from the river reminds us of a common blood, a common origin, a common destiny. Creation is simply—and majestically--Mystery made manifest. Let's re-visit the Creation Narrative, which too often has been translated to the detriment of Creation. Here are 3 principles the reader is invited to consider:

1—**Imago Dei**--Adam and Eve are created in the image of God from the Earth which has at least 2 implications: first, the very material from which we have been fashioned has been provided from the Ground of all Being, and second, there is Divine animation which gives a blueprint for conscious living. It is from the initial "Let there be Light" that we possess both sacred being and inseparable connection to the very Earth itself. In her insightful book, *Scotus for Dunces*, Mary Beth Ingham writes: "the created order is not best understood as a transparent medium through which divine light shines but is itself endowed with an inner light that shines forth from within. Therefore, each being possesses an imminent dignity; it is already gifted by the loving Creator with sanctity beyond our ability to understand."

2—**Original Blessing**--Upon every aspect of Creation, the Creator pronounced blessing. As we follow the narrative we read, "God saw that it was good" five times and "found it very good" after the sixth day. This "original blessing" is prior to a later doctrine of "original sin." Matthew Fox illustrated this rather well in his groundbreaking book, *Original Blessing*. It is crucial to realize that if we start with original sin--beginning with Genesis 3 rather than Genesis 1-- our worldview is shaped by scarcity rather than abundance, by curse rather than blessing, by fear rather than love. In short, the narrative is that Yahweh created paradise and disobedience created sin. God provided everything we need, but we incessantly wanted more, including the power to be like God and to place ourselves at the center of everything. We eventually lose Eden by making bad choices, and suffering ensues. The story's truth tells us that we all grow up and get kicked out of the garden of innocence, that we are seldom satisfied with the life we have, always looking for a way to be 'masters' of our lives. Thus, whether our starting point of our ontological story is original sin or original blessing makes all the difference in our daily living. The first births fear, blame and competition, while the latter births joy, wonder and reverence.

3-- **I-Thou Relationships**—Adam is given the task of naming the animals, which necessarily implies intimacy. Consider the time, attention and reverence that requires to

carefully study each creature and decide on its name. Jewish theologian Martin Buber makes an important distinction that helps us grasp this paradigm of intimacy when Buber spoke of an “I-Thou” verses an “I-it” type of relationship. ‘I-it’ sees the other as mere object to be used, whereas ‘I-Thou’ sees the other as one to be honored. Living in the reverence of ‘I-Thou,’ we refuse to objectify anyone or anything. When we can make this paradigm shift as it relates to all of Creation, the world becomes a communion of neighbors rather than a collection of objects. We continue to eat the proverbial fruit, expressed by the seduction of taking/ consuming that which doesn’t belong to us. This dualistic way of seeing the world as mine vs. yours is a way of dividing all of creation into subject and object, inside and outside. As it turns out, I am my brother’s keeper, according to Jesus.

In Genesis 1:28 we read that human beings are to “have dominion over” creation, but what does this actually mean? It seems that this has given permission for humans to take from the Earth anything we want and has led to the depletion of Earth’s resources to our detriment. A careful look at this phrase will perhaps lead us to a more sacred, more sustainable conclusion. The word ‘dominion’ in Hebrew is *radah*, which is a royal word used in Psalm 72. In verses 12-14 we see what dominion looks like: “He delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence, he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight.”

Therefore, the dominion prescribed by Creator in Genesis is one that protects the defenseless and gives justice to the oppressed. Dominion does not mean destruction, but stewardship couched within an ‘I-Thou’ relationship. This original reciprocity and harmony of the relationship of all living things sets an archetype for our way of being in the world-- nonviolently, peaceably, reverently. Black Elk says “The first piece, which is the most important, is that which comes within the souls of people when they realize their relationship, their oneness with the Universe and all its powers and when they realize that at the center of the Universe dwells the Great Spirit and that this center is really everywhere, it is within each of us.”

From the interplay of biblical and indigenous wisdom, God is known as The Great I AM and Great Spirit, respectively. This understanding has no cause to argue whether a Being exists, but names Reality as wondrous and sacred. God as Creator in this sense is not a being that acted eons ago, but rather the very Process of creation as ongoing and the universe as dependent upon that Process for its very existence. Creation thus has an evolutionary unfolding infused with Divine Presence, guided by Divine Intention, and lured by Divine Interaction. As such, God is relational, present to and present in every becoming actuality. God as Great Spirit calls us to act as if creation matters to steward it properly.

Meister Eckhart, a fourteenth century philosopher, theologian, and mystic who lived and worked in the Dominican Order spoke of God this way:

*Apprehend God in all things, for God is in all things.*

*Every single creature is full of God and is a book about God.*

*Every creature is a word of God.*

*If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature—even a caterpillar—I would never have to prepare a sermon.*

*So full of God is every creature.*

Every living thing contains the divine imprint of Great Spirit in its molecules and reveals some aspect of God's presence. And who would make something beautiful and then not love what has been made? God as Divine Lover interpenetrates all created things. The theological word for this is *panentheism* which posits that God *transcends* yet also *immanently includes* all beings as their Real Self. Thus, in pure panentheism, God is *beyond* all beings as Source, and *within* all as essential Substance. God is Spirit, God is Truth, God is Light, God is Love. God is the Great I AM as disclosed to Moses in the burning bush. And, like Moses, encountering this God leaves us changed and on mission.

The Gospel call is to change the world—Jesus refers to the Year of Jubilee as part of his divine manifesto—a covenantal time of transforming broken social systems which uplift the poor and oppressed and all creation. The Good News is an invitation to empty oneself the way Christ did, and to be agents of reconciliation who act as a balm for the “least of these” which necessarily includes all creation. Restoring the intrinsic value and beauty of creation broadens our understanding and stewardship as it relates to salvation. Much of Western Christianity has limited the concept of salvation to the human species and our place in the afterlife. This interpretation grants us permission to plunder Earth's resources without consequence. And we are just now beginning to realize the devastation of such bad theology. Great Spirit as Presence of Possibilities is the vital life force that gives rise and shape to the becoming of every part of creation. An ethic of reverence recognizes this and thus treats all creation as sacred.

### **Questions for Reflection:**

1. How does having an I-Thou relationship with creation lead to greater joy/love/abundance?
2. In what ways do we perpetuate this dualistic stance of ‘mine vs yours’ by taking resources that are not ours to take?
3. How can we work together as a community to make a positive impact on the environment?
4. Where have you sensed awe just by looking at God's handiwork?
5. What does it mean to understand God as the “Great I Am?”
6. How does the way we use and manage our resources affect future generations?

### Action Steps:

1. Explore becoming a “Green Chalice” congregation. If you already are, how can you take this reverence beyond the obvious steps of reducing waste, pre-cycling, recycling, and minimizing your footprint on the Earth?
2. Create a Flower Garden or Rain Garden on your property (see Appendix). Enhance your green space for greater usage and beauty.
3. Create raised beds and begin building good soil to raise chemical free vegetables to share with members/ neighbors. Involve the young and encourage them to get their hands in the dirt.
4. Take a walk in nature in the morning and notice what you discover about Sacred Presence all around you. Keep a journal for such attentive reflections.
5. Brainstorm ways of making the kingdom of God tangible in your community in ways which enhance gratitude of Great Spirit. Ask what difference does it make?
6. Design a Logo for your creation care emphasis.
7. Watch the Netflix episode of “Chef’s Table” featuring Dan Barber to help make the connection between the land, soil, animals, nutrition and flavor from the earth.

### Chapter 3: An ethic of Reverence



“If you would learn more, ask the cattle, Seek information from the birds of the air. The creeping things of earth will give you lessons, and the fishes of the sea will tell you all. There is not a single creature that does not know that everything is of God’s making. God holds in power the soul of every living thing, and the breath of every human body.” **Job 12: 7-10**

“I am poor and naked, but I am the chief of the nation. We do not want riches but we do want to train our children right. Riches would do us no good. We could not take them with us to the other world. We do not want riches. We want peace and love.’ – **Red Cloud**

It is the thesis of this book that communities of Faith should be leading the way in this effort. Some may ask if environmental stewardship is a religious concern. Throughout scripture we are asked to love one another and to serve the poor. We can no longer sit in a pew and profess a love of God and let what God loves and called “good” be destroyed. When it’s all said and done, there is not so much an environmental crisis or food crisis or water crisis as there is a crisis in reverence for that which supports us all.

We have lost our way spiritually, lost our shared compass for deep connectedness. For too long in the U.S., we have placed profits above people, convenience above mindfulness, and prosperity above spirituality. Our economic policy of limitless growth is clearly collapsing. Now is the time for some soul-probing questions: Is there more to who we are than acquiring or taking? Do we have a higher purpose that is much more gratifying? Many people of faith are beginning to see the destruction of creation as a moral issue and are getting involved and speaking out. Over the last ten years care for creation has taken hold in most major denominations and congregations have green teams that are helping with reduction in energy use and less wasteful practices. One example is an Episcopal church in New Jersey who had the congregation save its trash for two weeks and then open the black garbage bags and lay the contents all over the courtyard. The congregation was asked to put on rubber gloves and sort what was really garbage from what could be composted or recycled. It was a life changing experience for many when they saw and touched what was going into landfill when it could have been reused, composted, or recycled.

Communities are beginning to acknowledge how we are polluting our own back yards and the harsh consequences as a result. Many discover that an antidote for despair is engagement and participation. People now need tools, both practical and spiritual, to live into this new awareness. As co-creators with the Divine our combined trajectory can bring about renewal. No individual exists independent of all other realities of life--each has the Divine Source as their beginning, ending and impetus for becoming. All individuals have, therefore, the whole Universe as their common ground, and this universality becomes conscious of the One River of Life.

The Iroquois have a term "Orenda" which is a spiritual power inherent in all people that empowers them to affect the world. As we tap into our Orenda and attune ourselves to the vast consciousness that births creation we find ourselves standing on holy ground--literally and figuratively. To be spiritual means to be animated and empowered by an invisible Source which always seeks to breathe Life. Spirituality, in this sense, doesn't make us otherworldly, but grounds us in the essence of being fully alive and in tune with the wonder under, around and above us.

Reverence moves us beyond the superficiality of independence and into the depths of interdependence. What is being called for now is a spiritual movement which builds its lifestyle on this reverence for the interdependence of all creation. This movement can be a gathering place for those who desire to walk lightly and in awe upon this Earth. This movement is grounded in justice, compassion, and celebration, and is the intersection where "peace and justice kiss" as Psalm 85:10 says. Inspiration for this new movement resides in our willingness to restore, rebuild, and regenerate life's entire web of interdependence.

We are being called to rise to leadership in both big and small ways to bring about a peaceful, harmonic, regenerative world. Ron Garan, NASA Astronaut says, *“When we look down on the Earth from space, we see this amazing, indescribably beautiful planet. It looks like a living, breathing organism. But it also at the same time, looks extremely fragile.”*

Ralph Waldo Emerson once asked what we would do if the stars only came out once every thousand years. No one would sleep that night, of course. The world would create new religions overnight. We would be ecstatic, delirious, made rapturous by the glory of God. Instead, the stars come out every night and we watch television...yet each of us is as complex and beautiful as the stars in the universe. We have done great things and we have veered off course in terms of honoring creation. It is time to assign a moral value to excessive consumption and hoarding of resources which fails to recognize the beauty and mutuality of all life. It is time to sequester all our entangled fields of consciousness and create a spiritual network of co-creators for the common good. It is time to realize that our very survival depends upon participation and communion rather than withdrawal and separation.

The words “What God has joined together, let no one tear asunder” is spoken during the Declaration of Marriage at many weddings. Those are affirming words, they’re powerful words. But this phrase has to do with more than just the two people being united in marriage. It also has to do with that love that exists between all of us as neighbors. All of us are bound one to another in the bond of Divine love, and we are called to nurture and strengthen that love as an act of remembering. We belong to each other. We need one another. What God has joined together, let no one tear asunder. We are neighbors.

But have you ever thought of the earth as your neighbor? And in the same spirit that we are called to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, do we appreciate the earth as something we are bound to? We have a neighborly and even symbiotic relationship with the whole of Creation. We are united in love with the expanse of God’s handiwork--the rivers, lakes and streams, the plants, flowers and trees, the birds of the air, the creatures of the deep and on the land, the soil and grass and rocks at our feet, the air around us and in our lungs. We belong to each other.

Albert Schweitzer, a French-German theologian, writer, humanitarian, and physician spoke of ‘reverence for life’ years ago while searching for a universal concept of ethics for our time. He believed that reverence for life is a concept that develops from observation of the world around us. In 'Civilization and Ethics' Schweitzer expressed this in these words: "Ethics is nothing other than Reverence for Life. Reverence for Life affords me my fundamental principle of morality, namely, that good consists in maintaining, assisting and enhancing life, and to destroy, to harm or to hinder life is evil."

Reverence is a sacred posture of seeing and honoring the intrinsic worth of all of creation, blessing the Gift that it is to us while granting its rights and its claims. Furthermore, it is a way of structuring our individual and corporate choices in such a way to ensure the vitality and rights of nature beyond our lifetime. Reverence acknowledges the unique gifts and contributions of all human and nonhuman entities and recognizes the interdependent web of life. True reverence means that room is made for the other, not as tolerance but as celebration.

The ethic of reverence for life forbids any of us to exploit another for selfish gain. It prompts us to walk lightly upon the earth, seeking to cause as little suffering as possible while living to conserve earth's beauty and resources. It inspires us to join in communion with others to ensure our practices are regenerative, resilient and life-giving. Reverence understands the earth as a living system with an innate intelligence to participate in the ongoing cycle of energy—namely, the whole is more than the sum of its parts.

As an example, the cells that make up our bodies are continually dying and regenerating themselves. What seems static in creation is actually in a state of constant flux displaying a pattern integrity which tempts us to dissect it into its parts. But, as we know, a body is more than just its cells. So, too, the earth is much more than its various parts, an interconnected system which we must appreciate and honor. This requires an intimate presence to truly grasp the many implications of systems thinking.

**A Return to Reverence** allows an emerging future that depends upon us to act for concern for the whole, not just isolated parts. The problem is that we have mostly spent our lives in a dualistic separation of subject and object with the illusion that we can continue taking without consequence to the whole. One example of this is our modern farming practices where fertilizers are used to correct soil deficiencies and herbicides and pesticides to manage threats to the crop. These are based on a very mechanical input-output view of production which lacks a deep appreciation for the earth and how best to manage the quality of the soil. Reverence sees the land as a living whole, as an ecology, and seeks to honor every part in a generative way that improves every part over time.

Alexander Campbell had this reverent awareness of innate intelligence after marveling at the richness of the soil in the Mississippi River bottom near Hannibal. This was published in the *Millennial Harbinger*, Vol. 3, No. 4, April, 1846: *One can scarcely imagine a more luxuriant soil on this side of the Nile or the Ganges, than that which has been manufacturing for ages in these bottoms, by the alternate layers of new crops of vegetables of every species, and the deposits of earth that cover them, itself the composition of various mineral, vegetable, and animal substances, carefully assorted and compounded by a wisdom and benevolence that our present science not yet fully comprehends.*

*The standing stacks of corn that everywhere follow the rudest cultivation of the soil, are vegetable pyramids monumental of many fallen generations of trees, and plants, and animals, that have gathered riches from all the winds of heaven—from suns, and moons and stars—and are now, after many new and marvelous transmigrations and transformations, again standing in piles of golden harvests waiting for the wants of man. How rich in resources, and provident in means, is the great Father and Benefactor of us all! Even in the wastes of ancient forests, in the ruins vegetable and animal, of ages, the Lord of earth and heaven has been storing away in his immense cellars, granaries, and storehouses, rich and abundant provisions, in anticipation of the wants of a thousand generations, ages before they have a being.*

### **Questions for Reflection:**

1. Talk about the sacredness of soil as enumerated by Campbell.
2. Talk about your experience of growing something in the soil.
3. From your experience, how are we polluting the “River of Life” given by God for our stewardship?
4. How do you access your “Orenda” leading you in regard to living with a greater connectedness?
5. What role do you think the church should play in caring for creation?
6. How does having an ethic of reverence change our lifestyles?

### **Action Steps:**

1. Brainstorm what a Fair Trade Market would look like, offering products such as coffee, tea and chocolate.
2. Consider establishing a Blessing Box Pantry on your grounds as a pantry of nonperishables for those in need.
3. Go through your closet and share the items you no longer use with a shelter.
4. Study and/or Adopt the Alverna Covenant. (Appendix)
5. Have conversation about the use of harmful chemicals in your neighborhood and how you might not only reduce their usage but find ways to rebuild the soil.
6. Establish a Bible Study on the theme of Biblical Reverence.

## **Chapter 4: Creation Regeneration**



“The Gardener answered, “I’ll dig around it and put some manure on it to make it grow.” **Jesus,** Luke 13:8



“The old people came literally to love the soil and they sat or reclined on the ground with a feeling of being close to a mothering power. It was good for the skin to touch the earth and the old people liked to remove their moccasins and walk with bare feet on the sacred earth. Their tipis were built upon the earth and their altars were made of earth. The soil was soothing, strengthening, cleansing and healing.” **Luther Standing Bear**

There’s nothing like walking barefoot in the dirt, planting seeds, or creating a flower garden to nurture your soul. Francis of Assisi would walk the trails of Umbria and let nature teach him. Francis knew and respected creation, calling animals, sun and moon, the weather, and the elements of his brothers and sisters. Through extended time in nature, Francis became intimately connected with non-human living things and came to recognize that the natural world was also imbued with soul. Soul is the blueprint inside of every living thing that tells it what it is to become. When we relate to everything at that level, we will respect, protect, and love it.

Creation calls us to live regeneratively in reverence of creation and our neighbors on this sacred planet. Regenerative practices don’t just take from creation without giving back, rather they steward ecosystems in ways which the relationship is reciprocal and life-giving in a cyclical way. This change happens from the ground up, and is more than organic, more than being sustainable but rather moving towards regenerating so that it’s improved over time.

Biodiverse farms are simultaneously regenerative and resilient and harness the power of living systems which maximize outputs for minimum inputs toward an immersion in abundance. We need to re-engineer a localized system which cares for people in fair trade and honors the cycle of energy ecologically. Then we will have a viable alternative to our current monoculture methods of producing and distributing which has wreaked havoc on the land and its peoples. The Regeneration movement is concerned with the protection and rebuilding of topsoil, carbon sequestration and ecological biodiversity to the benefit of all life.

For the last fifty years, we have been stuck in a monoculture of the mind which has been primarily about profit and sold to the public as necessary for “feeding the world.” But who can live on corn and soy, especially when they are grown in nutrient robbed soil and sprayed with toxic chemicals? The push to increase yield has been at the expense of the health of all living systems--including humans--and even at the expense of production long term. Many animals raised for consumption are in confinement settings producing toxic conditions which transmit to the consumer. These practices come at great cost: loss of biodiversity, erosion of topsoil and microbial activity in the soil, and contamination of our water supplies. Also, the compaction of the soil after repeated tillage destroys the pore spaces in the soil which are critical for water infiltration. Our current practices seem to be based on a war mentality—a push to kill weeds, fungus, pests, diversity.

In short, this model is not sustainable, is bad for our health, and rapidly falling out of favor around the globe. Regenerative farming calls us back to diversity and focuses not only on the health of the soil, but the health of people, relationships and the economy. It's an approach that can provide harvests comparable to conventional chemical-based agriculture over the long haul, while simultaneously healing the land.

The Rodale Institute is leading the way in these efforts on a large scale. Their Farming Systems Trial was launched in 1981 with a clear goal: address the barriers to the adoption of organic farming by farmers. For more than 40 years, the Farming Systems Trial has applied real-world practices and rigorous scientific analysis to document the different impacts of organic and conventional grain cropping systems. The scientific data gathered from this research has established that organic management matches or outperforms conventional agriculture in ways that benefit farmers and lays a strong foundation for designing and refining agricultural systems that can improve the health of people and the planet.

By raising crops regeneratively we gain an increase in the density of nutrients and long-term soil health rather than short-term exploitation. Through integrating animals back onto pastures rather than in Concentrated Feed Lots, the farm is treated as a living organism — a living, self-sustainable whole — and biodiversity of both plants and animals are viewed as integral. These farming practices honor and harness holistic energy and participate in the natural cycle of energy. The landscape is always regenerating itself-- it has that innate capacity-- and our work as stewards is to maximize the natural flow towards life. By aligning ourselves with nature's ways and cycles, we are on the path to long term sustainability.

Gabe Brown, a regenerative farmer, lays out five principles that we must align with to live in sync with nature's wisdom:

- 1-least amount of mechanical disturbance (no-till methods);
- 2-armor on the soil (cover cropping);
- 3-diversity of species (plant and animal);
- 4-leaving roots in the ground as long as possible to feed the soil and optimize solar energy collection.
- 5-animal impact (manage for symbiotic relationships).

Through these agriculture practices which honor creation, we can feed the world in a way that regenerates our resources healing farms, families, and communities.

But isn't it too big a task? What difference can we make in the big picture? I find encouragement from Native American Elder Clarissa Pinkola Estes who says, *"My friends, do not lose heart. We were made for these times. Look out over the prow; there are millions of boats of righteous souls on the waters with you. Even though your veneers may shiver from every wave in this stormy roil, I assure you that the long timbers composing your prow and rudder come from a greater forest. That long-grained lumber is known to withstand storms, to*

*hold together, to hold its own, and to advance, regardless. In any dark time, there is a tendency to veer toward fainting over how much is wrong or unmended in the world. Do not focus on that. There is a tendency, too, to fall into being weakened by dwelling on what is outside your reach, by what cannot yet be. Do not focus there. That is spending the wind without raising the sails. Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach. Any small, calm thing that one soul can do to help another soul, to assist some portion of this poor suffering world, will help immensely. It is not given to us to know which acts or by whom will cause the critical mass to tip toward an enduring good. What is needed for dramatic change is an accumulation of acts, adding, adding to, adding more, continuing. We know that it does not take everyone on Earth to bring justice and peace, but only a small, determined group who will not give up during the first, second, or hundredth gale.”*

There is an urgency to raise our consciousness from consumer to steward, to truly see and act in regard to the well-being of all life on planet Earth. As the Good Book says, “Today is the day of salvation” and we are being called from within the burning bush to lead the way of creation care. Collectively, we are entrusted with the safekeeping of the circle of life, and it is a high calling. Reverence invites us to live with Wonder of all Creation, to appreciate the majestic Beauty gifted to us. This happens as we intentionally listen to the voices of Earth and its multitude of expressions that surround and support us. In addition to listening, we need to experience, feel, and consider the natural cycles of energy and ways in which we can live in tune with them.

So, how do we begin? It is said a great Zen teacher asked an initiate to sit by a stream until he heard all the water had to teach. After days of bending his mind around the scene, a small monkey happened by and, in one seeming bound of joy, splashed about in the stream. The initiate wept and returned to his teacher, who scolded him lovingly, “The monkey heard. You just listened.” With the best of intentions, we often parlay in philosophical discussions about the river without ever getting wet. It is my hope that this book will inspire many to jump in with both feet and get wet, to get our hands dirty in the soil and thereby merge with the majesty of creation. Let’s begin by focusing on three primary systems of reverence to promote the redemption of creation.

**Food.** Currently, we have a convenience-based food system which is built upon just a few basic food sources: soy, wheat and corn. Drive by any farm in the Midwest and that is what you will see being grown. In the United States we get cheap food dominated by monoculture production, containing poor quality with severe deficiencies of nutrition. Wiping out biodiversity is threatening our health and we are becoming sicker every day as a result.

As we attune ourselves to the primary difference between calories and nourishment, we realize our mass produced foods offer plenty of the former and little of the latter. We are the first generation to have obesity and malnourishment simultaneously. Consuming foods which are locally grown and nutrient dense, we support the mind and body in optimal health maintenance. Ideally, these are whole foods consumed in the freshest form possible and prepared in ways that preserve the enzymes present within them at harvest time. In a best-case scenario, that means growing and eating local foods in season as much as possible.

**Soil.** Humans, soil and planetary health are inexplicably tied together. Everything that feeds and nourishes us comes from the soil and regenerative practices such as cover cropping and no till farming can help maintain the soil's viability. The health of the soil and water is the foundation upon which the land-human community is built. By increasing organic matter through composting leaves, wood mulch and other soil builders, we increase biological activity and enhance the natural energy cycle of living systems. In addition, regenerative practices draw down carbon from the atmosphere and sequester it into the ground. Caring for our soil through reducing toxic inputs and topsoil runoff helps rebalance our ecosphere. As we continue to unearth fossil fuels, we are releasing enormous amounts of carbon and causing our atmosphere and our oceans to be more acidic which leads to climate change. As a result of how we grow food, fiber and fuel, atmospheric carbon is out of balance but can be reversed by drawing it down into the soil through regenerative practices.

**Water.** Access to clean water may be the single most important factor in our world as many of our aquifers and waterways are being depleted and polluted. The criticality of water to ecosystems, living resources, and human welfare impacts its global distribution. Thus, there is a continuing need to develop efficient and sustainable approaches for maintaining water quantity and quality for ecosystem use. Water is washed through our system daily and is the medium through which we extract and absorb nutrients from our food. Where possible, water that has been purified through reverse osmosis at the point of use leads to optimal health. This removes most of the chlorine, chemicals and hard particles which help contribute to poor health. Managing our watersheds is a critical topic for creation regeneration and many permaculture practices can be employed to maximize availability.

In conclusion, we must rebuild from the bottom up, and that means restoring the inherent sacrality of all things. As we stand on this moment of holy ground our place and purpose in all creation becomes reverently clear. We are re-collecting the lost knowledge of our ancestors, those most essential of human skill sets: how to preserve seeds; how to tend plants, animals and ourselves; how to create regenerating systems that participate in the sacred cycle of energy; how to engage in sacred commerce that is fair to all; how to rebuild communities through social, ecological and economical stewardship that brings life to all; how

to live in gratitude for all the gifts and miracles of creation; how to co-create with the Creator to bring about and enjoy a new Garden Eternal where there is abundance and health for all. May it be so.

**Questions for Reflection:**

1. Tell of a time as a child when you played in nature.
2. What are some ways that technology can be used to support sustainable practices and reduce waste?
3. How do you balance the need for economic growth with caring for creation?

**Action Steps:**

1. What would the mission statement be of a “Tikkun Olam” Council to be advocates and activists for creation regeneration?
2. Plan a field trip to a farm with animals or a zoo and take time to study the animals and really see them.
3. Plan an Earth Stewardship Worship service.

**Resource Books:**

Home By Another Way by Timothy Cap Diebel

Hope Beneath Our Feet by Martin Keogh

The Resilient Farm and Homestead by Ben Falk

Drawdown by Paul Hawken

Black Elk Speaks by John G. Neihardt and Black Elk

The Sheer Ecstasy of Being a Lunatic Farmer by Joel Salatin

The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry by Wendell Berry

Animal, Vegetable, Miracle by Barbara Kingsolver

Food Heroes by Georgia Pelligrini

Indigenous Americans: Spirituality and Ecos by Jack D. Forbes

**Appendix:**

The Alverna Covenant was written by members of the Task Force on Christian Lifestyle and Ecology of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) while meeting at Alverna Retreat Center, a Franciscan retreat in Indianapolis, Ind. The name has added significance. Alverna is named for Mt. Alverna in Italy, the mountain retreat given to Francis of Assisi. Francis is honored for his concern for the care of and relatedness of all creation. The 800th anniversary of Francis' birth was celebrated in 1981, the year the Alverna Covenant was first introduced at the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

**The Alverna Covenant:**

**Whereas:** \*God has created the world with finite resources; \*God has given to us the stewardship of the earth; \*God has established order through many natural cycles.

**And it is evident that:** \*We are consuming resources at a rate that cannot be maintained; \*We are interrupting many natural cycles; \*We are irresponsibly modifying the environment through consumption and pollution; \*We are populating the earth at a rate that cannot be maintained;

**As a member of the human family and a follower of Jesus Christ,** I hereby covenant that: \*I will change my lifestyle to reduce my contribution to pollution; \*I will support recycling efforts; \*I will search for sustainable lifestyles; \*I will work for public policies which lead to a just and sustainable society; \*I will share these concerns with others and urge them to make this Covenant.

### Afterword

What joy it is to live with this Reverence for Life and create a sustainable lifestyle for our own--and creation's-- good. Putting up square bales of alfalfa in the hot summer is hard work, but deeply satisfying, as is cutting wood for our Buck stove insert in the Fall. Planting seeds in the spring and watching them grow is very soulful work and keeps us in tune with the sacred rhythms and gifts of creation. Building fences for the animals, raised beds for gardens, a chicken shed, a milk parlor and two greenhouses have all been a labor of love, and long-term investments in regenerative farming.

It is a wonderful life, with lots of losses and a huge learning curve, but we are producing most of our own food now, and loving being in step with the circle of life. Staying here has allowed me to take the long view, to plant trees and plan for the duration with the hopes of one day passing it on to our children and grandchildren. If the future of the environment appears bleak, I know they will have the place and skills to be self-sustaining to become agents of change in their world. From our family to yours, may you have the same blessed assurance. Blessed be the Creator.



Front Row: Monikah, Kaisyn, Louise Ann  
Back Row: Ron, Serenity, Rebekah, Jill, Ransom, Mike, Ronikah