



DISCUSSION COURSE ON

RECONNECTING WITH EARTH

Will you ever bring a better gift for the world than the breathing respect that you carry wherever you go right now?

- WILLIAM STAFFORD



DISCUSSION COURSE ON

RECONNECTING WITH EARTH



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By



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This course, originally titled *Deep Ecology and Related Topics*,
was first developed by the Northwest Earth Institute founders, Dick and Jeanne Roy.
The course has been revised over the years by many dedicated NWEI volunteers.
We are grateful to all of those who have contributed in some way to the curriculum process,
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INTRODUCTION

Thank you for participating in the Northwest Earth Institute's discussion course, *Reconnecting with Earth*. This course addresses the central issue of our time: What is the appropriate relationship of the human being to Earth? That this relationship must change has become clear as the impacts of industrialized societies have grown more evident and now threaten ecological collapse. The authors included in this discussion guide call for a fundamental shift in the way we humans perceive our place in the world. They argue that this shift is the key to real and lasting change—and our best hope for the future.

The course is comprised of six sessions, designed for weekly discussion. The first five sessions explore our relationship with Earth from a variety of perspectives: that of naturalists, scientists, theologians, philosophers, and psychologists. The readings in the final session offer concrete examples for putting a more Earth-centered worldview into practice.

Each session includes readings, discussion questions for the group, a "Putting It into Practice" list of suggested actions, and suggestions for further readings and resources. Please plan on about an hour of reading each week. Each week when you meet with your discussion group, we invite you to bring your own experience and critical thinking to the process. The selected readings are intended to invoke meaningful discussion, not consensus. With the aid of the readings and the discussion format, participants learn from themselves and each other.

For resources on getting the discussion group started, visit www.nwei.org and visit the "Course Resources" page

for flyers, organizing guides, and press releases. On pages 6–7 of this guide, "How to Start a Discussion Course" provides further information about organizing a course. You may also contact our office at (503) 227-2807. To become a member of NWEI and support the sharing of this work with others, please join at www.nwei.org/join or complete the membership form on page 97.

On behalf of the thousands of organizations, workplaces, and volunteers who are involved in promoting Earth Institute programs, we hope your experience with this course will be of deep and lasting value.

The Northwest Earth Institute currently offers seven other discussion courses:

- **Menu for the Future** explores food systems and their impacts on culture, society, and ecological systems.
- **Global Warming, Changing CO₂urse** addresses the urgent need to respond to climate change.
- **Choices for Sustainable Living** explores choices each of us make that have an impact on the Earth.
- **Healthy Children—Healthy Planet** examines the influence of consumer culture on children and how families can deal with these influences.
- **Discovering a Sense of Place** considers the benefits of knowing and protecting our place.
- **Sustainable Systems at Work** provides organizations with the tools and inspiration needed to transition to a more sustainable future.
- **Voluntary Simplicity** examines the personal and ecological benefits of living with less in a consumer culture.

How to Start a Discussion Course

Thank you for your interest in the programs offered by the Northwest Earth Institute. The following tips are for those of you who would like to organize NWEI discussion groups. We are thrilled that you have taken the initiative to order this guide for small group discussion. While this discussion guide has tremendous stand-alone value, please keep in mind that it was designed to be used with others in a group dialogue setting. As such, we ask that you consider inviting others to participate in the process with you. Below, please find steps for doing so. If you have any questions about the process, please visit our website at www.nwei.org or contact any member of NWEI's Outreach Team at (503) 227-2807, or by email at contact@nwei.org. If you have joined an existing group, please consider organizing future courses. We hope you benefit from participating in this course.

STEP 1: FORM GROUP(S)— IDEAL SIZE IS 8-12 PEOPLE.

In certain regions, an NWEI representative may be available to assist you in getting started. Visit www.nwei.org/n_american_network to see a list of regions where NWEI representatives may be available to mentor new groups and offer introductory presentations on NWEI.

TIPS FOR STARTING YOUR NWEI COURSE:

- Invite others to join NWEI programs via newsletters, email networks, personal invitations, or the media. Download NWEI program flyers at www.nwei.org. Include location information, times, and dates for the entire program. Set clear registration deadlines for signups. Order any remaining materials from NWEI and give discussion guides to participants before the date of the first group meeting.
- Call a noontime meeting or host a brown bag lunch in a workplace to offer an informal presentation on NWEI programs and how they work.
- Host an introductory group meeting at home, your community or faith center, local library, or municipal office.

*If you would like to host an introductory group meeting in order to form a group, visit www.nwei.org/course_resources to download NWEI's Course Organizer Guide for ideas.

STEP 2: FIRST CLASS SESSION— GETTING STARTED

TAKE THE FOLLOWING MATERIALS WITH YOU TO THE FIRST SESSION: 1) Discussion guide, 2) Course schedule (enclosed) for participants to sign up for an opening and to facilitate the remaining sessions.

HAVE A ROUND OF INTRODUCTIONS. Introductions

serve several important functions, even if the group is already well acquainted. Participants begin to know each other on a personal level and have an opportunity to “get each person's voice into the room.” A person who has spoken and been listened to early in the session is more likely to participate in the rest of the session. Ask participants to say their names and something personal about themselves. As the organizer of your group, you should give your answer first to model the length and content.

DESCRIBE THE GROUP PROCESS. NWEI programs are designed to encourage discussions that clarify personal values and attitudes. Consensus is not the goal, and the group should not seek to reach agreement at the expense of diversity of opinion. Most groups meet for an hour to an hour and a half for each meeting. Each session will be led by a volunteer facilitator from the group. Point out the guidelines for the weekly facilitator on page 8.

CALL ATTENTION TO THE EVALUATION FORM IN EACH DISCUSSION GUIDE. Encourage participants to fill out the evaluation form on page 9 and share any feedback with NWEI.

FILL OUT THE COURSE SCHEDULE (found on the next page). This gives group members an opportunity to sign up to present an opening and to facilitate one of the sessions. Information on opening and facilitating is included at the beginning of each discussion guide.

STEP 3: FIRST CLASS SESSION— DESCRIBE/PRESENT THE OPENING

Please reference “Guidelines for the Facilitator” located on page 8.

STEP 4: FIRST SESSION— FACILITATING THE DISCUSSION

EXPLAIN THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR. Tell the group that you will help to keep the discussion personal, focused, and balanced among the participants. Show them the guidelines for the weekly facilitator on page 8. Encourage each person to review these guidelines before facilitating a session.

CIRCLE QUESTION. Following the opening, each person answers the Circle Question found at the beginning of each session. The question provides a focus for the day's discussion.

STEP 5: FIRST SESSION—CLOSING

Watch the time, and stop discussion a few minutes before the session is scheduled to end. Note whether the course schedule is completed. If not, work with participants

to complete it. Confirm the time and place for the next meeting. Be sure to end the class on time. This shows respect for the participants, and demonstrates that their time commitment is predictable.

STEP 6: DURATION OF NWEI PROGRAM

Your group will meet four to seven times, depending on the chosen discussion course and the meeting dates set by participants. Each session will be led by a rotating member of the group. Note the “Putting It into Practice” and “Further Reading” lists at the beginning of each session for ideas on further educational opportunities as well as tips for applying the learning you gain from the group into your life.

CLOSING: FINAL SESSION—A CALL TO ACTION.

The final session in each discussion guide is an optional celebration, and is an opportunity to:

- Celebrate the completion of the program and evaluate your experience.
- Discuss options for continuing as a group and consider goals and action items.
- Consider organizing other NWEI programs in your community, workplace, or organization.

Don’t hesitate to contact NWEI with questions or for assistance. If you enjoyed this experience and would like to support the Northwest Earth Institute’s work, please see our membership form on page 97.

COURSE SCHEDULE FOR RECONNECTING WITH EARTH

This course schedule may be useful to keep track of meeting dates and when you will be facilitating or providing the opening.

Course Coordinator : _____ Phone : _____

Mentor (if applicable) : _____ Phone : _____

Location for Future Meetings : _____

CLASS SESSION	DATE	OPENING	FACILITATOR
Wild Nature	_____	_____	_____
Shifting Paradigms	_____	_____	_____
Nature and Spirit	_____	_____	_____
The Universe Story	_____	_____	_____
Ecopsychology	_____	_____	_____
Bringing It Down to Earth	_____	_____	_____

PLANNERS

Call to Action* _____

*After the last regular session, your group may choose to have a final meeting and Call to Action. This meeting celebrates the completion of the course and may include a potluck lunch or dinner, and it provides an opportunity for evaluation and consideration of next steps.

GUIDELINES

FOR THE FACILITATOR AND OPENER

For each session of this course, one participant facilitates the discussion. The roles rotate weekly, with a different group member doing the opening and facilitating each week. This process is at the core of the Earth Institute culture—it assumes we gain our greatest insights through self-discovery, by promoting discussion among equals with no teacher.



FOR THE SESSION FACILITATOR

As facilitator for one session, your role is to stimulate and moderate the discussion. You do not need to be an expert or the most knowledgeable person about the topic.

Your role is to:

- Remind the designated person ahead of time to bring an opening.
- Begin and end on time.
- Ask the questions included in each chapter, or your own.
- Make sure your group has time to respond to the action-oriented discussion questions—this is a positive way to end each gathering.
- Keep discussion focused on the session's topic. A delicate balance is best—don't force the group into answering the questions, but don't allow the discussion to drift too far.
- Manage the group's process, using the guidelines below:

Strongly encourage all members to participate and to learn from themselves and each other. Draw out quiet participants by creating an opportunity for each person to contribute. Don't let one or two people dominate the discussion. Thank them for their opinions and then ask another person to share.

Be an active listener. You need to hear and understand what people say if you are to guide the discussion effectively. Model this for others.

Keep the focus on personal reactions to the readings, including personal values, feelings, and experiences.

Remember, the course is not for judging others' responses or solutions. Consensus is not a goal.

FOR THE SESSION OPENER

- Bring a short opening, not more than five minutes long. It should be something that expresses your personal appreciation for the natural world. Examples: a short personal story, an object or photograph that has special meaning a poem or a visualization. You can be creative.
- The purpose of the opening is twofold. First, it provides a transition from other activities of the day into the group discussion. Second, since the opening is personal, it allows the group to get better acquainted with you. This aspect of the course can be very rewarding.

For more information on the NWEI course model and organizing a course, see "How to Start a Discussion Course" on page 6.



EVALUATION

PART 1. PLEASE FILL OUT WEEKLY, while your thoughts and opinions are fresh in your mind. Rate the content of the six sessions.

	POOR CHOICE EXCELLENT					COMMENTS:
1. Wild Nature	1	2	3	4	5	
2. Shifting Paradigms	1	2	3	4	5	
3. Nature and Spirit	1	2	3	4	5	
4. The Universe Story	1	2	3	4	5	
5. Ecopsychology	1	2	3	4	5	
6. Bringing It Down to Earth	1	2	3	4	5	

Were the following articles helpful? Circle "Y" if we should use the article next time or "N" if we should look for better reading material. Leave blank if you didn't read it or have no opinion.

COMMENTS:

- 1. "The Real World Around Us".....Y N
- "The Tuolumne Camp"Y N
- "The Judgement of the Birds".....Y N
- "Seeing".....Y N
- "The Phosphorescent Soul".....Y N
- "The Moral Equivalent of Wildness"Y N

- 2. "Thinking Like a Mountain"Y N
- From *The Web of Life*.....Y N
- "The Eight Principles of Deep Ecology"Y N
- "Deep Ecology and Lifestyles".....Y N
- "The Gaia Hypothesis".....Y N
- From *Seeing the Whole at the Center*.....Y N

- 3. "The Greening of the World's Religions".....Y N
- "The Gospel of J. Matthew".....Y N
- "First Do No Harm".....Y N
- "Sharing One Skin"Y N

- 4. "Cosmology: The Largest Context"Y N
- "Comprehensive Compassion:
 An Interview with Brian Swimme".....Y N
- "The Universe Is Our University".....Y N
- "Living the New Story:
 An Interview with Sister Miriam MacGillis"Y N

continued

SESSION 1



WILD NATURE

This curious world which we inhabit is more wonderful than it is convenient, more beautiful than it is useful; it is more to be admired and enjoyed than used.

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU

SESSION GOALS

- To get acquainted, set a schedule for future meetings, and identify facilitator and “opening” roles for each session.
- To listen to others’ experiences in nature and to reflect upon our own.
- To explore the meaning of a deep connection to the natural world.

SESSION BACKGROUND

Among the giants of the American conservation movement are naturalists who were grounded by an intimate experience in the natural world. This session includes readings by Rachel Carson, John Muir, and Loren Eiseley, all authors whose influence continues today. Each stands as a tap root of the modern environmental movement.

Carson, best known for her 1962 publication, *Silent Spring*, which exposed the danger of pesticides, also wrote *The Sense of Wonder*, about experiencing nature with children. In “The Real World Around Us,” included here, she

balances a poetic evocation of the beauty and mystery of the natural world with a sobering contemplation of the artificial world humans are creating.

In *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911), naturalist and Sierra Club founder John Muir details his early experiences in the Sierra Nevada. Journal entries from his summer spent at Tuolumne Camp include close observation of life and land forms and reflects his reverential connection to creation.

Loren Eiseley was a highly respected anthropologist, science writer, ecologist and poet. He is known for his writings about humanity’s relationship with the natural world. In *The Star Thrower*, he explores our perceptions of the world and challenges readers to experiment with alternative views to increase their sense of reverence.

More recent voices included are Annie Dillard, Terry Tempest Williams, and Kathleen Dean Moore. In “Seeing,” from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), Dillard describes her first encounter with “seeing deeply and truly.” Terry Tempest Williams then treats us to a vignette of a magical moment shared by her family while swimming in a phosphorescent tide. Finally, Kathleen Dean Moore, an environmental philosopher and essayist, shares her reflections on “wildness” and how we might broaden our understanding of it in “The Moral Equivalent of Wildness.”

Circle Question

(Each Member Answers)

**If you think back to a significant experience in the natural world, what comes to mind?
When was this moment? Where were you?**

Reminder to the facilitator: The circle question discussion should move quickly. Elicit an answer from each participant without questions or comments from others. The facilitator's guidelines are on page 8.

POSSIBLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Carson believes that we need the beauty and mysteries of the natural world for our spiritual and emotional development. Does that ring true for you? What are the implications for a culture that spends most of its time indoors?
2. Eiseley describes an incident with a crow that completely altered his perception of reality. Has your focus or perspective in nature ever been altered in such a way? Describe your experience.
3. Dillard writes that "when I see this way I see truly" and suggests that each of us can cultivate a truer way of seeing. How do you, or how could you, create this way of seeing in your life?
4. Muir refers to the "so-called lifeless rocks." Is there any other way to view a rock?
5. Muir details his daily observations of nature. What do your daily observations include?
6. Kathleen Dean Moore explores Thoreau with her students, concluding that "If the natural world is to be preserved...it will be because of how wildness transforms us." In what ways does it transform you? Is Thoreau right?
7. Can we capture the experience of wildness in any setting, as Moore suggests, whether it is urban, suburban or rural? Explain.
8. After reviewing the list in "Putting It into Practice" are there any actions you feel inspired to begin doing?

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

- Find a special place in nature where you can keep the built environs and other people out of view. Spend five or ten minutes being aware of what you experience with all your senses. Notice color, motion, touch, sound, temperature, form, and smell. Write down your impressions.
- Find at least one new hike or scenic view that you can visit in your local bioregion each month. Keep going back to your favorite ones.
- Adopt a tree and visit it monthly throughout the year. Being still in its presence, note the changes it undergoes as the seasons turn.
- Dig into one square foot of soil in a garden or compost pile. How many living creatures can you observe?
- Start a daily observation journal. Document a natural event every day in words or a sketch. Grow a plant from a seed and sense the miracle of life.
- Provide food and water for birds and spend time observing their behavior.

FURTHER READINGS AND RESOURCES

In *New and Selected Poems* (2004), Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Mary Oliver captures the power and beauty of our natural world.

In *An Unspoken Hunger: Stories from the Field* (1994), Terry Tempest Williams's contends that lack of intimacy with the natural world results in a lack of intimacy with one another. She calls on us to find the courage and heart to stand our ground in the places we love.

Orion magazine delves into the connections between nature, science, justice, art, and politics. Read selected articles or subscribe online at: www.orionmagazine.org.

In *Home Ground, Language for an American Landscape*, edited by Barry Lopez and Debra Gwartney, forty-five writers describe their unique landscapes.

As you complete the weekly readings, remember to fill out the course evaluation form on page 9. Your comments will help NWEI improve the course. Thank you.



THE REAL WORLD AROUND US

by Rachel Carson

From what I have told you, you will know that a large part of my life has been concerned with some of the beauties and mysteries of this earth about us, and with the even greater mysteries of the life that inhabits it. No one can dwell long among such subjects without thinking rather deep thoughts, without asking himself searching and often unanswerable questions, and without achieving a certain philosophy.

There is only one quality that characterizes all of us who deal with the sciences of the earth and its life—we are never bored. We can't be. There is always something new to be investigated. Every mystery solved brings us to the threshold of a greater one.

I like to remember the wonderful old Swedish oceanographer, Otto Petterson. He died a few years ago at the age of 93, in full possession of his keen mental powers. His son, also a distinguished oceanographer, tells us in a recent book how intensely his father enjoyed every new experience, every new discovery concerning the world about him. "He was an incurable romantic," the son wrote, "intensely in love with life and with the mysteries of the Cosmos which, he was firmly convinced, he had been born

to unravel." When, past 90, Otto Petterson realized he had not much longer to enjoy the earthly scene, he said to his son: "what will sustain me in my last moments is an infinite curiosity as to what is to follow."

The pleasures, the values of contact with the natural world, are not reserved for the scientists. They are available to anyone who will place himself under the influence of a lonely mountain top—or the sea—or the stillness of a forest; or who will stop to think about so small a thing as the mystery of a growing seed.

I am not afraid of being thought a sentimentalist when I stand here tonight and tell you that I believe natural beauty has a necessary place in the spiritual development of any individual or any society. I believe that whenever we destroy beauty, or whenever we substitute something man-made and artificial for a natural feature of the earth, we have retarded some part of man's spiritual growth.

I believe this affinity of the human spirit for the earth and its beauties is deeply and logically rooted. As human beings, we are part of the whole stream of life. We have been human beings for perhaps a million years. But life itself—passes on something of itself to other life—that mysterious entity that moves and is aware of itself and its surroundings, and so is distinguished from rocks or senseless clay—[from which] life arose many hundreds of millions of years ago. Since then it has developed, struggled, adapted itself to its surroundings, evolved an infinite number of forms. But its living protoplasm is built of the same elements as air, water, and rock. To these the mysterious spark of life was added. Our origins are of the earth. And so there is in us a deeply seated response to the natural universe, which is part of our humanity.

Now why do I introduce such a subject tonight—a serious subject for a night when we are supposed to be having fun? First, because you have asked me to tell you something of myself—and I can't do that without telling you some of the things I believe in so intensely.

Also, I mention it because it is not often I have a chance to talk to a thousand women. I believe it is important for women to realize that the world of today threatens to destroy much of that beauty that has immense power to bring us a healing release from tension. Women have a greater intuitive understanding of such things. They want for their children not only physical health but mental and spiritual health as well. I bring these things to your attention tonight because I think your awareness of them will help, whether you are practicing journalists, or teachers, or librarians, or housewives and mothers.

What are these threats of which I speak: what is this destruction of beauty—this substitution of man-made ugliness—this trend toward a perilously artificial world? Unfortunately, that is a subject that could require a whole conference, extending over many days. So in the few

minutes that I have to devote to it, I can only suggest the trend.

We see it in small ways in our own communities, and in larger ways in the community of the state of the nation. We see the destruction of beauty and the suppression of human individuality in hundreds of suburban real estate developments where the first act is to cut down all the trees and the next is to build an infinitude of little houses, each like its neighbor.

We see it in distressing form in the nation's capital, where I live. There in the heart of the city we have a small but beautiful woodland area—Rock Creek Park. It is a place where one can go, away from the noise of traffic and of man-made confusions, for a little interval of refreshing and restoring quiet—where one can hear the soft water sounds of a stream on its way to river and sea, where the wind flows through the trees, and a veery sings in the green twilight. Now they propose to run a six-lane arterial highway through the heart of that narrow woodland valley—destroying forever its true and immeasurable blue to the city and the nation.

Those who place so great a value on a highway apparently do not think the thoughts of an editorial writer for the *New York Times* who said: "But a little lonesome space, where nature has her own way, where it is quiet enough at night to hear the patter of small paws on leaves and the murmurings of birds, can still be afforded. The gift of tranquility, wherever found, is beyond price."

We see the destructive trend on a national scale in proposals to invade the national parks with commercial schemes such as the building of power dams. The parks were placed in trust for all the people, to preserve for them just such recreational and spiritual values as I have



mentioned. Is it the right of this, our generation, in its selfish materialism, to destroy these things because we are blinded by the dollar sign? Beauty—and all the values that derive from beauty—are not measured and evaluated in terms of the dollar.

Years ago I discovered in the writings of the British naturalist Richard Jeffries a few lines that so impressed themselves upon my mind that I have never forgotten them. May I quote them for you now?

The exceeding beauty of the earth, in her splendor of life, yields a new thought with every petal. The hours when the mind is absorbed by beauty are the only hours when we really live. All else is illusion, or mere endurance.

Those lines are, in a way, a statement of the creed I have lived by, for, as perhaps you have seen tonight, a preoccupation with the wonder and beauty of the earth has strongly influenced the course of my life.

Since *The Sea Around Us* was published, I have had the privilege of receiving many letters from people who, like myself, have been steadied and reassured by contemplating the long history of the earth and sea, and the deeper meanings of the world of nature. These letters have come from all sorts of people; there have been hairdressers and fishermen and musicians; there have been classical scholars and scientists. So many of them have said, in one phrasing or another, "We have been troubled about the world, and had almost lost faith in man; it helps to think about the long history of the earth, and of how life came to be. And when we think in terms of millions of years we are not so impatient that our own problems be solved tomorrow."

In contemplating the "exceeding beauty of the earth" these people have found calmness and courage. For there is symbolic as well as actual beauty in the migration of birds; in the ebb and flow of the tides; in the folded bud ready for the spring. There is something infinitely healing in these repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter.

Mankind has gone very far into an artificial world of his own creation. He has sought to insulate himself, with steel and concrete, from the realities of earth and water. Perhaps he is intoxicated with his own power, as he goes farther and farther into experiments for the destruction of himself and his world. For this unhappy trend there is no single remedy—no panacea. But I believe that the more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction.

This excerpt is from *Lost Woods: The Discovered Writing of Rachel Carson* (1998). Rachel Carson (1907–1964) was an American marine biologist and nature writer whose writings are credited with advancing the global environmental movement. She also wrote *The Sense of Wonder*, *The Sea Around Us*, *The Edge of the Sea*, *Under the Sea Wind*, and *Silent Spring*.