
An ES 401 Final Project
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Spirit In Nature ☯ i
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Preface: A Conversation Between the Head and the Heart

Rebecca Kneale Gould

-- for my students and for Paul Bortz

When I tell people that I teach courses in religion and ecology they tend to look at me funny. They are not sure how these two fields of inquiry can possibly go together, or even if they should. Awkward conversations inevitably ensue. Scientists who hold no truck with religion worry about the evangelizing I might be up to in the classroom. The religiously-minded wonder if I am really a pagan, in scholarly disguise. Those occupying neither camp, often cock an eyebrow and quickly change the topic of conversation. And then there are those other moments, those refreshing and illuminating ones, when little explanation is needed. When, as with old friends, understanding precedes analysis.

Such was the case when I first met Paul Bortz and heard of his project to establish a series of woodland paths in Ripton, Vermont. SpIN, he told me in our first meeting, would introduce visitors to the religious traditions of the world and give them a taste of how these traditions might speak to the environmental crisis we are called to address. In the face of the realities of global warming and other forms of anthropogenic ecocide, Paul urgently felt the need to create something tangible, a place people could visit to nourish their souls. A true minister, he saw this not as an individual project, but as a work of love that would be built in community, by members of Middlebury College and citizens of the surrounding towns.

As I walked these beautiful paths in their early stages of formation, I reveled in the possibilities that this place, SpIN, might create: a sanctuary, a place of worship, a meeting ground for activism, a house of study with stars for a roof, a mandala for walking meditation - - whose common center would be the Sacred Circle. I also chuckled to myself about this unexpectedly fortuitous way to respond to future inquiries about my career. "You don't see the connection?" I could now reply, "Why don't you take a long walk up in Ripton?"

But while the SpIN paths sometimes have felt like the physical incarnation of my intellectual work, they have also inspired me (in my role as an advisor to the Board) to be something of an intellectual thorn in the side of my friend, the founder.
"Paul," I have insisted, "These paths only tell part of the story. Our religious traditions are contradictory and complex. So, too, are ecological niches. I want visitors to know more after they visit here!"

"But Becky," Paul has exclaimed in reply, "People these days are so in their heads! We've forgotten how to feel! People need to have a place where they can meditate, contemplate and nourish their hearts."

Paul and I will probably be having this conversation for the rest of our lives. I fervently hope so! For we engage in such discourse with a great spirit of mutual affection. Each has a twinkle in the eye as we exchange perspectives, and then hugs. I have come to think of these conversations as conversations between the head and the heart. And in the course of them, we have played multiple roles. Paul has come to his own intellectual insights, and I have shown him, I hope, that there is more "heart" in my work than writing footnotes suggests. Such conversations between the head and the heart are crucial. They are conversations that we all need to have.

My students in the Environmental Studies Seminar (ES 401) of the fall of 2001 were as drawn to SpIN as I was. When we held class amid the soft pine needles and russet maple leaves, our abstract conversations about "nature" and "sustainability" became more palpable, and more urgent. Even those students who chose to write a different, and equally fascinating, senior project expressed a sense of enchantment with the place, as both an escape from the everyday world and as a different kind of classroom. The conversation between heads and hearts started to unfold.

Through visits to SpIN and reading about environmental ethics in our weekly classes, one set of students came to see the value in taking the great resource of SpIN to a new level, setting it spinning, as it were, upward and outward to new directions. The scientists in the class, whose mastery of biological niches and chemical balances far outweighed my own, saw the need for expanding the existing "Nature Notes" that Barry and Warren King had so graciously contributed to the initial SpIN project. While SpIN is intended as a place for contemplation and renewal, it is also located in a particular watershed, and populated by a particular community of non-human beings. The work of Susy King and Sarah Percy was invaluable in bringing this place and these communities to light. They earned my further admiration by doing so in a style so accessible to the non-scientist reader.

Moreover, as students in an Environmental Studies program who had, themselves, been inspired by early childhood experiences in nature and by passionate teachers who brought them to local bogs and fields, King and Percy dedicated themselves to pondering more deeply
what effective environmental education might look like. Visitors may go to SpIN for religious reflection or simply a walk in the woods, we concluded, but what potential could be unlocked if we gave parents and teachers the tools to use this location as a place of study? Percy and King tackled these questions with enthusiasm and vision, offering exercises and study guides that can now serve as a template for use as a formal curriculum, an afternoon tromp with a youth group or as part of a family outing. Together, these authors admirably embraced both the inter-disciplinary and Service Learning goals of our Senior Seminar, providing resources that would be used primarily by citizens of the surrounding communities and communicating their interests and concerns from the various disciplines of biology, the physical sciences, education theory and practice and environmental history.

The second set of authors had a different task before them, equally formidable and perhaps more nerve-wracking since it spoke directly to the specialization of their advisor! Yet Peter Park and Kaitlin Gregg worked tirelessly toward the lofty goals I set for them, while also establishing their own intellectual independence in meeting those goals. Park tackled the problem of scholarly synthesis with a serious understanding of the daunting challenge of sketching the broad themes of an entire religious tradition in only a handful of pages! He also graciously accepted the addition of some of my own perspectives and phrasings to his final prose. Gregg encountered both the delights and drudgery of sociological research: the pleasures of interviewing a fascinating group of religious environmentalists and the painstaking work of transcribing hours of interviews.

Together, both Park and Gregg learned -- and conveyed to others with impressive detail -- a great deal about the many facets, and endless fascinations, of conducting scholarly research in the field of religion. In doing so, they also managed to capture what the great scholar of comparative religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, has argued is central to the meaning of the term "religion." Smith wrote that "religion" is really a two-fold term; that what we are talking about when we mean "religion" is really the dynamic intersection between two key elements: "faith" and "the cumulative tradition." The cumulative tradition constitutes those texts, rituals, doctrines, and institutions that we normally think of when the word "religion" is used: the structure of authority in the Catholic church, the suras of the Qur'an, the traditional Jewish Days of Awe (Rosh Ha-shanah and Yom Kippur), or the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism. "Faith" speaks of the many dynamic and varied ways an individual grasps, engages and wrestles with that tradition. Park paints for us with broad brush-strokes, the themes and sources of the traditions encountered when one walks the paths of
Spirit In Nature

Gregg reveals to us the textures and tensions of individuals' particular experiences of following the paths of their traditions, seeking to make them meaningful and meaning-filled in the face of their life experiences and ecological commitments.

My own life and work has been dedicated to probing the richness of religious history and religious experience, very much in the tradition of Wilfred Cantwell Smith's own vision. My senior colleagues in the Department of Religion at Middlebury have invigorated my sense of the value of "texts and traditions" in understanding religious histories and cultures. In addition, my research has gravitated, in ethics, history and sociology, to the questions of how these traditions are lived. In my teaching and scholarship, I have become consistently aware of how "faith" depends on the rich sources of a given tradition and how those traditions are themselves illuminated by studying the complex, and often contradictory, ways that they are individually practiced and understood.

When the question of "religion and ecology" comes before us, we need to pay attention to both the dynamics of faith and the complexities of the cumulative tradition. The work in this volume is a wonderful illustration of a great deal of work that remains to be done. While Gregg and Park have chosen to emphasize the "positive" ecological potential of our religious traditions (a choice which befits the inspirational potential of the SpIN project more broadly), I have been vocal in my own teaching and scholarship about the need to recognize the complexity of all traditions in this regard. Each religious tradition sets the rhythm for a complex dance of human existence, a dance between divine immanence and divine transcendence; between this-worldly and other-worldly desires; between human exceptionalism and human finitude with respect to larger natural and sacred worlds. In each tradition, we find attitudes toward "nature" that are decidedly negative. Yet, in each tradition, we also find modes of resistance toward the tendency to see the physical world as merely a stage for the human religious drama. Let us consider, for instance, the Christian belief in the Incarnation of the divine in earthly flesh, the Jewish observance of the Sabbath in which no improvement on nature nor consumption of products is permitted, or Hindu and Buddhist pilgrimages to the sacred rivers and mountains of India, China, Japan, and now, America. Such beliefs and practices all carry the potential for religiously-motivated earth-care. But to truly understand -- and perhaps unlock -- that potential, we need to dedicate ourselves to the on-going task of learning about these traditions in their full, dynamic, multi-layered dimensions.
Taken together, the work of Percy, King, Park and Gregg -- wonderfully supplemented with GIS maps by Ben Sprauge and Dane Springmeyer -- represent an invitation into the on-going work of teaching and learning from one another. But what has motivated this effort has not been simply intellectual curiosity or scholarly drive for its own sake. Always, we have been moved in our hearts by the environmental destruction that haunts us, and the ecological vision that inspires us.

Many bridges have been built in the process of this work. Bridges across the disciplines, among the generations, between town and gown and intersecting the head and the heart. Paul Bortz had the vision to imagine such bridges. I have urged that more could be built. Diane Munroe has displayed the enduring patience to check that all the planks were there and the nails hammered in cleanly. I hope, then, that readers will use this book as a bridge, as an inspiration to get them up to Ripton and as a resource for further study and reflection when they return. Our work has been a conversation between the head and the heart. May you use it, now, to start religious and ecological conversations of your own.
1. Introduction

Purpose of Spirit in Nature Handbook

It is our hope that as readers you will use this book as a resource for learning about and becoming involved with the Spirit in Nature paths (SpIN) in Ripton, Vermont. We have provided this guide for our community at Middlebury College, as well as for the wider community, in the hope that it will encourage interaction and enjoyment of the natural world surrounding our Vermont home. The book is intended for both adults and young people, those who are a part of SpIN and those who have never thought of connections between nature and spirituality. It contains a wide range of resources, including natural history, educational exercises, information about religious traditions and interviews with SpIN founders and path coordinators. As authors, we hope you will find it contains information and ideas that will augment your study and enjoyment of the natural world.

History of SpIN

In 1996, Paul Bortz, then a Unitarian Universalist Minister from Middlebury, left traditional ministry and became active in the environmental movement. His vision of a unity between faith and environmental issues prompted him to develop the concept for "Spirit in Nature," a series of interconnected forest paths with quotes representing various faith traditions and their relationship to the environment. This dream was realized when Middlebury College agreed to lease land in Ripton, Vermont to SpIN in the spring of 1998.

Since that time, the center has grown significantly. There are now over eight miles of paths, including an interfaith path, and paths representing the Bahai, Quaker, Jewish, Muslim, Pagan, Unitarian Universalist, Christian, Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Each faith group is headed by a small group of individuals who were responsible for helping to clear the paths and choosing the sayings that line their respective path.

The paths are centered around an open area lined with benches, called the sacred circle. All paths eventually lead back to the circle, representing the unity of hope and love for the earth even among a diversity of religious traditions. The paths themselves are situated in an immensely beautiful landscape, with over 6,000 feet of river, several bridges, beaver ponds, abandoned foundations, and an old apple orchard. This landscape has provided an optimal place not only for reflection, but also for engagement with the natural world and inquiry into natural history.
**Project Formation and Process**

During the fall of 2001, our Environmental Studies 401 group decided to create a project around the Spirit in Nature paths in Ripton, Vermont. We were interested in the story behind this set of walking paths, and wanted the Middlebury community to become more aware of them as a place to visit and enjoy. Our class explored the paths as a group, marveling over the fact that so few of the students at Middlebury have been there. We began to wonder what we could do to change the situation and how we could invite the town as a whole to learn more about Spirit in Nature.

As a group we were motivated by a variety of things, including a interest in looking at how science and environmental issues can be integrated with religious ideals, and the desire to create a project that would give back to our area. We felt it unfortunate that for many students involved in science and Environmental Studies at Middlebury, the power and beauty of nature is too often turned into numbers and equations. Therefore we thought by focusing on the more visceral connections to nature formed by direct interaction and education, we could offer those normally involved in science, including several members of our group, a new way of looking at the world.

Our final conception of the project gave us the freedom to concentrate on non-technical ways to understand nature, enjoy it, and learn about what it can mean to others and to ourselves, both spiritually and generally. This attitude of questioning and growth beyond a scientific worldview is reflected in the sections we chose to include: mapping, history of the land, natural history, educational activities, background on religious traditions, and interviews with Spirit in Nature coordinators.

After we had decided on the sections we might be interested in doing, we got in contact with Paul Bortz, the founder of SpIN, and told him of our plans. He was eager to have our group become involved with SpIN and provided us with a lot of information and additional ideas about how our project could aid SpIN’s mission. After speaking with Paul, our group felt more certain that we would like to add to SpIN’s existing assets by creating a book that could promote community involvement and place-based education.

We also discussed with Paul and each other our motivations behind the different sections we decided to include. We felt like the inclusion of mapping could ground us in the physical area, and help us gain a greater spatial respect for the place. Only one person in our group was familiar with thinking spatially, so we all learned about what it entails to map paths using GPS units, albeit in the midst of snow flurries and hunting season. As we tried to ground ourselves in the
place that is SpIN, we wanted to find out about the previous uses of the land and how it came to be owned by the college and then rented by SpIN, and therefore we included a section on the history of land use. We utilized the Ripton town records and deeds to help us piece together a coherent history of the physical landscape now used by Spirit in Nature. In addition, we connected this historical section to natural history descriptions.

We decided to expand upon already existing Nature Notes at the SpIN site, documenting the many flora and fauna of the area. To complement this section, we have also decided to include educational activities for both children and adults, each of which help us gain a greater understanding of place and knowledge of the animals that reside there. These educational activities teach few scientific specifics, but rather encourage children to get to know the forest, to recognize its many components, learn that all these components work together, and to understand that we too are part of the give and take of components comprising this natural setting.

In the last two sections of our book we chose to focus on SpIN’s mission of connecting environmental activism and religious belief. Because Spirit in Nature uses elements of different traditions as a means to ground us in nature, and perhaps into our own religious faith as well, we felt it was important to provide background on each of the traditions represented by the paths. Oftentimes one can be walking the paths and be moved by a particular quote lining a path. Previously, there has not been a resource for individuals wishing to learn more about that particular tradition, so we hope to provide that background information in this book.

The final piece of our guide chronicles the development and involvement of the many people connected to SpIN paths. We felt this type of investigation was valuable as it is not only the doctrinal aspect of a religious tradition that is important, but also how it may translate into individual action. Each of the traditions has a “Path Coordinator,” who has chosen to become involved in the environmental movement based on religious convictions. We wanted to profile these individuals to see how their daily faith informs the environmental choices they make, especially their choice to get involved with SpIN. We were also interested in what each individual feels their traditions have gained from the creation of SpIN paths.

Each of us who has been a part of this project is eager to share with you the information we have gathered, and to let you learn about the topography, natural history, religious traditions, and, the people we have come into contact with during the course of our project. The Spirit in Nature organization represents many things to the Middlebury
community, not the least of which is an open and unique partnership with the college. At this time, Middlebury students serve on the Board of Directors, participate in the Global Warming Action Coalition, help clear paths during orientation, attend Soup and Bread dinners, and have even started a "Yellow Bike" bike sharing program in conjunction with SpIN. It is our hope that the thoughts and information in this book will prompt even more involvement and interaction with the SpIN community.
Introduction to History of SpIN Land Use

Scattered upon SpIN property lie many clues telling us about the past uses of the land. It is important to remember that the forest through which SpIN paths are cut is not a virgin forest invaded by humans for the first time. Instead, the creation of SpIN is just the most recent chapter in the history of how humans have used and connected with this space. Surprisingly, little research has been done on the history of this land, but old stonewalls upon the property and charcoal kilns suggest that the land was once cleared for farms and industry. However, specific dates, owners’ names, and occupants’ use of the land have not been assembled before now. With the help of the past deeds found in the Ripton Town Clerk’s office, we compiled a history of SpIN’s land use (Figure 1).

The first clue used to begin the deed search was a charcoal kiln remain on SpIN land. One kiln ruin lies one hundred feet west of Goshen Road and seven-hundred and fifty feet south of the bridge crossing the South Branch. As noted in 200 Years of Soot and Sweat, and indicated on the 1871 Beers Map of Ripton, Parsons Billings temporarily owned the kilns that existed in this area. Thus, the deed search began with Billings, and the land with the kilns was researched backwards in deeds to 1841. The owners before 1841 and after Billings have not been confirmed, but the history of the land becomes concrete again once Battell acquired the land in the eighteen-eighties. We believe that a recollection of the land’s past uses is important for understanding how Vermonter’s relationship with nature has evolved with time. Through the environmental or landscape history of SpIN we can acquire a better appreciation of the harmonious relationship between humans and nature that is being demonstrated on SpIN property today.

History of SpIN Land Use

Two-hundred years ago, the forest on SpIN property probably looked much like the forest of today with the exception of the present day White Pine stand representative of secondary succession. Until
this point in history the land had endured little visible human disturbance since the Abenaki were the people inhabiting the area and they did not practice agriculture. It was not until 1763 that a large number of Europeans began to settle in Vermont, after the Treaty of Paris was signed ending a set of the British-French wars. Bringing with them their own vision of an amiable and functional landscape, the settlers began to clear the land, divide it into private property, and establish agriculture. Seeing as wood was not a commodity at this time, the cleared trees were used for personnel lumber, charcoal, and potash.

As settlers flowed to the north, towns were established such as Ripton which was chartered in 1781. An 1820 local census showed that the town’s population was fifteen. The population grew rapidly in the following years, and by 1840, the Ripton town census showed that two-hundred and seventy-eight people resided in Ripton. Daniel Chipman was one of the landholders living in Ripton in the eighteen-thirties. Owning land along Goshen Road, he may have been one of the first farmers settled upon SpIn land. In 1837, Chipman sold a tract of his land to William Arnold, who in turn sold land in 1841 to Jonathon R. Furnal. This lot, which became known on all the deeds as the “Furnal” lot was most certainly part of SpIn property because it is upon this lot that some of the coal kilns resided, as mentioned in later deeds. Johnathon Furnal lived on this track of land with his wife Eliza, whom he left the land to upon his death. In 1860, Eliza sold the Furnal lot to Israel Davey, from Fairhaven. This deed describes the Furnal lot as the sixty-seven acres lying west of the brook that runs from Goshen Road to Wheeler Sawmill.

Israel Davey joined the Furnal lot to another tract called the Whitcomb lot which he purchased from Charles G. Wainwright in 1859. The Whitcomb lot consisted of two-hundred acres, touching the western edge of the Furnal lot. Though this lot consisted of the land lying on and surrounding the western edge of SpIn, a history of this portion of land can give a sense of who the land owners were in the area at the time and how they used the land. After purchasing both the Furnal and Whitcomb lots, Davey resold them almost immediately to Benjamin Nichols who had acquired many other surrounding pieces of land. Nichols purchased land known as the Champlin lot in 1859 and the Lewis Lot in 1862 so the Furnal and Whitcomb lots, lying adjacent to these parcels of land served as a nice addition to his holdings. Deeds involved in joining all these lots under the possession of Nichols included mention of the coal kilns for the first time. Therefore, it can be inferred that the kilns were probably not built or considered an asset to the land until the eighteen-fifties and sixties.
Signaling the emerging dominance of industrial rather than agricultural land use, the Burlington Manufacturing Company began to use Nichols’ land consisting of the Furnal, Whitcomb, Champlin, and Lewis lots starting in 1865. On these deeds, the land is described as having houses, barns, and kilns. The multiple houses and barns are probably a compilation of the farms that each individual family had established before the tracts were joined, and the existing kilns may have simply been used for condensing their own cleared lumber. The full economic significance of these kilns was probably not realized until the eighteen-sixties when the Manufacturing Company temporarily used the land. At this time, additional land may have been clear-cut to produce more charcoal used to manufacture iron.vii

Deeds indicate that in 1869 Nichols sold the land containing all four lots to Parsons Billings. Part of the contract involved supplying Nichols and Davey with sixty-five thousand bushels of coal as well as future supplies at the specified quantity and price of the time. Parsons resided on this land at least until 1871 when his residence and the coal kilns are marked on the 1871 Beers map of Ripton. On this map, it says that Billings was a “Farmer, Manuf [sic] of Clapboards, Shingles, and Charcoal, and Dealer in Coarse Lumber”.viii Clapboard and shingle mills are also indicated along the South Branch of the map.ix This indicates that industry continued to overtake farmland in the eighteen-sixties and seventies upon the present SpIN property. As industrialism increased, the importance of the land for agriculture must have become less significant, and the land that was once cleared for farming began to regrow. The Ripton census shows that the population hit its peak of six-hundred and seventeen people in 1890 and then began to rapidly decrease. By 1970, Ripton was only comprised of one-hundred and thirty-one people. The combination of the industrial revolution and the decline in population as farmers moved back to the west probably led to the resurgence of the forest.

While it is unclear who owned the land for the remainder of the eighteen-seventies, Joseph Battell who bought neighboring pieces of land in 1880 eventually acquired the Furnal lot. In 1915, he left this land, as part of a ten-thousand acre parcel, in his will to Middlebury College. Since then, timber has been harvested in the area, and from 1981 to 1986, local hardwoods, red pine and white pine were taken.x Other than the recent harvesting, since 1900 the land seems to have been fairly undisturbed and contact with humans fairly limited until the creation of SpIN five years ago.

A cycle of humans’ light and heavy use of SpIN land can be traced through its history. Humans did not significantly alter the landscape until the eighteen-twenties and thirties when a significant
number of farmers inhabited the area and cleared land for their houses and barns. However, humans’ relationship with the land changed in the following decades and the trees, which were once an obstacle that needed to be removed for good farming, became an asset that became more valuable than the land itself. However, the drop in the area’s population suggests that the industrial uses of the land could not compete with the value of the arable farmland out west.

With the decrease in the population, the forest was allowed to re-grow. It is only recently that the land and the forest have been viewed as something other than a commodity. With the creation of SpIN, a relationship has finally been established that does not involve physically taking anything from the land. SpIN encourages people to experience nature and take spiritual solace from the surroundings without marking the landscape. Therefore, this change in land use depicts a change in humans’ relationship with nature over time. Humans’ use of SpIN land today, which contrasts the farming and logging of the past, signals the evolution of a new set of values in the form of a new respect for nature.

Notes

3. Flora, Fauna, and Natural Processes Found at the Sprit in Nature Paths

Introduction

SpIN was originally envisioned as a place where a connection could be made between religion and the environment. However, many recognized from the outset that one need not be religious to benefit from SpIN’s resources. Barry and Warren King are two such people who do not practice religion, yet find that being in nature offers a spiritual renewal. They have both spent their adult lives exploring nature through their careers, Warren as an ornithologist and environmental educator and Barry as an outdoor and environmental educator (to learn more about the Kings see Appendix A). Because of their deep connection with nature and love for trail walking, the Kings enthusiastically responded when their friends Paul Bortz and Catherine Nichols came to them with their vision of SpIN and wanted assistance finding a piece of property on which to create the paths. Walking eight to ten properties in and around Ripton, the Kings helped in choosing the present location. Involved in the birth of Ripton’s SpIN, they became founding board members.

Two years ago, the King’s increased their involvement in SpIN when they co-authored the Nature Notes (see Appendix B). This document consists of twenty-four descriptions of animals, plants, physical processes, and evidence of past land use that correspond to numbered examples along the paths. Narrowing their selection down to twenty-four noteworthy items was difficult, but necessary since one of their goals was to create a one-page document that people could easily carry around with them as they walked the paths. They feared that too many nature notes would detract from the overall experience because it would force the visitors to concentrate on facts and numbers rather than their surrounding beauty. Therefore, the criteria used for choosing a limited number of items to include in the notes were proximity to the paths, existence along multiple paths, and presence for the majority of the year. Their goal for a one-page document meant that the Kings had to be very economical with words, and severely limit the depth with which they could describe each item. Finally, in attempts to convey useful information about each natural element without burdening the visitor to SpIN, the Kings tailored their notes to what the average user would want to process while walking the paths. Their overall purpose for each note became emphasizing the context of each feature within the area’s overall natural history.
Designed perfectly for use while walking the paths because they printed on just one page, the *Nature Notes* contain brief yet comprehensive paragraphs on the flora, fauna, and natural processes found at SpIN. However, others with a great curiosity for nature may desire more knowledge about the topics introduced in the original document. For this reason, our group decided that a more detailed description of the notes could be a useful resource to the community, and we expanded the *Nature Notes*. Not all of the original nature notes are included in the expanded form, but all the flora and fauna identified, as well as two processes of nature, forest succession and stream erosion, are included (Table 1).

Table 1. Items described in expanded format and the number of the original *Nature Notes* they correspond to.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items described in expanded format (in order of appearance in this chapter)</th>
<th>Corresponding Original Nature Notes Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Eastern White Pine</em></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ferns</em></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Downy Serviceberry</em></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Speckled Alder</em></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Mountain Ash</em></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Norway Spruce</em></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Black Cherry</em></td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Striped Maple</em></td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Apple</em></td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Beaver</em></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Eastern Gray Squirrel</em></td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Black Bear</em></td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Forest Succession</em></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Stream Erosion</em></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All of the animals described in this section and most of the plants described are native to Vermont. Thus, this information serves as a resource that teaches not just about the SpIN site in particular, but also the region as a whole. While each aspect of the environment has been described separately, it is important to realize that all of these interact with each other. Close examination of the information below shows that many of the flora found at SpIN are the typical diet of the fauna found at this location. This interplay between these two components contributes to the character of the forest. Combined with this, the natural processes described below act to shape the landscape and make the forest what it is today.
Eastern White Pine – *Pinus strobus*

This tree, also called the Northern White Pine, occurs primarily as single trees and in small to extensive groves. It prefers moist, well-drained, acidic sandy soil and is often found on slopes. This tree is moderately fast growing and long lived and commonly lives to two hundred years if undisturbed. In fact, maximum age may exceed four hundred and fifty years.

Historically, Eastern White Pine grew to heights of one hundred fifty feet, but now because it is heavily harvested, individuals taller than one hundred feet are rarely found. The bark is smooth and greenish gray when young, becoming dark gray-brown and deeply fissured with thick vertical to narrow to broad rough ridges as it ages. The blue-green needles are fine-toothed and grow in bundles of five. They are soft, fine and flexible, reach up to five inches in length, and drop off the tree after the second year. The cylindrical cones are yellow-brown in color, grow up to eight inches long, and are slightly curved with thin scales that open in autumn to release seeds and then drop in winter.

Eastern White Pines are sensitive to pollution, salt, drought, and soil compaction. They also have a variety of enemies including fire, white pine weevil, blister rust, and annosus root rot. Early colonists in Vermont valued white pine for building ship masts. Trade in white pine as lumber flourished in the early nineteenth century in Vermont. The majority of this was cut from the Champlain Valley. By the middle of the century, loggers became more selective and white pine was not harvested as much. Intensive cutting of other trees led to changes in forest composition, the result being that in some locations today, there are more white pines present than there were before intensive logging began. However, the soft wood is still used for many products including trim, doors, lumber, paneling, pulp, and toys. Eastern White Pines also have commercial value as Christmas trees. This species is not seen as a major food source for wildlife. However, some species of songbirds eat the seeds and some mammals feed on the bark, seeds, and foliage. These include the beaver, snowshoe hare, New England cottontail, porcupine, mice, white-tailed deer, and red and grey squirrel.
Ferns – order Filicales

Ferns are a large group of plants, encompassing many varieties. Because there are so many variations, these plants can be found in almost any habitat. Moist, shady forests and lakesides are usually considered typical fern habitats, but they can also be found in hot, dry deserts, floating on the surface of water, and submerged below the surface of water. All ferns are **perennial** and **herbaceous**. Although none are **woody**, some can reach the size of small trees.

Young leaves, which are called fiddleheads, start out tightly coiled. As the leaf grows, it uncoils and becomes flat. The leaves of ferns are called fronds, and are the portion of the plant that is used in identification. Variations in the color and texture of the frond can be used as identifying characteristics. Leaves can be quite varied in texture, ranging from leathery to delicate, and also in size, ranging from a few centimeters up to several meters long.

**Downy Serviceberry – Amelanchier arborea**

While this tree is also called the shadbush, downy serviceberry is a more descriptive name. This refers to the white hairs that cover the emerging leaves in spring. However, this is not just an aesthetic feature; it is an adaptation that exists to trap warm air near the new growth on cold nights. The tree grows best in the understory of hardwood forests and along forest edges, with a preference for moist to somewhat dry, slightly acidic soils. The species is able to thrive in the understory because it is tolerant of shade. The preference is to grow as a few stems in a clump, but it is often found as a single-trunk tree. It is slow growing and short lived.

The maximum tree height is approximately forty feet, while the trunk reaches a maximum diameter of twelve inches. Although it can be found as a tree, this species often grows as a shrub. The bark is light gray and smooth. The leaves start out as light green tinged with pink when they first open, and become greener, with the bottom remaining light in color. In autumn, they change colors, ranging from gold to crimson. They are oval, have fine teeth, and are about four inches long and two inches wide. The flowers are small and white, but
sometimes slightly pink. In June to early July, the small, crimson or purplish flavorless fruits ripen. They can be recognized by their apple-like shape.

There are no serious insect or fungus pests of this species, but it is susceptible to fire damage. It is one of heaviest woods in North America and it has been used for tool handles and other small items. The fruits are sought out by thrushes and many other songbirds, as well as bears and squirrels and other rodents. They are an important food for wildlife during the early summer. Deer browse on the foliage and twigs.

**Speckled Alder – *Alnus rugosa***

![Speckled Alder](image)

The speckled alder is adaptable to different soils, but it prefers moist areas. It occurs most often along stream banks and on margins of ponds. It is fast growing and short-lived. This is a deciduous large shrub to small tree that reaches a maximum height of thirty feet and a maximum diameter of six inches. The bark is thin and smooth in texture and grayish in color.

Buff-orange **lenticels** are easily apparent on the bark. The leaves are coarsely textured with rough, uneven edges, dull dark green coloring on the top and pale gray-green coloring on the underside. They are oval-shaped and grow to be two to four inches in length. The fruit is cone-like and grows on thick stalks.

This species has characteristics that are of environmental importance. A relationship between the roots and soil bacteria allow the plant to convert nitrogen from the air into a form that plants can use. This process, called nitrogen fixation, is important because nitrogen is essential to plant growth and the nitrogen in the air cannot be used by most plants. Another ecological contribution is the shade it gives to trout streams, which keeps the water temperature low.

Fortunately, it is relatively free of insect pests. However, it can be damaged by fire. Long ago natives and early settlers used it for medicinal purposes. It is not an important timber tree. It serves as a source of forage and habitat for wildlife.
Mountain Ash – *Sorbus aucuparia*

This species is most often found on rocky sites and on moist slopes. It is often found in cold-climate forests in areas where loose rocks make it difficult for other trees to grow. It has a moderate growth rate and is short lived.

It is a small tree that is commonly twenty to thirty feet tall and rarely grows taller than forty feet. The trunk is about four to twelve inches in diameter. The bark is light gray and broken into small scales. The tops of the leaves are yellowish green while the underside is paler. Like other trees in its genus, it has alternate leaves. The leaves are five to eight inches long with seven to nineteen leaflets. The white flowers are found in large clusters and measure one eighth of an inch across. The globular fruits are bright orange-red and one quarter to one inch in diameter.

This species has no significant enemies or diseases, but fire will kill its stem. The flowers are a popular source of nectar for honeybees. The principal use is as an ornamental shrub. The long-lived crop of fruits is a source of winter food for migrating birds. The buds and fruits are also eaten by squirrels, and moose browse the foliage and twigs.

Norway Spruce – *Picea abies*

As its name suggests, this species is not native to this area. It is native range is northern and central Europe, but it has been widely planted in some parts of the United States. In order to thrive, this tree requires abundant atmospheric moisture and cold, acidic soils.

This is a large conical-shaped tree that grows up to seventy to ninety feet in height and six to seven feet in diameter. The trunk is straight and slender. The bark starts out smooth and pale brown, but turns to reddish-brown to gray and fissured in thin scales with aging. Branches are horizontal or curved downward, but the tips point upward. It has dark green, relatively square needles, which are about one half inch in length. It is characterized by its especially large cones, which are four to eight inches in length. They stay on the tree for a year or more before being shed. They are green when young, but brown when ripe.

This tree is not tolerant to air pollution. The root system is shallow, and therefore the tree is sensitive to wind damage. In the United States, the tree is used primarily as an ornamental plant or for lumber.
Black Cherry – *Prunus serotina*

Trees of this species generally occur as scattered individuals mixed with a variety of other hardwood trees. This species does not tolerate shade well, which explains why it is normally found in a group of scattered individuals and not in a dense forest. Seedlings can survive in the *understory* for about five years, at which point if there is a gap in the canopy, the young trees will grow rapidly to fill the open gap and thus have better access to sunlight. Moist, well-drained slightly acidic soils in river or stream floodplains are the preferred growing environment. A wide variety of soils can be tolerated as long as the summer growing conditions are cool and moist.

The maximum tree height is about one hundred twenty feet with the trunk being tallest where trees grow in forests and shortest where trees grow in the open. It is the largest of the cherry trees native to North America. Growth is rapid in the first forty to fifty years, and then slows down following that period. The life span is of medium length. The bark in early trees is thin, smooth, and dark red to almost black. As the tree ages, the bark remains thin but becomes increasingly fissured and scaly. The leaves are glossy green on top and paler on the bottom with white, orange, or rust hairs along the center line. They are elliptical and up to five inches long by two inches wide with a pointed tip. The leaves have a cherry-like scent, but a bitter taste. White, small, cherry-like flowers appear in clusters along the drooping stem in late spring. The fruit is a small cherry, which starts out dark red and turns black as it ripens. The root system is shallow and wide spreading.

The species is not free of pests; it is susceptible to damage by tent caterpillars, borers, cambium-mining larvae, and a variety of fungi. This tree is one of the species that is characteristic of northern hardwood forests in Vermont. This is a hardwood tree species that has great economic importance. It is highly prized for furniture and cabinetry. The tree also has other uses for both humans and other animals. The fruit is used for preserves, jellies, and baked goods. The bark has proposed medicinal properties and has been used in cough medicines and sedatives. Many types of mammals and migrating birds feed on the fruit, and deer browse the foliage and young twigs.

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**Understory** refers to the trees in a forest found beneath the level of the main canopy.
Striped Maple – *Acer pensylvanicum*

Also called the Snakebark Maple and Moose Maple, this tree prefers cool, moist, well-drained, and quite acidic soil conditions. It is a small tree, reaching heights of thirty to forty feet. It is fast growing with a short to moderate life span. The most striking aspect is the bark, which is smooth and vertically striped in shades of green and white all the way down the trunk. The young twigs are reddish in winter. The leaves are bright green in spring and summer, but change to a vivid yellow in autumn. They are large and have two small side lobes that frame a larger middle lobe. The drooping flowers are brilliant yellow in color. The fruit is winged and measures approximately two inches from tip to tip.

This tree is one of the characteristic trees of the northern hardwood forests in Vermont. The species has no serious insect pests or diseases, but it is susceptible to fire damage. The inner bark was once used by native people for medicinal purposes with a strong infusion acting as an *emetic* and a milder infusion being used as a gargle for sore throats. Today there is no commercial use except in urban planting. Twigs of the Striped Maple are a favorite winter food of both moose and deer. Songbirds, rodents, and other small mammals enjoy eating the seeds.

Apple – *Pyrus malus*

This is a medium size tree with a round crown and spreading branches. The trunk is short and one to three feet in diameter. When un-pruned, it can grow up to fifty feet in height. The bark is dark grayish-brown and flaky. The leaves, which are often wooly on the underside, are three to five inches in length and doubly-toothed. The flowers are light pink or white and measure one to two inches across. The fruits come in a wide variety of shapes, colors, and flavors.

As you might expect, this one of the most popular fruit trees worldwide. It is a native of Europe and has been cultivated since ancient times. The species was brought to the United States during colonial times. The wood, which is light and sturdy, is an excellent source of fuel. As a food crop, apples are important to the farming economy of Vermont.
Beaver – Castor canadensis

Beavers can be found throughout North America wherever there is a river, stream, lake, or pond. They can be found at varying elevations, but flatlands and valleys are the preferred habitat. The diet includes a variety of plants, but aspens serve as a staple. Many other trees serve as food sources, including maple, willow, alder, apple, and birch. In the summer, aquatic plants such as pond lilies, bur reed, duckweed, pondweeds, and algae are also eaten.

Beavers are the largest of the North American native rodents. Adult beavers measure three to four feet in length and weigh in at thirty to seventy pounds. The coloring is typically reddish brown to blackish brown. Ears are dark blackish brown in color and short and rounded in shape. The skull and teeth are exceptionally large, which allows them to cut tough wood. This animal is easily distinguished by its large tail, which is scaly and has a shape similar to a paddle.

After humans, beavers alter their environment more than any other species of mammal in North America. This species is most well known for its architectural talent of building dams and lodges. The locations chosen by beavers for these projects are lakes, ponds, or streams where their dams will create a pond deep enough for sufficient food storage under ice. Edible branches are hidden in the mud at the bottom of the pond, and then used for food in the winter. Dams are constructed from branches, mud, sod, and stones. The base is made of thick branches with their tips stuck into the mud and is constructed so that it spans the entire width of the body of water. Mud, sod, and stones are used to secure the base, and then branches are laid on top of these. This process is repeated until the dam begins to cause a back up of water and the desired pond depth is reached. Lodges, which are made from large branches or trunks of saplings, are built up starting at the bottom of a pond, or on top of a small island or gently sloping bank. Beavers can change the character of forest stands through the building of dams and impounding of brooks and streams.

In nature, coyotes and wolves are predators of beavers. However, historically, humans have been one of the beaver’s most threatening predators. They were once almost extirpated from Vermont due to fur trades. They were first given year-round protection in Vermont in 1900, but this was not successful. In 1921 and 1932, individuals from other states were brought in to restock the population. Today, the species is firmly reestablished in Vermont. Because beavers have become so well reestablished, some people consider them to be pests. They cut down valuable trees and flood large areas, and their dams warm trout streams. However, beavers also help us by creating
wetlands, which serve as important habitat for waterfowl and other species of wildlife.

**Eastern Gray Squirrel – *Sciurus carolinensis***

Gray squirrels primarily live in trees, but they also spend a considerable amount of time on the ground, particularly in the fall when they collect food for the winter. They are active all year round, even in extremely cold conditions. During the winter, they eat what they have been able to store in the fall, which is primarily nuts, acorns, and maple [samaras](#). Throughout the rest of the year, they have a myriad of other food sources: buds, fruits and berries, fungi, hawthorn fruits, apples, horse chestnuts, inner bark of maple or elm trees, and occasionally insects or young birds.

The eastern gray squirrel is a medium-size tree squirrel, measuring an average total length of fifteen to twenty inches and average weight of one half to one and a half pounds. This type of squirrel can be recognized by its tail shape and body and tail colorings. The upper side of the body and top of the head are grayish to yellow-brown in color. The underside is white, occasionally having yellow-brown parts. The forefeet are gray, while the hind feet are light brown, and the toes are gray. The tail is brown at the base and each hair is blackish near the middle and silver gray at the tip. The rounded ears are relatively short, but still prominent. The partially flattened tail is long and bushy.

Due to hunting and automobiles, humans are one of the gray squirrel’s major enemies. Other predators include red-tailed hawks, barred and great horned owls, bobcats, coyotes, and foxes. While the population of eastern gray squirrels has fluctuated some, the species has never been scarce in Vermont. These fluctuations are due to the fact that this species undertakes periodic mass migrations, which are most likely triggered by poor nut years. The numbers of individuals increases on good nuts years, but then they must move on during bad nut years.

**Black Bear – *Ursus americanus***

The ideal habitat for black bears is relatively inaccessible terrain with a thick understory and good supply of [mast](#). While bears may be rarely seen by humans, their signs are easy to find. They leave behind large tracks, trampled bushes, overturned logs and stumps, mud wallows, and gnawings and claw

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**Samaras** are dry, usually one-seeded, winged fruits.
marks on trees. They are most active at dusk, but are also active during the day. Little activity is seen in black bears when the temperature is below freezing. In fact, they hibernate for most of the cold weather months.

Bears are omnivorous, and thus their diet is quite varied. They feed primarily on grasses during the spring, and fruits and mast during the summer and fall. They are quite fond of fruits, especially blueberries, blackberries, and serviceberries. Only a small part of their diet comes from animal sources, and most of these are larvae and pupae of ants, wasps, bees, and beetles. Bears also occasionally feast on mice, stranded fish, and other small animals.

The black bear is a large animal with a long tapered nose, rounded ears, small black eyes, and essentially no tail. Males of the species range from fifty-four to seventy inches in length, while females are smaller at forty-seven to fifty-nine inches. Weight range for males is two hundred and fifty to five hundred pounds, and one hundred and ten to four hundred and fifty pounds for females. The fur, which is coarse and dark, varies in color from cinnamon brown to black.

Humans and their dogs are the only enemies of black bears. Due to steady encroachment by humans, this species has disappeared over much of its range. Another human threat is that of hunters. Although the fur has little value, bears are often seen as a prize to hunters because of their size and meat. Many hundreds of individuals are killed in the eastern United States every year.

Forest Succession

Succession can be defined as a gradual change in plant and animal communities in an area following disturbance or creation of a new geological substrate. This process can also be thought of as the continual replacement of one community by another. Succession begins when a group of several species of plants colonizes a newly exposed area. This group of plants, which is the first in a successional sequence, is called the pioneer community.

This group of plants may last for several years, and then be replaced by a different group of individuals. Several more years later, a new group will replace that group of individuals. This process continues and after about seventy-five to one hundred years, there will be a dense forest community. Succession usually ends with a community whose

Mast is the accumulation, on the forest floor, of fruits from various forest trees, such as acorns, beechnuts, and hickory nuts, often serving as food for animals.

Omnivorous refers to eating any sort of food (i.e. both plant and animal material).
population remains stable until disrupted by disturbance. This community is called a climax community. When succession begins on newly exposed geologic substrates, such as after glacial retreat or lava flows, it is called primary succession. When disturbance destroys a community, but not its soil, such as abandoned agricultural lands or forests fires, this succession is referred to as secondary succession.

To give an example of primary succession, lichens act as pioneer organisms because they can grow on bare rock. Lichens secrete organic acids, which breaks down the rock surface and makes nutrients and substrate available for mosses to grow. Mosses trap water and change the environmental conditions, thus allowing for ferns to grow. This begins the process of succession, which continues through different types of plants. The process will eventually end with a climax community that is best suited for the specific climate or soil conditions.

**Stream Erosion**

Erosion can be defined as the removal and transportation of geologic materials by wind, running water, waves, glaciers, underground water, or gravity. Erosion by streams works to shape and modify a landscape.

In fact, streams are the primary erosion agent in the sculpture of a landscape. The extent to which a stream is able to erode land and transport soil is dependent on the quantity and velocity of the water in its channel. When comparing streams of equal discharge, a fast-flowing stream erodes its banks more significantly and carries more sediment than a slow-moving one. In streams of low velocity, erosion acts to move small particles, like sand and silt. Streams of higher velocity can move larger particles, such as boulders and gravel.

**Conclusion**

Just as many people may not visit SpIN for religious reasons, many people may be content to walk on the paths without any knowledge of the natural surroundings. For those with an interest in natural science, there may be a desire to know the names of the flora and fauna with which they share the forest. Many people may also desire to know more than the names; to know how to identify each species and where to look for it. The information presented above should serve just this purpose and help visitors to SpIN become more familiar not just with their surroundings at the path center, but also in the entire region.
References and Sources for Further Reading


4. Educational Activities

The Spirit in Nature paths can serve as a place of worship, and they can also act as a setting for strengthening one’s relationship with nature. Warren and Barry King recognized that SpIN, in addition to serving as a religious resource to the Ripton community, could also serve as an educational resource. With their creation of the Nature Notes, SpIN became an outdoor museum of natural history in which walkers could learn about the animals and plants that make up the forest. The notes are particularly useful for orienting the reader as to how each natural element fits into the larger context of SpIN land. However, these notes are catered towards an adult audience, and it is our feeling that this forest can also be used as a resource to teach children about nature and its inhabitants. Further, a textbook approach to teaching children about SpIN’s natural history would not serve as an effective way for actually connecting children with their natural surroundings. They can learn the most about the forest from experiences that encourage them to actively touch, smell, listen, and look at their surroundings. Therefore, as an extension of the nature notes, we are proposing activities that children and even adults can use to become better acquainted with nature and this particular forest (Table 1). Some of these activities, targeted at 6-12 year olds, can be done casually, with little preparation, as children walk the paths with family and friends. Others may be more appropriate for a class on a field trip. Each activity is based upon an exercise from an environmental education book and then modified to fit SpIN property. In addition to the endnotes, a list of recommended readings is provided at the end of this section where one can find additional resources for furthering your explorations via existing environmental education texts.

The six activities we have proposed allow adults to teach children about the separate components of the forest as well as the interdependency between all of the components within the forest. The activities begin with four exercises, each one acquainting a child with a specific component of the forest. The two succeeding exercises are constructed to show the children that these forest components are all interconnected, and that humans are also dependant upon the natural world. Because the following educational activities vary in complexity and focus, exercises may be chosen to match one’s educational goals. Some teach general lessons such as “Growing with the Forest” which talks about change and memories. Other exercises, such as the soil activities, require materials and are appropriate for a science class. It is important to realize that these activities are not structured to be lesson plans that follow Vermont’s educational criteria.
or objectives (http://www.state.vt.us/educ/). However, the activities could be easily modified and expanded by an individual teacher to become connected with school curriculum and tailored to fit a particular unit of study. These notes do not have to be accepted as written because their flexible structure allows the teachers and children to branch off from a particular activity or focus more on one concept or forest component. These activities can also be used to alert children to their preconceptions about the natural world that are often misconceptions. It could be useful to discuss what the children expect to find before starting the activities and then comparing these original thoughts to their findings.

Because SpIN encourages the respect of nature, activities have been structured so that they make a minimal impact upon the land. Furthermore, we ask that rocks, leaves, and organisms moved during the exercises be replaced before leaving the grounds.
### Table 1a: Educational Activities – Forest Components

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components</th>
<th>Trees and Other Plants</th>
<th>Animals</th>
<th>The Insect World</th>
<th>Soil</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>Meet a Tree Exploring Ground Cover Collecting Seeds with Socks</td>
<td>Squirrel Signs Animal –Observations Animal Tracks</td>
<td>Life Under a Rock The World of Logs and Leaves Observing an Earthworm</td>
<td>Soil Characteristics Soil Absorption and Compaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectives</td>
<td>To learn about the differences and similarities between individual plants. Children can learn about the forest’s plant community by initially observing a particular tree, looking at a species of tree or plant, and then observing the individual parts of these plants.</td>
<td>To become familiar with many of the animals who inhabit SpIN and the forests of Vermont</td>
<td>These activities are meant to show children that many microenvironments exist within the forest ecosystem. These biomes include the smaller insect worlds that may be found under a rock, within the soil, or in a decomposing log. Once children have explored these hidden worlds, they can further their understanding of an individual insects.</td>
<td>Investigating the soil will allow children to learn that the properties of soils differ depending on their location and surrounding plant life. Furthermore, soils have different absorption properties and these properties determine the amount of runoff that enters the nearby streams.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materials</td>
<td>Fuzzy socks Magnifying glass White paper</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Trowel Tray Magnifying glass Insect key White paper Glass plate Flashlight</td>
<td>Thermometer pH meter Litmus paper Pencil Metal can Measuring cup Water</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Image and page layout adapted for readability.*
### Table 1b: Educational Activities – Connecting the Forest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Objectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Activities | Plants and Animals  
Plants and Insects  
Plants and Soils  
Animals, Soils, and Insects | These exercises help children to understand that fact that while the forest is made up of very specific components that have their own parts and processes, all of these components are interrelated and that they live together as a community. |
| Materials  | None       |                                                                             |

### Table 1c: Educational Activities – Human Relationships with Nature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Objectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Activities | Experiencing Nature Through Senses  
Growing Up with the Forest  
Utilizing Natural Elements | As the Spirit In Nature paths suggest, a protected natural area serves as more than an outdoor laboratory. For many, it is a place that provides comfort, memories, inspiration, and spirituality. The children can think about nature as a place for rest or as a place to understand change. While the other exercises teach children about the forest’s components living dependently upon one another, it is important to show children that they themselves are dependent upon the natural world. |
| Materials  | None       |                                                                             |
**Trees and other plants**

**Objective**: To learn about the differences and similarities between individual plants. Children can learn about the forest’s plant community by initially observing a particular tree, looking at a species of tree or plant, and then observing the individual parts of these plants.

**Materials**: Fuzzy Socks, magnifying glass, and white paper.

**Activities**:

**Meet a Tree**

Many educational resources suggest that children first “meet a tree” when they explore nature so that they learn to look at nature using all of their senses. Introducing children to a tree in SpIn should be easy, especially with the help of the *Nature Notes*. Lead children to a tree of your choice, such as a Norway Spruce or a Striped Maple (*Nature Notes* # 15 and 17). Tell the children the type of tree and point out specific features. Let the children observe the texture of its bark, the branching pattern of its twigs, and the shape of its leaves. Encourage the children to compare these characteristics to trees of other species within the forest. They can also compare the size of trees by measuring their trunks and leaves with their arms and hands. On pine trees, point out the tree’s pinecones and the cones’ shape and size. Additionally, during the appropriate season, show children that some trees produce berries or flowers, such as the Mountain Ash trees which have berries in the autumn (*Nature Note* # 12). xi

**Exploring Ground Cover**

Once children have looked closely at a few specific trees, they can begin to search the forest floor for different species of plants. Depending on the season, children should find several types of wildflowers, mosses, shrubs, and ferns. While identification of all the different plants inhabiting the forest would be tedious and time consuming, an investigation of the forest’s most prominent ground covering, the fern, could teach children how to use an ecological key. Using the key provided, have the children identify at least 3 types of fern along the paths (Figure 2). xii

**Collecting Seeds with Socks**

The preceding exercises have introduced students to a specific tree, as well as another species of plant. However, it is also important to take a closer look at plant parts and processes. Consider a plant’s seeds and the process by which trees disperse their seeds. The “Sock Walk” is one method suggested by educational resources for exploring seeds. xiii

Covering their shoes with “old, fuzzy” socks, children can roam the
paths and pick up seeds upon their socks. Then, with the help of a magnifying glass and white paper, these seeds can be examined for differences and similarities. Children can also try to trace the seeds back to the plant from which they originated. Finally, these seeds can be taken home and planted to see what will grow. Seeds sprout best after sitting in the refrigerator for a week to simulate winter conditions.\textsuperscript{xiv}

Figure 2. Fern Key. Sketches by Ian Zenlea ’02.
Animals
Objectives: To become familiar with many of the animals who inhabit SpInN and the forests of Vermont.
Materials: None
Activities:

Squirrel Signs
Look for signs of squirrels within the forest. Have children search the forests for squirrel middens, described in Nature Note # 22 (Note that all not all squirrel signs are made solely by the eastern gray squirrel, other possibilities include the red squirrel and the southern flying squirrel). Ask children what squirrels usually eat, and have them come up with clues that signal the presence of squirrel within the forest. Can they find piles of nutshells or partially eaten cone shafts? Squirrels make nests in trees from branches and leaves, particularly during the summer months. Can the children spot any of these nests?

Animal Observations
Learn about an animal simply by watching it. Because squirrels are so abundant, they serve as a good animal for children to observe. However, if the children are patient, they may be able to wait for the beaver to emerge from his den (Nature Note # 4). Encourage children to sit quietly and watch these animals for an extended period of time. Ask them to notice what the animals eat, how they eat, and where they take their food. How do they use their hands, feet, and tails for movement, and how do they react towards other animals? For instance, squirrels use their tails for balance, protection from rain, and communication. Can the children detect these uses? Have children write their observations down and then compare them with a friend to discover details they may have missed about an animal and its movements.

Animal Tracks
Tracks are another excellent way for studying animals in the forest. These tracks may be found along a muddy trail, or in the snow. First, have children find a set of tracks to analyze. Then, determine whether the tracks were left by an animal who walks as a human, hops, waddles, or bounds. Next, use the footprint key to determine what type of animal created the prints (Figure 3). Look for signs of food, or an animal home at the beginning or ends of these tracks. Children can also create their own tracks, while switching from a walk to a run, and notice how their stride changes in correlation to their speed. They may
use their observations to make inferences about the change in speed of the animal whose tracks they are observing. Why would the animal suddenly begin to run? Also have the children imitate a specific animal as it walks and see if the other members of the group can guess what animal the child is mimicking.xvii

Figure 3. Animal Track Key. Sketches by Ian Zenlea '02.
The Insect World
Objectives: These activities are meant to show children that many microenvironments exist within the forest ecosystem. These biomes include the smaller insect worlds that may be found under a rock, within the soil, or in a decomposing log. Once children have explored these hidden worlds, they can further their understanding of individual insects.

Materials: trowel, tray, magnifying glass, insect key, white paper, glass plate, and flashlight

Activities:

Life Under a Rock
Begin by leading children to a large rock along SpIN paths. Lift up the rock, and have the children watch for insects that run and hide. Observe where these insects bury themselves. Some may hide themselves in the mud, while others may dodge beneath a fallen leaf. Have children hypothesize why the insects live under the rock. What conditions exist under the rock which must be good for insect life? Have children describe this insect world in terms of temperature, moisture, and light. Also, notice the other organisms that share the rock as a home. Lichens, mosses, and plants may live upon the rock or in its shade.

The World of Logs and Leaves
Insects, mosses, and lichens can also be found upon and within rotting logs. A good way to investigate logs is to lift an old log or to pull back the top layer of bark from the log. Tell children to once again look for fleeing insects and to find insect tunnels dug within the bark. The insects usually found beneath rocks and inside rotting logs include the following: ants, millipedes, centipedes, earthworms, slugs, caterpillars, spiders, beetles, and sow bugs. These insects assist in breaking the log down into soil. These insects often share the logs with many animals. Keep your eyes peeled for mice, chipmunks, rabbits, and sometimes snakes. Also look for holes in the tree bark where woodpeckers may have drilled into the tree.

Other methods for finding and observing insects include using a trowel to collect soil or leaf litter, placing the materials in a tray, and picking through the soil or leaves with fingers, and searching for different insects. Bugs can be observed more closely with a hand magnifying glass and perhaps identified with a key for insects. Bugs may also be observed by placing a piece of white paper upon the ground, shaking a bush over the white paper until bugs fall upon the sheet.

Sisson’s book, *Nature with Children of all Ages*, provides...
good descriptions and pictures of the bug’s that children might find (see recommended readings).

**Observing an Earthworm**

Just as we suggested with the animals, a lot can be learned through the closer observation of a particular insect. One of the easiest to find, catch, and watch is the earthworm. First find an earthworm beneath a rock, a log, or beneath the soil. A trowel may be necessary for digging up earthworms. Ask the children to decide what kind of habitats these earthworms prefer. Where do you find the most worms? Next, put the insect upon a damp surface to watch its movements. Notice how the worm flips itself over when placed upside down. Finally, place the worm upon a glass plate, and look through the bottom to see the 4 pairs of bristles on each worm segment. A magnifying glass may be necessary to see them. If a worm is placed on a piece of paper, the bristles may be heard. Using a flashlight, look more carefully at the worm through the bottom of the plate and try “to see the intestinal tract, blood vessels, and pulsating heart” [xxii]

*Note:* It is important that all soil, logs, and leaves are replaced back to their original positions and that all insects are returned to their homes before you leave.

**Soil**

**Objectives:** The children may have already started to explore the soil as they searched for insects in the previous exercise. Investigating the soil will allow children to learn that the properties of soils differ depending on location and surrounding plant life. Furthermore, soils have different absorption properties and these properties determine the amount of runoff that enters the nearby streams.

**Materials:** thermometer, pH meter, litmus paper, pencil, metal can, measuring cup, and water

**Activities:**

**Soil Characteristics**

Pick two or three patches of soil at different locations within SpIN. Dissimilar features should dominate these locations. For instance for temperature purposes, pick a patch of soil in an open area of the woods and another in the shade of a large tree. For the pH measurements, pick a location dominated by pine trees and a location dominated by hardwoods. First, place a thermometer in the soil and have the children record the temperature. The thermometer should be left in the ground for about 5 minutes to ensure that the instrument has stabilized. Next,
measure the pH of the soil. The pH scale is based on a system of 1-14 in which 1 is the most acidic and 14 is the most basic. Soil under or near pine trees should be acidic than the soil under or near hardwoods because pine needles acidify the soil as they decompose. pH can be measured with a pH meter, or a pH kit containing litmus paper. Finally, have your children or students write down observations about each patch of soil in terms of color, texture, and smell. Help the children to make correlations between the soil properties and their location. Furthermore, look for connections between the abundance of plant or animal life and the properties of the soil.

**Soil Absorption and Compaction**

As an extension of the last exercise, investigate the soil compactness and absorption properties of each observed area. SpIN would be an excellent site for learning about how soil compaction relates to soil absorption properties. A fun exercise that a teacher could perform with his or her class involves testing separate patches of soil for their hardness as well as their ability to absorb water and then allowing students to determine relationships that exists between these two factors. Tests can be run in the parking lot, along the paths, near the water, to the sides of the paths, on flat ground, and along slopes. Students can draw some conclusions about the human effects on soil absorption and runoff by comparing tests done on parking lots or paths vs. those done on areas where humans do not usually walk.

To test soil compaction, students must first take a pencil and drive it into the ground with 10 successive and equally forceful taps. Then, the length to which the pencil digs into the ground with these taps must be recorded. To test its absorption properties students may twist a can, open on both ends, about 5cm into the ground. Into the can, they should pour 500 ml of water and time how long it takes for this water to seep into the soil. After these tests have been performed at a number of sites, students should find that areas with compact soil, usually, absorb water more slowly. However, other factors must often be taken into account. For example, clay soils absorb more slowly than sandy soils, and students may find that soil along a stream’s edge is too saturated to absorb more water quickly. Students should be made aware of the fact that more compact soils or surfaces, such as concrete or heavily walked paths, have less space between their particles, so they absorb smaller amounts of water. Therefore these areas produce great amounts of runoff and hold too little air or water for organisms to survive.
**Connecting the Forest’s Components**

**Objectives:** The previous exercises help children to understand that the forest is made up of very specific components that have their own parts and processes. This section teaches that all of these components are interrelated and that they live together as a community.

**Materials:** None

**Activities:**

**Plants and Animals**
Encourage children to look for signs of animal interactions with plants. Can the children find leaves or shrubs that have been nibbled on by deer? Are there nutshells upon the ground that squirrels have chewed? Look for nests, or dens in the trees. Plants serve as both food and shelter for animals. Have children look closely at the beaver den. What is it made of? The beaver depends upon the small trees of the forest to make their homes. Can you think of or see any other connections between plants and animals in the forest? Have children draw their favorite plants, animals, insects, and rocks in the forest and ask them to create a web of lines connecting the ones that interact. Ask the children to explain these interactions.

**Plants and Insects**
Examine the leaves and flowers of trees and other plants. Point children to leaves upon trees and upon the ground that have tiny holes and nibbled edges where insects have fed upon them. Take children to look for bees, wasps, butterflies, and moths visiting wildflowers in the spring and summer. These insects feed upon the nectar and pollen of the plants. The plants are dependent upon these insects because the insects spread the pollen that allows the plants to reproduce. Insects may also use plants as a foundation for building their homes as they transition through life stages. Look for cocoons along the bark of trees.

**Plants and Soils**
Observe the land for areas with an abundance of plant life and those where little life exists. Ask children if more plants exist where the soil is rich and stable rather than thin and eroding. Aren’t plants very dependent upon the quality of the soil? Furthermore, look for areas where a lot of leaves have fallen. What is the soil like beneath these leaves? Children will probably find that the soil is richer and moister in areas where trees have covered the ground with leaves that are being decomposed into the soil. Rich soil is necessary for plant life, and plant life is necessary for the production of good soil.
Animals, Soils, and Insects
Walk the paths with the children and look for animal tracks upon the soil. Think about the impacts these animals have upon the ground. Not only do they leave their footprints, but also scat, which becomes incorporated into the soil. How does the soil affect the animals? Ask the children to make connections between the areas with rich soil, the number of plants and insects in the area, and the habitability of this area to animals. Brainstorming with a partner may be an effective way for them to make many of these connections.

Ask the children to find things in the forest that are decomposing. When they lead you to a dead plant, log, or pile of leaves, encourage them to search the area for invertebrates. They will probably find many insects and white fungus plants eating away at these materials. Ask children to find a relationship between the role of the invertebrates and the richness of the soil. Emphasize the importance of the insects in nature’s breakdown and decaying processes.

Human Relationships with Nature
Objectives: As the name Spirit In Nature paths suggests, a protected natural area serves as more than an outdoor laboratory. For many, it is a place that provides comfort, memories, inspiration, and spirituality. The children can think about nature as a place for rest or as a place to understand change. While the other exercises teach children about the forest’s components living dependently upon one another, it is important to show children that they themselves are dependent upon the natural world.
Materials: None
Activities:

Experiencing Nature Through the Senses
Encourage children to enjoy nature as a whole without trying to look at its individual parts. Spending quiet time along SpIN paths will allow them to appreciate the outdoors without the pressure of mastering a task or lesson. One good way for children to connect with nature is by encouraging them to use their senses. For example, sit by one of the brooks running through SpIN and listen carefully to the babbling of the water. Ask children how the sound of the water makes them feel. Do they find the sound soothing? Does nature make them feel rested? Sit in the Sacred Circle and have the children shut their eyes. Listen to the wind rustling the leaves, the birds chirping in the trees, and the squirrels scurrying along the ground. Can they hear other sounds? The children can experience nature through all their other senses as well. Can they
feel the warmth of the sun on their faces? Touch the bark on the trees and the stones and leaves along SpIN’s paths. Run your fingers through the stream waters. As the children use their senses to really experience nature, ask them how it makes them feel? Have children share these feelings by telling them to a friend, making a song about their experiences in nature, or drawing a picture of their surroundings. If many of them are experiencing feelings of relaxation then stress the importance of nature as a source of rest.xxvi

Growing Up with the Forest
There are many other questions you can ask the children during the sensory exercises or while walking the paths. Do they have a lot of memories from doing things in nature? Ask them to share their favorite memories in nature. Tell them how nature has influenced your life. Share with them your favorite childhood memories spent outside, and then explain to them how your relationship with nature has changed over the years. Stress the theme of life’s changes which are reflected within nature. Just as you have grown older and have experienced many transitions, so has the forest. Nature goes through seasons, animals enter hibernation, new flowers grow in the spring, trees grow taller and shed their leaves, and logs slowly decompose into the soil. Furthermore, discuss how human’s connections with the forest have altered overtime. At one time, the forest where SpIN lies was chopped down to build farms, and its wood was burned in kilns to make charcoal. The forest was allowed to grow back, and the land is being used as a place to walk paths.xxvii

Utilizing Natural Elements
Children may also explore human’s connections with individual components of nature as they perform the sensory activities throughout the forest. As they explore these connections children may best capture their thoughts by writing brief journal entries or by sketching pictures. Ask children to try the following exercises.xxviii

- Feel the warmth of the sun upon your face. Think about how the sun is important to humans. It provides food for the plants, and the plants are food that we can eat. The sun keeps humans warm. Solar energy can be used to run our machines.
- Look for animals or signs of animals, such as footprints, scat, or dens. Listen for animals crunching leaves as they run through the forest. Make connections between humans and animals. They provide us with food, and their fur has been
used as clothing. They also serve as symbols. The Eagle represents our nation and several animals act as team mascots.

- Run your fingers through the soil and smell it. Look at the different grain sizes and colors. Consider the importance of the soil in your life. Its minerals and rocks have been used to build our homes and create useful metals. Good soils help to produce healthy crops that we then eat.

- Dip your finger in one of the streams. Humans have utilized running water in many ways. How? Not only do humans drink the water, but they harness its motion to create energy for industry. Water has also been an important component in transportation. The same human processes that utilize water and its energy often pollute our rivers, lakes, and oceans. Encourage children to consider the trade-offs humans make when they begin viewing nature simply as a resource.

- Rub your hands along the bark of a tree or its leaves, think about how humans have utilized plant life. Plants have been used for food, medicinal purposes, and decoration.

Conclusions
In addition to expanded the knowledge of individual forest components, we hope this section has shown how these activities can teach children lessons that pertain to the world outside of the forest. If anything, these exercises conclude by showing that time spent in nature can teach us as much about ourselves as it can about its other inhabitants. Therefore these activities still fulfill the overall goals of SpIN by encouraging reflection in the natural world of how are lives are intertwined with the environment.

Sources for Further Reading


Notes


Field Notes
A few weeks ago, I was standing outside in the crisp November air underneath a perfect night sky – the stars seemed uncommonly bright and greater in number that night, and the Milky Way carved a path in the heavens like a celestial Long Trail. A deep orange moon, full in all its glory, hung suspended somewhere between the Green Mountains and the picturesque town of Middlebury, its own humble lights silently mimicking the grand portrait lying overhead. As I looked East to the horizon, the spine of the Green Mountains softly illuminated by the full moon, feelings of awe and wonder overwhelmed me. For a moment, although it was just a moment – at least until the hum of a solitary car passing by on a nearby road snapped me out of it – I was completely enraptured by what I saw before me. Maybe it was some romantic ideal that somehow manifested itself before me on that perfect night. Maybe it was the sheer aesthetics of the Vermont night sky. Maybe it was an expression of God or the Divine. The bottom line is, I don’t know.

In a way that I cannot fully understand and perhaps never will, I felt – well, frankly, I felt small. I felt like I was standing before something greater than me, something that showed me that the everyday world I have carved out for myself and live in is not the entire picture. It was not frightening. Rather, it was comforting, yet full of awe in the most profound sense; familiar, yet also entirely transcendent of anything I could ever call my own. I suppose, in a word, that I felt humbled.

What we call religion, in a lot of ways, is about this feeling of humility. I devoutly believe that we are, at heart, all religious beings, whether we call ourselves “religious” or “spiritual.” Indeed, I think that is what makes us humans capable of thinking and feeling, able to experience pain and love, laughter and tears, to shout out with joy at the wonders of the world before us, to be passionate and tender, to realize that we are part of a community, and the community is a part of us. I don’t know if I could ever prove it, but I am sure all of us have felt these things. I know whoever has looked out at the marvelous world before us and felt the same warmth and comfort I felt that night, is a person I can speak to – and this person could speak to me in a way that transcends all culture, language, or time. I mentioned feeling humbled by this experience. In another, and perhaps more accurate word, I suppose I felt human.
The Spirit in Nature interfaith paths, in a way, attempt to preserve this feeling. In a world that constantly tries to suppress our connection with the natural world, Spirit in Nature is a place to take a moment to walk, reflect, and experience some of the very things that make us human. Of course, no part of the world is completely artifice, from the middle of New York City to the well-tended lawns of suburban America. But Spirit in Nature allows us to take a moment to walk in a land “as it were,” realize that we, too, are fundamentally a part of this thing we call “nature”. Consequently, we realize that we should treat the world we immediately live in – whether it be in the Green Mountains of Vermont, the bustling streets of the city, or suburban America – as part of nature. I feel privileged to have been able to be a part of this project; it has been truly enriching and I hope that my contributions can help, in a small a way, to enrich you on your own travels through the Spirit in Nature interfaith paths.
5. Religious Traditions

Introduction

Religious perspectives on environmental issues are important for many reasons, but especially because all religious traditions are concerned with, though not limited to, a right way to live and act. The Spirit in Nature interfaith paths involve nine religious traditions’ reflections on the environment, constructions of nature within their traditions, and ethical considerations within each tradition with respect to the environment. The nine religious traditions are Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Friends (Quaker), Unitarian Universalist, Islam, Bahai, and Pagan.

Each religious tradition represented in the Spirit in Nature (SpIN) Interfaith Paths provides a wealth of perspectives on the environment that show the religious value of nature. Each tradition finds within its rich heritage unique ways to approach the environment. The following pages attempts to capture some of this rich heritage, outlining some defining characteristics of each religious tradition, some constructions of nature and environmental ethics present within each tradition, and finally, some suggested sources for further, more in-depth reading.

Because of the complex and varied nature of religious traditions, some of which have developed over thousands of years, the religious traditions component of the Spirit in Nature Handbook is far from comprehensive, and in no way is meant to imply that what is contained within the pages of the book is a comprehensive treatment of what each religious tradition has to say about the environment. The significance of “nature” in many aspects of religious symbol and ritual has been lightly treated in our text, relative to more central theological and philosophical issues. Further research on these aspects would be a
valuable step toward further education on what perspectives each religious tradition offers with regard to the environment. Also, more examples of specific individuals who have helped shape an understanding of the environment within their respective traditions would be a useful contribution, as these examples provide unique perspectives that show what even a single individual can provide to positive environmental discourse.

Indeed, “religion,” by its very nature is difficult, if not impossible, to adequately define. It is almost always an overgeneralization to make such claims as “All Buddhists believe this…” or “All Christians do this…”. Such is the nature of this project; it has been a challenging one. We should emphasize here in the introduction that there are differences between the doctrine, teaching, and beliefs of a religious tradition and the everyday practice of religious individuals. No religious tradition is ideal when it comes to praxis; Chapter Eight of the handbook, entitled “Interviews With SpIN Path Coordinators” echoes this sentiment.

We should also mention that within all the religious traditions covered in the Spirit in Nature paths, there are “negative” ideas and theologies within their respective heritage. For example, the idea of samsara, or the cycle of rebirth in Buddhist and Hindu traditions, can easily be interpreted as an idea that actually hurts environmental sensitivity. One “goal” of these traditions is to liberate oneself from the world, which is seen as suffering, and therefore can be interpreted as quite unconcerned about the welfare of the earth. While we will show you that there is also a vast array of “positive” arguments for the religious traditions, in order to have a more accurate understanding of the religious traditions’ stances on the environment, we must take these negative arguments into account. These negative arguments are, of course, not the focus of this chapter; nevertheless, it is only appropriate that we mention this aspect of religious traditions and their understanding of the environment.

While keeping in mind the presuppositions and limitations of this chapter, while keeping these in mind, hopefully you will find some truly unique and interesting topics helpful for your understanding of these religious traditions and their connection with nature. Finally, we hope that you will come away from your time at Spirit in Nature encouraged that each religious tradition has some truly valuable things to say about the environment.
The Hindu Tradition

A Summary

The Hindu tradition is perhaps the oldest of the nine religious traditions represented in the Spirit in Nature interfaith paths. But what exactly is “Hinduism?” To begin, we should mention that the terms “Hinduism,” “Hindu,” or even “religion” are actually Western terms and are not native to “Hinduism” at all! We should always keep this in mind when using these terms. In fact, one of the spiritual sayings you will see on the Hindu path, if you have not yet encountered it already, affirms this very idea:

Religion is a western word, as is Hindu. A correct description is ‘Sanatana Dharma.’ Sanatan means eternal, and dharma means the true state. So Sanatana Dharma means to find the true, everlasting state of being, the eternal path. Hindus are searching for the dharma of the soul, the meaning of life. That is the quest.xxix

We should mention here that the term “Sanatana Dharma” is ironically a term coined by Swami Dayananda Sarasvati (1824-1883) of the nineteenth century reform movement Arya Samaj and is therefore younger than the Western term “Hinduism.” So while “Sanatana Dharma” is commonly used today, it is far from ancient as the quote implies, though the concepts themselves have been present in Hinduism since the time of the Vedas. Such ironies remind us that we should keep the inevitable artificiality of using the terms “Hindu,” Hinduism,” and “religion” in mind. Thus, let us remain aware of the limitations of our terminology while we explore some of the aspects of what Westerners call “Hinduism.”

The Hindu tradition originated and developed in India over several thousand years, and is especially intertwined with the social structures and cultural history of India.xxx So in a lot of ways, the Hindu tradition is a religious tradition tied to a specific culture and people, although currently one can say that it has crossed many of the boundaries that may have once contained the tradition as an “ethnic religion.” Still, the majority of Hindus live in India, although today there are Hindus in all corners of the world, and, increasingly, in America.

No particular individual is acknowledged to have “founded” the Hindu tradition the way that Buddhists and Christians speak of “founders.” There are also no prophets in Hinduism and no common
creed. The institutional structure of the tradition is loose at best. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that the Hindu tradition is incredibly diverse, has multiple forms of worship, thousands of acknowledged deities, and “as many Hinduisms as there are Hindus” – even “as many Hinduisms as there are non-Hindus.”

Within most forms of Hindu thought is the belief in *samsara*, or “the wheel of suffering” that results from death and rebirth. This concept is linked with a prevailing belief in reincarnation. If there is a unifying “goal” (for lack of a better term) within Hindu traditions, it is liberation (*moksha*) from this cycle of suffering and rebirth. *Moksha* is achieved when one expels all *karmic* action from one’s life – the totality of actions one has amassed throughout his or her lifetimes to warrant rebirth. An individual can be reborn in several ways – as a plant, an animal, a god, a human, a ghost, and many other manifestations. But while one may be reborn – through appropriate action – to increasingly “better” categories of rebirth, the ultimate goal is to break free from the cycle of rebirth altogether. For some sects within Hinduism, through discovering the nature of *Atman*, the Self, and transcending oneself to that of the non-dual Absolute (*Brahman*), one can become liberated.

The practice of fervent devotion (*bhakti*) to any number of gods may be another means of achieving *moksha* and is often a popular aspect of Hinduism. While there are several thousand deities within the Hindu tradition, there are three “chief Gods”: Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, who together form a triad, the *Trimurti*. Hindu devotion (*bhakti*) may be to a particular deity, such as Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, or to a variety of local and pan-Indian gods and goddesses. The significance of *bhakti* can be varied; for the “‘monist,’ only knowledge (*jnana*) of the non-dual Absolute (*Brahman*) liberates, whereas for the ‘theist’ liberation results from devotion to a personal God by his or her grace.”

As we have said before, the Hindu tradition has varied forms of worship, and as many gods within the tradition. But whether one considers himself or herself a monist, theist, a polytheist, or something else entirely; whether one worships Shiva, Lakshmi, both, or none, it cannot be said that the Hindu tradition does not acknowledge a unifying Reality common to all Hindus. Sharma suggests that we think about it in this way: “Hinduism is not a thing, it is a process,” a “method.” But he goes on to warn us that “a method should not be confused with its results. [Hinduism] is a method for the discovery of spiritual truths, and its long history is a record of such discoveries, however uneven in quality.” The “method” that is Hinduism searches for the discovery of this One Reality, and this is what binds all Hindus together. Indeed:
Even by the mind this truth is to be learned: there are not many but only ONE. Who sees variety and not the unity wanders on from death to death.xxxv

The Hindu Tradition and the Environment

In the Assisi Declarations of 1986, which emerged out of an inter-religious conference where five religious traditions gave statements on the significance of nature within their traditions, Hindu representatives pronounced that “the divine is not exterior to creation but expresses itself through the natural phenomena.”xxxvi The statement goes on further, declaring, “forests and groves were considered sacred… (and) just as various animals were associated with gods and goddesses, different trees and plants were also associated in the Hindu pantheon.”xxxvii Within the Hindu tradition, therefore, the natural environment is more than just “functional;” it is sacred – that is, nature must be regarded as something more than what it can provide for us. In a sense, in nature are contained the secrets of the universe, Brahman, the very source of human existence, and where we can find Truth. The sacredness of place is especially evident in India. The Ganges River is a good example of how what is often considered a “resource” can be looked at, from a religious perspective, as “holy” or “sacred.” The Ganges is said to flow from the head of Shiva and flows on earth, heaven, and the netherworld. It is thus called the Triple-Pathed River and the River of Heaven. According to Diana L. Eck, scholar of Hinduism, “The Ganges is revered as goddess and mother.”xxxviii The Ganges River is thus seen as a source of purification and cleansing.

But the sacredness of the Ganges does not prevent it from being an incredibly polluted river, and the very fact that the Ganges is considered sacred has only increased the magnitude of its environmental problems. We can look at the problem in this way: if the Ganges is a source of purification and cleansing, how can it, or anything within it, be polluted? The Ganges shows us that we cannot say that just because a region or place is considered sacred, all action toward that place will be sensitive to environmental concerns.

To find some sort of response to this problem, we must take into account dharma, which we can essentially define as one’s duty with respect to caste, social law, or sacred law. The Bhagavad-Gita is a good example of a text that outlines some of the questions of right action. The ideas behind dharma call for action, but in a way that is fit and in accordance to one’s obligations toward society, civil law, and sacred law. Thus far, we have shown that there is a unity between us as human beings and the rest of the world in Hindu thought.xxxix Coupling
an individual’s duty to uphold this unity can provide an ethical basis by which we should approach the environment. This could apply to such situations as the pollution of the Ganges and other sacred geographical locations throughout India and beyond. The *Upanishads* states:

The god of creation, who in the beginning was born from the fire of thought before the waters were; who appeared in the elements and rests, having entered the heart: This in truth is That.

The goddess of Infinity who comes as Life-power and Nature who was born from the elements and rests, having entered the heart: This in truth is That.

Agni, the all-knowing god of fire, hidden in the two friction fire-sticks of the holy sacrifice, as a seed of life in the womb of a mother, who receives the morning adoration of those who follow the path of light or the path of work: This in truth is That.

Whence the rising sun does come, and into which it sets again; wherein all the gods have their birth, and beyond which no man can go: This in truth is That.

We can see here some characteristics within Hindu thought that are especially helpful for looking at the environment and approaching the environmental crisis. First, some aspects within the Hindu tradition shows that there is a nonduality between the human and natural worlds, as both come from the same One source. Second, we see an intertwining of the natural world and the divine, to the point where they are, at times, inseparable. Both these understandings set the stage for ethical treatment of the environment, which sees real action from the principle of dharma. These ideas within the Hindu tradition can give us an especially important framework to work within in relation to the environment.
Sources for Further Reading


Notes: The Hindu Tradition

xxix SpIN Archives, for more information, contact Paul Bortz, 802-388-7244, or write to: Spirit in Nature, P.O. Box 253, 464 E. Main St., E. Middlebury, VT 05740.


xxxxv “Brihadaranyaka Upanishad,” SpIN Archives.

xxxxvi SpIN Archives.

xxxxvii “The Assisi Declarations,” SpIN Archives.


xxxxix There is also a school within Hindu thought that stresses the duality of things. We should keep in mind therefore, that we are discussing one particular train of thought within the Hindu tradition which lends itself to the particular understanding of the environment we are arguing for here.

xli SpIN Archives.
The Buddhist Tradition

A Summary

According to the Buddhist scholar Masao Abe, “at the heart of Christianity is a person – Jesus Christ. At the heart of Islam is a text – the Qur’an; at the heart of Buddhism is a story – that of the Buddha’s realization.”

Buddhism as a religious tradition originated circa 500 B.C.E. in India from this foundational “story” – the experience and teachings of the Buddha, which literally means “enlightened one.” Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha, was an Indian prince who renounced his family and formerly lavish life for the pursuit of supreme enlightenment. In search of this enlightenment, Siddhartha Gautama traveled widely, came in contact with the poor, the sick, and the oppressed and experimented with a wide variety of ascetic disciplines and yogic practices. Eventually, while meditating under a tree, the Buddha realized the true nature of things and became enlightened. As he began to teach his disciples about his experiences and insights, the Buddha devised a concise method (upaya, or skillful means) of describing what he had learned, in order to share his spiritual wisdom with others. He described his path to enlightenment as a recognition of the Four Noble Truths. Briefly, the Four Noble Truths are:

1) **duhkha**, or the existence of suffering.
2) **samudaya**, the recognition that craving or attachment is the cause of suffering.
3) **nirodha**, which acknowledges that removing the cause suffering (**samudaya**) will remove suffering itself.
4) **marga**, which outlines the Eightfold Path, or Middle Path – a way to remove the cause of suffering and thus achieve enlightenment. This Eightfold Path is: right view, aspiration, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and meditation.

The Four Noble Truths are fundamental Buddhist teachings. Implicit in the Four Noble Truths is the idea that if attachment causes suffering, non-attachment will help remove suffering. Attachment in this Buddhist sense is referring to desire in a broad sense – desire for material wealth is but one example. The consequences of individual attachment is laid out in the Buddhist doctrine of **samsara**, or “circle of rebirth,” which binds all beings in a cycle of life, death, and rebirth. Though originally a Hindu concept, the Buddhist understanding of **samsara** teaches that so long as one remains subject to craving or attachment, then he or she will be reincarnated in the next life, and the
cycle of life, death, and rebirth will continue. Only non-attachment reveals the true nature of things – that all things are empty of a core essence independent of anything else (sunyata), and are instead mutually interdependent, or “dependently co-arisen” (pratitya samutpada). These two ideas – emptiness and dependent co-arising – are fundamental to many forms of Buddhist teaching. Liberating oneself from the cycle of rebirth – nirvana – is partly dependent on proper understanding of emptiness and dependent co-arising.

How do we make sense of such lofty and abstract ideas? One popular Buddhist analogy tells us that we can liken the concepts of emptiness and dependent co-arising to a raft on a river. Buddhist teaching emphasizes the importance of such concepts, and like a raft, they can help us get from point A to point B. But like any raft, we must realize that these concepts are not the final end to our destination, but are instead a way to get us there. Buddhist teaching points out that once we reach the other side, we must leave the raft behind. In the same way, we must remain “nonattached to nonattachment.”

We mentioned earlier that “at the heart of Buddhism is a story;” the centrality of the experience of the Buddha is vital to understanding in what ways the Buddhist faith tradition has progressed. Buddhahood as an experience has allowed many different “schools” of Buddhism to develop throughout its rich historical tradition. Like Christianity, Buddhism has spread throughout the world and has taken distinct forms in India, Tibet, China, Korea, Thailand and many other countries, including, most recently, the United States. Indeed the term “Buddha” is regarded not as a name for one person but rather a title. In fact, in some cultures, Siddhartha Gautama Buddha is considered as one of a continuing line of Buddhas; countless others came before him, and many more may come after.

So who is a Buddhist? It is typically understood that one formally “becomes Buddhist” by reciting three times the Triple Refuge (trisarana), also called the Three Jewels (triratna):

I go for refuge to the Buddha;
I go for refuge to the Dharma (Duty);
I go for refuge to the Sangha (Community).

In addition to the Buddha and the dharma, which we have discussed in some detail by now, let us examine the third refuge in Buddhism – the sangha, or community. Indeed, according to Abe, “it is vital to the proper understanding of Buddhism that the real witness to Buddhism is the Sangha, just as the Catholic Church is the witness to Catholicism.” Two main historical communities, or sanghas, within the Buddhist
tradition are the Theravada and Mahayana traditions. The Theravada tradition is primarily associated with adherence to the early teachings of the original Gautama Buddha, while Mahayana traditions are also associated with various other Buddha figures, and “introduced the doctrine of the bodhisattva.”xlvi The bodhisattva attains enlightenment and could choose to exit the cycle of samsara and enter into nirvana. He or she chooses not to do this, however, deciding instead to stay in “this world” exercising compassion and working for the enlightenment of all sentient beings (which in some schools includes non-human beings). The bodhisattva represents the ideal to which all Mahayana Buddhists should aspire: that is, we should all aspire to become Buddhas for the sake of others.

To sum up some of the ideas we have discussed thus far, Abe provides a useful Western model for understanding the relationship among the three elements of the Triple Refuge together with the concepts of emptiness and nirvana:

If the formal cause of a building is its concept, the material cause the substances involved in making it, and the efficient cause the architect, then one might identify the Dharma as the formal cause, the Sangha as the material cause, and the Buddha as the efficient cause of the edifice of Buddhism. But what about the final cause? In the case of Buddhism it is Nirvana. Nirvana consists of the realization of Emptiness, for it is precisely the emptiness of a house, the emptiness within its walls, which makes it habitable — which makes it a house!xlvii

The Buddhist Tradition and the Environment

Unique environmental perspectives stem from the incredibly rich and diverse Buddhist faith tradition. Pratitya samutpada, or “dependent co-arising,” for example, is a teaching within Buddhism that can help us appreciate our relationship to the environment. One way to better understand dependent co-arising can be found in Zen Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh’s commentary on the Prajnaparamita Diamond Sutra. In this commentary, Hanh describes a rose as “made of non-rose elements, with no clear demarcation between the rose and the elements that are not the rose.”xlviii One can see the rose as dependent on the raindrop and sunlight that feeds it, the soil that beds and nourishes it, the bees that pollinate it and contribute to its reproduction, and so on. Conversely, we can look at the dependency the bee has on the rose to sustain its own life, the dependency of the
soil on decomposed matter to provide its nutritive value, and the elements that allow raindrops and sunlight to exist. In the end, we see that a rose cannot exist on its own in and of itself, and that in fact, “when we look deeply into the rose, we understand that the rose is not just a rose (and) thus understand the true nature of the rose… But until then the rose we see is just an illusion of the true rose.”

A more local Buddhist voice offers us further insight in this regard. Ven. Sunyana Graef, Sensei at the Vermont Zen Center in Shelburne, VT, shows us a way to extend this idea into the sphere of environmental ethics. Writes Graef:

> If at a deep level we accept that all phenomena are in essence one with our own body, we will treat everything, animate and inanimate, with reverence. Since we are not separate entities, what happens to the universe happens to us as well. Buddhist ecology, therefore, encompasses not just this planet, but the whole cosmos.¹

The concept of dependent co-arising, then, provides first a conceptual base for the nature of existence and consequently, a moral base for understanding how our relationship to the environment ought to be conducted. Generally speaking, in the Buddhist tradition, correct understanding leads to ethical action, which follows the basis of that understanding. Dependent co-arising provides not only a way to perceive the environment, but also a call for action.

In Graef’s statement, “what happens to the universe happens to us as well,” we can see the influence of another Buddhist teaching present – the law of karma – “action.” Most of us have heard the familiar saying, “what goes around comes around.” Put simply, this “law of cycles” is the idea behind karma. The concept of karma (originating in Hinduism), states that there is a law of “cause and effect” which governs our actions and their impact. Needless to say, if we look at the actions we take in the world on these terms – that is, knowing that our actions, good or bad, will be returned in full to us – the Buddhist teaching of karma provides a truly ethical base to act – in Graef’s words, to “treat everything, animate and inanimate, with reverence.”

So far, we have talked about two concepts – dependent co-arising and karma – for providing a way in which we can act in relationship to the environment. Thich Nhat Hanh wrote about looking deeply into a rose, and seeing that the rose is ultimately interdependent on all things that are typically regarded as “non-rose elements.” Graef
goes on to say that we (as in people) too can be looked upon in this way, and in doing so, are called to look at the environment as not separate from us, but a part of us in the same way we are a part of it.

Interesting and problematic questions get raised, however, when we pursue the possible consequences of these concepts. What about the things in the world that are typically considered non-natural, like a coal-burning factory? This too is dependently co-arisen, and a “part of us in the same way we are a part of it,” is it not? If this is true, then why would it be necessary to act in a “pro-environmental” way if the “rose” and the “factory” are both dependently co-arisen? One approach to this problem can be found in the Second Noble Truth – the Law of Arising, which states that craving is the cause of suffering. This craving manifests itself in the world in many ways. Of course, a factory, to continue with our “non-environmental” example, is not full of “bad-karma” in and of itself, but rather has important implications for us as human beings, since the factory’s existence is a creation of our own hands. What should be looked at is how and for what reasons this factory was “arisen” and how we are using it. If the use of the factory is based on “craving,” then we know that this is not right action. In other words, we should ask, why was this factory built? For whom? Was it built for the good of “all sentient beings” – plants and animals, wildlife, ecosystems? Also, is our “craving” causing us to us to burn more coal than we really need and therefore harming the environment unnecessarily? These kind of questions must be asked when trying to differentiate between right action – “good karma” – and detrimental action – “bad karma.”

Of course, just because an individual is Buddhist does not necessarily mean that he or she is also automatically an environmentalist. Plenty of “Buddhist” countries – Japan is one example – suffer from and are themselves the cause of many of the same environmental problems we face in the United States. So the Buddhist tradition is not necessarily any more ideal than any other tradition represented in the Spirit in Nature network. Nevertheless, as we have shown by now, Buddhism has some unique perspectives to offer for understanding “the environment” and for approaching the question of ethical behavior. Conceptually, the very point of SpIN paths is to show that all religious traditions offer deeper understanding of our relationship to the environment, though each offering may be quite distinct.

In the end, the Buddhist tradition has a lot to say about the environment and American environmentalists have been especially interested in Buddhism. As with all the religious traditions represented in the SpIN network, however, what we have presented here could
never adequately do justice to the breadth of what Buddhism might "say" to a variety of audiences. "Nature," historically, and "the environment," more recently is incredibly valuable in the Buddhist tradition. It is valuable not only in relation to what it can do or provide for humankind. It is valuable in and of itself, for it is dependently co-arisen in the same way humankind is, and is in fact of the same essence as we are. In fact, to say "in and of itself," to make the distinction between humans and the environment, or even the terms "nature" and "environment," is somewhat misleading in a Buddhist context, because all things are empty, mutually interdependent, and valuable. In the words of Tung Shan:

When all things return to the One, even gold loses its value. But when the One returns to all things, even the pebbles sparkle.
Sources for Further Reading


Notes: The Buddhist Tradition


xlii Abe, 75.

xliii We should mention here that this doctrine of emptiness is fundamental especially to Mahayana Buddhism. Non-Mahayana forms (e.g., Theravada) do not necessarily accept this particular definition of emptiness.


xlv Abe, 74.

xlvi Reciting the trisarana for formal ‘membership,’ though common to many branches within the Buddhist tradition, has its exceptions. For example, reciting “I go for refuge to the Lama” is a ‘fourth refuge’ necessary within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, although it is not necessary within other branches of Buddhism.


xlix Hanh, 46-47.

The Jewish Tradition

A Summary

The Jewish tradition is, historically, the religious tradition of a specific people and their relationship to God through time. Of course, this “specific people” does not live in a cultural or historical vacuum; thus, Jewish lifestyles and practices are incredibly varied depending on the historical or cultural context in which they live. Today, one “Jewish way of life” may seem entirely incompatible with another. For instance, Orthodox Jews in Crown Heights, New York may have more in common with their Hasidic ancestors in eighteenth century Eastern Europe than they do with fellow American Jews who count themselves as Reform. Today also, Jews are increasingly inter-marrying (especially in America) thus adding to a rich diaspora of Jews who are either born Jewish, or have converted, and who represent all races and ethnicities. Indeed, just “who is a Jew” is a matter of lively debate in the twenty-first century. Jewish studies scholar, Jacob Neusner, agreed: “we cannot deal with the Jews and Judaism in isolation from the world in which they live and to which they respond.”

The diversity of Judaism is vast and it is difficult (and perhaps undesirable) to paint a portrait of “the typical Jew.” One Jew can literally believe that the Torah is given by God and strictly follow the Laws within it as God-given, while another can modify their understanding of and obligations to those original Laws – and both can still define themselves as Jews. Even here in the United States, we cannot adequately define “American Judaism,” as there are four main groups within the U.S. that are all quite distinct from one another: Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist.

The rise of the “Jewish Renewal” movement adds further diversity to the picture. But through all this, we should still remember that being Jewish implies that one is part of a common community.

What common values might be found within the “big tent” of the Jewish community? What is it that binds two seemingly different people together? Although there are several different “Judaisms,” each “Judaism” can essentially be broken down into three main components that are common to Judaism as a whole religious system. These three components are:

1) A worldview – in general, what a Judaism defines as “the Torah” (the first five books of the Bible) will contain that worldview, although different emphases will be applied depending on who is defining “the Torah” (i.e. Reform Jews vs. Conservative Jews).
2) A way of life – which links the life of the individual to the life of the community.

3) A particular social group – this is the group to whom the worldview and way of life refer. For a Judaic system, obviously, that group is “Israel” or, more specifically, the group it considers to constitute Israel – beginning with itself.

It is these three components – a worldview, a way of life, and a particular social group – that are present within all communities within the whole of Judaism.

The methodology just described could really extend to identifying any religious tradition, not just Jews. After all, virtually all religious traditions contain a worldview, a way of life, and a social group that is distinct and indicative of what sets them apart from other religious traditions.

But it is the relationship to God, and the significance of Torah and Halakhah (interpretation of the Law) that makes Judaism such a moving force in history, and such a unique one. In sum:

The Jews remain a visible presence in many parts of the world, and holy Israel and its Torah – that is, Judaism – endures as a vital religion as well. That simple fact shows the amazing power of what we call Judaism and what Judaism calls “the Torah” to exalt the humble, to strengthen the weak, to give joy to the disappointed and hope to the disheartened, to make ordinary life holy and sacred and significant for people who, in the end, are not much different from everybody else, except that believing has made them so.

It is from here that perspectives on the environment are offered, moral teachings found, and the power of the Jewish tradition discerned.

**The Jewish Tradition and the Environment**

The “Judeo-Christian heritage” has frequently been blamed for the unprecedented destruction of the environment within the past few hundred years. The dichotomic “separation of man from nature” that is often perceived when reading Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew Bible, is often criticized as fundamentally insensitive to the environment. To its critics, because of God’s command to “fill the earth and subdue it,” we have been exploiting the environment as little
more than a resource to satisfy human ends. Arguments along these lines often conclude with the assertion that the “Judeo-Christian tradition” is fundamentally anti-environmental. This argument is a powerful one, and for many within Jewish and Christian circles, has caused some serious soul-searching to understand what the relationship between their tradition and the environment really is.¹⁵

But if we look more closely at the elements within the Jewish tradition, it is undeniable that there exists a rich and valuable relationship to the natural world that is both ethical and opposed to the way we have been overexploiting the environment. This alternative perspective comes into view especially when we consider the relationship between God and humankind. In addition, elements within the Jewish tradition show us that the relationship between humankind and nature is not so separate, and therefore holds valuable implications for both environmental perception and praxis.

One example of environmental consciousness in the Jewish tradition can be found in this quote from the Talmud (a set of writings which elaborate God’s teachings and commandments), which the most important text to the Jewish tradition next to the Hebrew Bible:

Two men were fighting over a piece of land. Each claimed ownership and bolstered his claim with apparent proof. To resolve their differences, they agreed to put the case before the rabbi. The rabbi listened but could not come to a decision because both seemed to be right. Finally he said, ‘Since I cannot decide to whom the land belongs, let us ask the land.’ He put his ear to the ground, and after a moment straightened up. ‘Gentlemen, the land says that it belongs to neither of you – but that you belong to it.’¹⁶

This quote hardly follows the charge that Judaism and the environment are fundamentally separate from each other. Rather, it is a truly humbling lesson that seems to reinforce the notion that “from dust we are, and to dust we shall return.” If anything, this Talmudic story shows that we are far from “superior to nature,” and is a reminder of our own mortality and our dependence on the natural world.

Chapter Two of Genesis also offers another perspective within the Jewish tradition that can show us something about the environment:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

- Genesis 2:15.¹⁷
On one hand, it seems this verse is an indication of human superiority over nature. Indeed, the statement “to till it and keep it” almost seems like written permission to use the natural world for human ends. But on the other hand, if are to truly understand the full implications behind Genesis 2:15, we must consider the following quote, taken from the Assisi Declarations on Nature in 1986. The statement on Judaism shows that we must always remember, first and foremost, what the human relationship with God is before we do anything to the environment:

There is a tension at the center of the Biblical tradition, embedded in the very story of creation itself, over the question of power and stewardship. The world was created because God willed it, but why did He will it? Judaism has maintained, at least in all of its versions, that this world is the arena that God created for man, half beast and half angel, to prove that he could behave as a moral being… Comparably, man was given dominion over nature, but he was commanded to behave towards the rest of creation with justice and compassion. Humanity lives, always, in tension between his power and the limits set by his conscience.\textsuperscript{lix}

The Assisi Declarations show that we cannot separate morality from action. Jews understand themselves to be charged by God to live ethically. So it is not correct to say that since the Lord God commanded humankind to till and keep the land, we can do anything we want to the natural world because God ordained that we are masters of it. Jewish teaching, instead, shows us that we must behave ethically and morally, because we are commissioned by God to be moral beings.

Today, virtually no piece of land is untouched by human intervention in one way or another. Even the preservation of what we call “wilderness” is a human act.\textsuperscript{lx} Thus, in some way, seemingly “natural” areas such as Yellowstone or SpIN paths you are standing on exist because of a conscious human choice to protect the land. Such “noninterventionist” acts are interventions of a kind. Indeed, we have truly “tilled and kept” the land, if not literally, at least metaphorically.

It is for this reason that Jewish teaching on humankind’s relationship to the environment is especially relevant to current environmental discourse. It shows that we have special responsibilities and powers (including potentially destructive power). But if we are to “till and keep” the land, we must act in accordance to God’s command...
to us – to behave morally. Jewish teaching provides us with a “land ethic” that (1) does not separate human action from the natural world, and (2), shows how to apply human action to a moral end. To act otherwise would be a breach of the trust God gave us as stewards and caretakers of the land – a sin in the most basic sense.

The Book of Leviticus, the third book of the Torah, which outlines many of the laws pertaining to how one should live out his or her daily life, is a perfect example of a kind of “land ethic” within the Jewish tradition. Leviticus includes ancient injunctions about appropriate agricultural practices, sharing the harvest, allowing the land to lie fallow (the Sabbatical year), and the establishment of border lands (to remain as open space) around a city perimeter. For example, let us take a quote from Leviticus: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me” (Lev. 25:23). Passages such as these show us that there is an understanding within the Jewish tradition that while we act in the natural world, we should always remember that none of the world can rightfully be called “ours.” Thus, we must be accountable for our actions. In ancient times, such practices were understood to be literally God’s commandments. Today, we might also call them principles of sustainability.

To conclude, the earth is sacred because of God, and ultimately, our actions in the world and in the environment are directly accountable before God. We should reiterate that just because the earth is not considered to be sacred in and of itself (as in the pagan context) this does not mean that the value of caring for the earth is necessarily diminished in any way. Rather, it is as important for Jews to be responsible caretakers of the earth as for adherents of any other religious tradition. For Jews, the fact of creation connects them to the Creator, to the Absolute, to God. It is God in whom “we live and move and have our being” and creation is the context for our life with God.
Sources for Further Reading


Notes: The Jewish Tradition


iii Neusner, 307. Briefly, Orthodox Judaism “believes in a literal way that God gave the Torah, both written and oral. It keeps the law as God-given. Reform Judaism “emphasizes change… Indeed, it abandons much of the original Torah as no longer relevant.” Conservative “affirms the God-given standing of the Torah but sometimes accommodates change.” Reconstructionist “sees the faith as the historical religious civilization of the Jews and identifies God in naturalist, rather than supernaturalist terms.”

iii Neusner, 307.

iv Neusner, 353.

iv We should note here that the term “Judeo-Christian” is not really accepted among most scholarly circles because it is problematic to say that a distinctive “Judeo-Christian” tradition even exists. In other words, if we are using the term “Judeo-Christian” to designate the traditions that acknowledge the God of Abraham, why is Islam not mentioned? Or Bahai? We can see here that “Judeo-Christian tradition” or “Judeo-Christian heritage” is implicitly misleading and misrepresented – therefore, the terms are no longer considered acceptable, although “Jewish tradition” and “Christian tradition” are still acknowledged and upheld. Many critics of Western religious traditions vaguely blame a “Judeo-Christian” tradition for current environmental problems. The section “The Jewish Tradition and the Environment” is partly a response to these critics; it is for this reason that I use the term.

lvii “The Talmud,” SpIN Archives.
lx William Cronon, “The Trouble With Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature” in Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996). Professor at Univ. of Wisconsin–Madison and renowned historian, Bill Cronon argues that the very idea of “wilderness” is, at least somewhat, a human construction, and therefore “nature” in this regard is somewhat “unnatural.”
lxi Lev. 25:5 – “What grows of itself in your harvest you shall not reap, and the grapes of your undressed vine, you shall not gather, it shall be a year of solemn rest for the land.”; Lev. 25:10 – “And you shall allow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants; it shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property.”; Lev. 25:23 – “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me.”; and Exod. 22:25 – “If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be to him a creditor, and you shall not exact interest from him,” The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
The Christian, Friends (Quaker) and Unitarian Universalist Traditions

The Christian, Friends (Quaker), and Unitarian Universalist traditions are included in the same section due to the fact that Unitarian Universalists and the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers, stem largely out of and in reaction to the particular historical Christian contexts of their times. Still, we cannot assume that these traditions thus deserve no individual attention; therefore, individual summaries of each tradition will be included, although the “Religious Traditions and the Environment” component will be synthesized into one section. The three traditions are organized in this fashion to emphasize the close relationship these religious traditions have with each other and to illustrate that among the nine religious traditions represented in the Spirit in Nature interfaith paths, Christian, Friends, and Unitarian Universalist traditions are linked in a way that is unique to any other relationships religious traditions in the SpIN network may have with each other, whether it be Christian and Jewish, Bahai and Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist traditions, or others.

A Summary: The Christian Tradition

Like all religious traditions, there is an incredibly vast and diverse array of ideas within what we call the Christian tradition, and to make the distinction between Christian, Unitarian Universalist, and Friends (Quaker) traditions is not meant to imply in any way that “Christianity” is unique only in its distinction to these other two religious traditions. Rather, it is somewhat misleading to provide a summary of the Christian tradition in this fashion, as the number of groups and ideas within “Christianity” is incredibly diverse, and in many ways broader than the Unitarian Universalist and Friends traditions due to the range of historical contexts the religious tradition has found its way through and the amount of time the religious tradition has been verifiably in existence. For example, some fundamentalist Christians would hardly be recognizable to liberation theologians of Latin America, although both groups still label themselves under the common name “Christian.” But there are some characteristics that we can identify that are common to these diverse Christian groups – otherwise, there would be no point to the designation “Christian.” Let us now try to find a few of these.

Christianity is a religious tradition that traces its roots back to the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, who was born around two thousand years ago in Israel, which was then under Roman rule. According to accounts found in the Holy Bible, the central text of the
Christian tradition, Jesus was born in the small town of Bethlehem of the Virgin Mary, who was told by the archangel Gabriel that although she was a virgin, she was to have a child and he was to be named Jesus. According to Gabriel, this child was the Son of God.

Though born in Bethlehem, Jesus grew up in the city of Nazareth, and eventually began teaching at the age of thirty throughout Israel. According to the Gospels, the first four books of the New Testament of the Holy Bible, Jesus worked many miracles, healing the sick, raising the dead, and feeding multitudes of the hungry. He often denounced the practices of the Pharisees, the Jewish priestly class of the time, as hypocritical and a perversion of Jewish teaching. Jesus often elevated the status of repentant sinners and the lowly in society and condemned the self-righteousness of the “holy” Pharisees. The Gospel adage, “The last shall be first and the first shall be last” illustrates this point. The Gospels portray Jesus as one who challenges the status quo and questions society’s standards; often, he associated with whores and tax collectors, some of the most reviled people in Jesus’s historical context.

Jesus made many enemies throughout his life, and especially among the Jewish authorities of the time. He was eventually condemned to death by crucifixion for blasphemy based on claims that he was the Son of God, and was ultimately betrayed by one of his own disciples, Judas Iscariot. Jesus was only thirty-three years old when he died. According to the Gospels, Jesus died an innocent man, entirely free from sin. The death of Jesus is incredibly important to orthodox Christian understanding, as Jesus, who is understood among Christians as fully Divine yet fully human, was crucified while innocent – a sacrifice for the sins of humankind.

But even more important for Christian teaching is Jesus’s resurrection from the dead, which, according to Biblical sources, occurred three days after his crucifixion. Soon after this occurrence, Biblical sources claim Jesus ascended into heaven. From this sacrifice and resurrection, the Christian tradition asserts that the redemption of the world is made possible.

The Christian tradition originated in and has grown out of the Jewish tradition. The Christian tradition is intimately tied with the Jewish tradition in that Jesus was regarded by his disciples at the time to be the Messiah or Christ foretold by the Prophets of the Hebrew Bible, the central text of the Jewish tradition. Jesus historically had twelve disciples who began the foundations of what would eventually develop into the Christian religious tradition. These disciples carried out the teachings of the Gospel, or “good news,” of salvation through Jesus Christ.
During the centuries following Jesus’s death, an explosion of Christian understanding came about, from early “Gnostic” movements to those movements that eventually became orthodoxy, the “official” position of the Christian tradition. In the Council of Nicea in 325 CE, the first discussion on establishing an official stance on Christian teaching came about and on what should be included as official texts. From this landmark event, the Church was born and the contents of the Holy Bible given legitimacy.

The Bible consists of two main parts: the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible, and the New Testament, which includes the Gospels, Pauline letters, and various other documents from early Christian thinkers. The Gospels consist of four books which contain accounts of the historical life of Jesus, each with its distinctive character. The Apostle Paul, one of the most prolific thinkers of the Christian tradition, composed the Pauline letters. Other letters were attributed to such figures as Peter and John, some of the disciples of Jesus.

Jesus is understood by the Church to be fully human and fully Divine. Through Jesus’s grace human beings are saved – that is, perfection cannot be attained by the fruit of one’s own efforts. Perfection must be given by He Who is Perfect – God. This perfection is made possible for humankind through Jesus, who, as the Son of God, is also perfect. The notion that perfection is given, and not achieved, is a characteristic of the Christian tradition unique from many other religious traditions.

Since salvation is only possible through Jesus, having a part in salvation through Jesus presupposes first, a belief in Jesus as Savior, and second, acceptance of the grace offered to all humankind through his sacrifice at the cross.

Ideally, the Church represents the community of individuals bound together through the saving work of Christ. Of course, the ideal definition of a thing and the thing in reality can often be very different, so this statement is not meant to represent in any way that all Christians have adequately carried out the calling of the Christian life – in fact, most Christians would tell you that no one has, save Christ. But we can find examples of people throughout the Christian tradition that have reflected a bit of the grace given by Jesus Christ. Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King, Jr. are two contemporary examples that illustrate this point. What is it that binds these individuals – and all other people – that declare themselves Christian? To Christian scholar Harvey Cox:

First, they were all touched and shaped in some way by the teachings of Christianity, its core ideas. The second is that each was part of a Christian
community, the Church, in one or another of its expressions. Third, each had a relationship, however mediated or indirect, to the person of Jesus Christ.

So if we are to try to find a way to bring the incredible diversity of the Christian tradition under one roof, we can start here – as holding onto some common ideas, being a part of a community, and having a relationship with the person of Jesus Christ.

What we have discussed so far about “what Christianity is,” is the culmination of the relationship these three elements have shaped for one particular individual’s (namely, myself) understanding of the Christian tradition. Clearly, the search for what Christianity is has been constant throughout the history of the entire religious tradition. Indeed, without this search, the diversity that is Christianity would not be in existence, let alone Friends and Unitarian Universalist traditions. And it is still changing – some groups may emphasize very little the one or more of the elements Cox laid out. For example, one individual may feel like he or she is a Christian, but not necessarily a part of the Church, and consequently, for that person, the meaning of the Christian faith is very individualized. For another, one may hold onto the teachings and ideas within the Christian tradition (e.g. love your neighbor as yourself), yet pay little attention to the person of Jesus Christ or attend Church. Such people may even call himself or herself “spiritual,” but not necessarily “religious,” as they do not emphasize the person of Christ or other “religious” figures. These are some contemporary situations the Christian tradition is now facing and constantly reevaluating itself and reflecting upon. We see that what it means to be a part of the Christian tradition can be incredibly diverse. That is why these next two groups can define themselves, at least on a certain level, as “Christians” themselves.

A Summary: The Religious Society of Friends (Quaker) Tradition

The Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers, trace their origins as a distinct religious tradition to the mid-seventeenth century under the teachings of George Fox, an English lay minister. The Friends tradition is most well known in its American context, however. As many Christian groups were settling in the American colonies in the 1600s, the Society of Friends was among them.

What makes the Friends tradition unique from orthodox Christian traditions is that it adheres to the doctrine of the “Christ within” or the “inner light.” Essentially, “the basis of Quaker life and practice is the conviction that there is something of God's spirit in us.
all: that every soul can have immediate communion with God.”\textsuperscript{lxiii} The implications of such a doctrine are many when taken in relation to orthodox Christian thought. First, it makes the doctrine of Original Sin – that humankind is Fallen on their own, and salvation is only possible through Christ’s grace – somewhat problematic, as it seems to suggest that human beings are fundamentally good, which is contrary to Augustinian teaching on Original Sin. Still, grace is only possible through this Christ within – without it, grace is not possible. The point of contention lies in the belief that a set authority is necessary for receiving this grace. For Quakers, “Christ was not encapsulated within priestly ritual nor within the Scriptures that testified of him.”\textsuperscript{lxiv}

Another consequence “Christ within” holds for Quaker thought is an increased emphasis on the individual, unmediated relationships faith brings with God. There is no official clergy within the Friends tradition and meetings are begun in silence, so one can directly hear God’s voice. The Friends tradition deeply calls attention to the necessity for the relationship between the individual and God to be a personal one, as no one individual can or should mediate one’s relationship with the Divine but God Himself.

But we must stress here that for the Friends tradition, “There is no salvation in any other name under heaven, whereby they must be saved but in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, crucified and raised from the dead.”\textsuperscript{lxv} Essentially, all relationships with God are realized through Jesus Christ. The difference with orthodox Christianity is that it puts aside much of the ritual, music, or programmed activities present in much of Christian worship. It calls for an understanding that the inner light within one’s heart, and not ritual, text, or other source, is the primary source for inspiration and truth.

\textbf{A Summary: The Unitarian Universalist Tradition}

The Unitarian Universalist Tradition is actually the embodiment of two separate movements within the Christian tradition: Universalism, organized in 1793, and Unitarianism, organized in 1825, although both traditions’ ideas can be traced to the early centuries of the Church fathers and the Reformation, the decisive event that brought on the inception of the Protestant Church. The consolidation of these two traditions came in 1961, and although it grew out of the Christian tradition, it acknowledges as spiritually valid any number of other religious traditions.\textsuperscript{lxvi} It is for this reason that a broad range of religious traditions exist such as Unitarian Universalist Buddhists and
Pagan Unitarian Universalists, to name a few. Congregational practices are thus quite varied; congregations may incorporate Buddhist, Christian, Pagan, and Hindu rituals and prayers all within the same service.

The Unitarian Universalist tradition is a non-creedal tradition. However, there are certain tenets upheld by the Unitarian Universalist tradition, as it is an institution, even if it is a non-creedal one. By creed, we mean any statement that outlines definitively one’s religious faith or orientation. There seems to be a fine line between what is held as creed and what are held as common values, for Unitarian Universalists profess to be non-creedal but definitely hold common values through their diversity. In its statement on principles and purposes, the Unitarian Universalist Association states:

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:
- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

As some of these points hint at, Unitarian Universalists welcome a broad range of religious ideas and practices, and no single religious symbol or figure has universal acceptance within the tradition. What is upheld is a pluralistic viewpoint on religious truth – that, using monotheistic terms here, God’s salvation is not for an elect few, God is One, and the religious pluralism upheld by the Unitarian Universalist tradition “inspires and deepens our understanding and expands our visions.” The Unitarian Universalist tradition, though it began from Jewish and Christian origins, has truly evolved into a distinct and unique religious tradition all its own.

The Christian, Friends, and Unitarian Universalist Traditions and the Environment

How do Christian, Friends, and Unitarian Universalist traditions relate to the environment, and where do they place themselves as human beings in relation to the rest of the natural world? This question is a difficult one; one Christian may tell you some very
positive things about its relationship to the environment, and another may tell you the exact opposite. There is a perception about at least the Christian tradition, and to an extent, the Friends tradition, that “Judeo-Christian ethics” are incompatible with environmental ethics.\textsuperscript{lxx}

Perhaps this is true – some proponents of this idea claim that in “filling the earth and mastering it,” the Bible legitimizes our dominion over the natural world.

But we must ask, “What does \textit{dominion} really mean?” And especially, what does this mean when we take into account the value that \textit{is} within Christian understandings of the natural world? Take this example:

\begin{quote}
For everything God created is good, 
and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, 
because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.
-1 Timothy 4:4-5
\end{quote}

This verse in the First Letter of Timothy suggests that creation is inherently good, as it is a creation of God’s. Other examples within the Christian, Friends, and Unitarian Universalist traditions support the idea that there \textit{is} a positive environmental viewpoint within these traditions. The following discussion will concern primarily Christian-related viewpoints on nature. Some Unitarian Universalist viewpoints, such as Pagan and Hindu viewpoints, can be found under sections devoted entirely to that particular religious tradition.

The life of St. Francis of Assisi is an important model for merging Christian ethics with the environment, and gives us a clear cut example by which we can examine the quote from First Timothy. St. Francis’ life emulates the joy one can find in nature, or more accurately, to use the terms of the Medieval context Francis comes from, “creation,” from a definitively Christian perspective. Recognized by Pope John Paul II as the patron saint of ecology, Francis’s attitude toward nature shows that there exist incredibly valuable and positive views toward nature in the Christian traditions. An example of his attitude toward nature can be seen in his statement:

\begin{quote}
These creatures minister to our needs every day: without them we could not live; and through them the human race greatly offends the Creator. Every day we fail to appreciate so great a blessing by not praising as we should the Creator and Dispenser of all these gifts.\textsuperscript{lxxi}
\end{quote}
What is so interesting about this passage is the fact that in all cases, the natural world, and our actions and treatment of creation, always finds its way back to God, the “Creator and Dispenser” of creation. St. Francis gives rise to the idea that the world we live in is inherently beautiful, orderly, and purposeful, as it is first a reflection of the richness of God the Creator. He sees the natural world as an expression of God’s handiwork. For Francis, the joy he finds in nature is not because of aesthetic reasons or because he sees God Himself in a flower or stone. Creation is a gift of God’s, and is an expression of His infinite grace. In other words, his love for creation is an effect of his love for God, not the cause.

For Francis, it is not enough to love nature in itself – we must love God, who made not only nature, but the ability to love itself possible. Therefore, St. Francis is first and foremost a devout Christian and lover of God, and only as a result of this is a lover of the natural world. Every aspect of his life was a testament to his piety and deep love for Christ. This is not to minimize the importance of nature and “put it on the backburner,” so to speak. Rather, loving God presupposes loving His creation, although it is not enough to say that simply loving the natural world is sufficient for the Christian life.

We see from St. Francis, devotion to the Lord follows first a humanitarian responsibility in the world through a life of service in the way Christ taught us. Second, thankfulness and “perfect joy” for God’s grace arises, as all creation – including humankind – would be nothing without Him. Finally, in a synthesis of the two values, interaction in nature becomes a moral interaction, as a disregard for God’s gift of nature is ultimately a defilement of God’s gift to us. This last point is especially relevant for today’s environmental concerns, as it calls for a life in the world as a social being with a moral calling. In fact, St. Francis went through a period in his own life where he was considering a life of hermitage. He overcame this temptation by following the example of Jesus Christ, who acted in society and for it.

Today, many Christians, Friends, and Unitarian Universalists are actively involved in raising environmental consciousness in their respective religious traditions and are acting out of their faith to make this consciousness a reality. The Spirit in Nature interfaith paths is a testament to this collective conviction.

The Unitarian Universalist tradition calls for “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part” in its Principles and Purposes. The implications of the statement for environmental consciousness and action seem self-evident; it calls for respect for all life and an understanding that there is no part of this world of which we are not a part of. Therefore, we must treat the
environment in the same manner we should treat all human beings – with love, respect, and admiration for its intrinsic value.

Since 1985, the Society of Friends has specifically addressed environmental issues from a Friends perspective through the *Friends Committee on Unity With Nature (FCUN)*, “a spiritually-centered organization of Quakers and like-minded people seeking ways to integrate their concern for environment with Friends’ long-standing testimonies for simplicity, peace, and equality.” They have been involved with a number of projects, many of which address social and environmental justice issues. For example, Marshall Massey, founder of FCUN, states:

Some of us have begun developing new cooperative approaches to agriculture in partnership with the native farmers of Costa Rica’s San Luis Valley -- approaches that protect the soils and the forests, and shelter the wildlife, while providing a more reliable income and greater social justice for the farmers. This "San Luis Valley Project" not only reestablishes an environmentally righteous way of living in a fragile environment, but also stands as a witness to the world, of what is possible even for civilized humans in the tropics, if they return to what is right.

So many contemporary environmental solutions must embrace “simplicity, peace, and equality.” Over-consumption and environmental and social injustices are some of the primary reasons why environmental problems have gotten so out of hand. It is for these reasons that Friends’ perspectives on the environment are important for current environmental problems.

Lastly, Christian traditions are also involved with the environment on a number of fronts. One such front is the liberation theology movement, which arose out of South and Central America with the past fifty years. What is so valuable about liberation theology perspectives is that they emphasize *praxis* – that is, true, applied action in the world – and combine the social element so intrinsic to the environment. From this perspective, the danger of divorcing social problems with environmental problems is minimized, and we see better the connections St. Francis made centuries earlier – that simplicity, reverence for earth, and commitment to combating poverty are ideals that go hand in hand. So many environmental dilemmas are a direct result of poverty; liberation theology seeks to find dignity for human beings and all of creation for the love and glory of Christ Jesus.
What we have mentioned only scratches the surface of the rich tradition of environmental consciousness present within the Christian, Friends, and Unitarian Universalist traditions. We hope that this has shown you a part of their rich heritage.

Sources for Further Reading


9) Friends Committee on Unity With Nature. To contact, write 173-B N. Prospect St., Burlington, VT 05401-1607; (802) 658-0308; fcun@together.net.


Notes: The Christian Traditions


lix “Quaker Electronic Archive and Meeting Place;” available at http://www.qis.net-daruma/believe.html; Internet.


lxv http://www.quakerinfo.com/article1077.html; Internet.


lxix Further reflections on the environment can be found in the “Jewish Tradition and the Environment” section of this document. Many of the themes presented in the Jewish tradition section pertain directly to Christian thought and offer some perspectives I do not go over in the Christian, Friends, and UU section.

lxx We should note here that the term “Judeo-Christian” is not really accepted in most scholarly circles because it is problematic to say that a distinctive “Judeo-Christian” tradition even exists. In other words, if we are using the term “Judeo-Christian” to designate the traditions that acknowledge the God of Abraham, why is Islam not mentioned? Or Bahai? We can see here that “Judeo-Christian tradition” or “Judeo-Christian heritage” is implicitly misleading and misrepresentative – therefore, the terms are no longer considered acceptable, although “Jewish tradition” and “Christian tradition” are still acknowledged and upheld. Many critics of Western religious traditions vaguely blame a “Judeo-Christian” tradition for current environmental problems. The section “The Christian Tradition and the Environment” is partly a response to these critics; it is for this reason that I use the term.


lxxii “Publications Catalog for Friends Committee on Unity With Nature,” SpIN Archives.

The Islamic Tradition
A Summary

The Islamic religious tradition originated in Arabia around the seventh century C.E. Islam, which literally means “submission” to God, is considered the perfect revelation of God to humankind through the prophet Muhammad, who was given the Divine Word, and recorded it into the Qur’an (literally, the “reading” or the “recitation”). The Qur’an (or Koran) is considered the direct Word of God within the Islamic tradition. Thus, translations of the Qur’an, while scriptural, are not considered to be as truly sacred, because it is believed that God revealed his words directly to Muhammad in Arabic. According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr:

Islam considers itself as the final plenary revelation in the history of present humanity and believes that there will be no other revelation after it until the end of human history and the coming of the eschatological events (i.e. final, penultimate events occurring at the end of time) described so eloquently in the final chapters of the Qur’an, which is the verbatim Word of God in Islam.\textsuperscript{1xxiv}

Islam, in being the final revelation of God until the end of human history, is also, in Nasr’s words, “the return to the primordial religion” – a reaffirmation of the same truth that has always been present throughout history, but from an Islamic perspective, has been simply misunderstood or misinterpreted. Seen in this way, we can say that Islam perfects, rather than replaces, previous religious faiths.

The Islamic religious tradition believes in a single Truth, where Allah (the “One God” in Arabic) is transcendent beyond any limitation, yet also is all-immanent in His relationship with humankind. In other words, although Allah is greater than anything we could possibly comprehend, that does not mean that He is something “out there,” above and beyond our world. Rather, He is very much a part of and involved in our daily lives. Humankind can only be considered in relation to Allah. Islam calls for humankind to accept God as the One (al-Ahad) and submit to Him (taslim) and His Will. Such submission calls us first and foremost to be His servant (al-‘abd) and vicergent (al-khalifah). In fact, to become Muslim formally (the term “Muslim” means any follower of Islam), one recites the shahadah, a two-fold creed that states, “There is no god but Allah,” and “Muhammad is the Messenger of God.”
Recitation of the *shahadah* is the first of the Five Pillars of Islam, which essentially are five duties incumbent upon any Muslim. They are:

1) the *shahadah*, the two-fold statement of belief.
2) the *salat*, or formal prayer, where the individual prays at designated hours five times a day facing the holy city of Mecca.
3) *zakat*, or almsgiving, an act where an individual shares his or her wealth with others out of thanks for Allah’s mercy.
4) *saum*, or fasting, during the holy month of Ramadan.
5) the *hajj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca, if at all possible at least once in one’s lifetime.\(^{lxxv}\)

The Five Pillars are a central set of commandments within the Islamic tradition – indeed, that is why they are called “pillars.” These commandments were first laid out through the prophet Muhammad and have been an essential practice within the Islamic tradition since.

Also central to Islamic practice is the *Shari‘ah*, or Divine Law of Islam. The *Shari‘ah* encompasses all aspects of the practicing Muslim’s daily action, and divides all actions into five basic categories: obligatory acts (*wajib*); recommended acts (*mandub*); those acts to which the Divine Law is indifferent (*mubah*); those acts that are reprehensible (*makruh*); and forbidden acts (*haram*).\(^{lxxvi}\) The root of the *Shari‘ah* is found in the *Qur’an*. However, the *Sunnah* (commentaries on tradition) and consensus sources serve as secondary texts within the Islamic tradition.

Though the doctrines and practices related to the *Shari‘ah* and the Five Pillars are recognized within Islam as a whole, there are different “groups” within the Islamic tradition that are distinct from each other in a variety of ways. The two main groups are Shi‘ite Muslims, who regard the “Hidden” *Imam* (leader of the mosque) as the principal religious authority, and Sunni Muslims, who constitute the majority group within Islam and recognize the first four caliphs as Muhammad’s legitimate successors. Thus, though Islam is a powerful unifying faith evident in all aspects of the life of the practicing Muslim, we must recognize that there are different movements within this tradition, as there are in all religious traditions.

**The Islamic Tradition and the Environment**

For Muslims, there can be no distinction between everyday life (work, leisure, family life) and the life of faith. We mentioned earlier that all action is divided into five categories; the whole life of
Muslims therefore cannot be separated from ethical consideration, as no aspect of life – social, political, or economic – can be taken outside of this ethical consideration. We can say in short, that the Muslim life is, on one level, the ethical life. Thus, the Shari‘ah is an important guide to understanding how we might live in our environments. The environment generally and “nature,” specifically, require ethical and respectful action. Such a holistic approach to living in the world is considerably different from many contemporary (often Western) separations between faith and reason, or work and social responsibility, or “private” religion and “public” life, that have contributed to the environmental crisis. In this regard, the Islamic faith is notable in that it offers an impetus for looking and acting in the world ethically at all times. Because Islam calls its followers to always act ethically, it also invites them to strive to act differently.

We can find another way to approach environmental questions through the Islamic teaching of the role of humans in creation; namely, that humans are, (1), God’s servants, and (2), His vicegerents. As God’s servants, we “become aware of the sublime fact that all powers, potentials, skills, and knowledge are granted to us by God… all our achievements come from the Mercy of God.” As His vicegerents, we are deemed responsible for the well being of all creation before God. When we look at ourselves as God’s servants and vicegerents, we begin to see that it is our duty to be environmentally responsible. But even if we were not bound to be stewards of God’s creation, we would still have no right to act environmentally irresponsibly, for the entire universe is God’s creation, and not ours! As with Judaism and Christianity, Islam articulates a clear and positive doctrine of creation. In addition writes Nasr, “Islam emphasizes, in general, responsibility before rights.” This includes the responsibility to be appropriate stewards of the natural world before claiming any “right” as humans to exploit its resources.

Humankind is in a very special place because “mankind has the potential to acquire a status higher than that of the angel but also the potential to sink lower than the lowliest of the beasts.” Islam shows, that in many ways, the fate of the world is in our hands. As vicegerents, we have been given the power to do great – and terrible – things in the world. So far, the state of the environment has reaffirmed this statement. Today, we live in a world where there are few limits on what we have the power to do – whether we act in accordance to the Will of Allah or against is up to us. With power comes responsibility. Islam teaches that we can never forget this, and moreover, that we must always remember that first and foremost, we are His creations, His servants and vicegerents. Indeed, we truly are in a unique position, and
are an integral part of the relationship between the natural world—which includes all humankind—and the Divine. In short:

Allah is Unity, and His Unity is also reflected in the unity of mankind, and the unity of man and nature. His trustees are responsible for maintaining the unity of His creation, the integrity of the Earth, its flora and fauna, its wildlife and natural environment. Unity cannot be had by discord, by setting one need against another or letting one end predominate over another; it is maintained by balance and harmony.\textsuperscript{lxxx}

Sources for Further Reading


Notes: The Islamic Tradition

\textsuperscript{lxxv} Nasr, 428.
\textsuperscript{lxxvi} Nasr, 465.
\textsuperscript{lxxvii} “The Islamic Declaration on Nature,” SpIN Archives.
\textsuperscript{lxxix} “The Islamic Declaration on Nature,” SpIN Archives.
\textsuperscript{lxxx} “The Islamic Declaration on Nature,” SpIN Archives.
The Bahai Tradition

A Summary

The Bahai religious tradition is the youngest of the nine religious traditions represented in the Spirit in Nature interfaith paths. The Bahai faith follows the teaching of Bahaullah (1817-1892), who was born Mirza Husayn Ali Buri, an early follower of the Bab. The Bab, which literally means “Gate,” was the founder of the Babi movement in Persia, an orthodox movement within Islam that foretold the coming of a prophet and later seceded from Islam in 1848. Persecution soon followed this secession; the Bab was executed by Persian rulers, and the Babi movement divided into two factions: the Azali Babis, and the larger and more successful Bahai movement.

The period of persecution following the Babi secession from Islam not only saw the Bab executed, but also Mirza Husayn Ali Buri jailed. While in prison, Ali Buri had a mystical experience in which he realized that he was the prophet foretold by the Bab—a Divine Messenger of God. He thus declared himself “Bahaullah,” which literally means the “glory of God.” The Bahai faith tradition was born.

Although the Bahai faith teaches that humankind cannot fathom the mysteries of God on their own, God manifests Himself through several Divine Messengers throughout history, including such figures as Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus Christ, Muhammad, and the Bab. Bahaullah is regarded as the culminating figure among these Divine Messengers. Bahaullah teaches that all humankind, religious traditions, and creation are fundamentally unified, for God is One. In addition, Bahaullah proposes that humanity has now entered a “new age” where “the day has come for its unification in one global society.” In this context, the traditional barriers of race, class, gender, creed, and nation should be entirely irrelevant. One of the purposes of the Bahai faith is to help “peoples of the earth accept the fact of their oneness and assist in the process of unification” and break down the traditional barriers which separate human beings from one another.

According to Bahaullah, “The soul is a sign of God, a heavenly gem whose reality the most learned of men hath failed to grasp, and whose mystery no mind, however acute, can ever hope to unravel.” Thus, another purpose of the Bahai faith is to unlock the capacities of the soul, which will inevitably benefit the individual and the society in which he or she lives. Because all persons are a “mine rich in gems” unknown to all but God, individual spiritual growth is stressed by the Bahai faith. Therefore,
practitioners follow no formal prayers, ministers, sacraments, or initiation rituals.

Certain practices, however, have become established within the Bahai tradition, and are now considered obligatory. Some of these include daily prayer, fasting from sunrise to sunset during the nineteen days of the Bahai Fast, the obligation to attend the Bahai Feast which occurs every nineteen days, and to observe the Bahai holy days (e.g., the birth of Bahaullah, the martyrdom of the Bab). Recognized scriptures exist within the Bahai tradition as well, stemming from the writings of such figures as Bahaullah and the Bab.

In sum, the Bahai tradition stresses individual spiritual growth through prayer and personal relationships with God, without discarding the strong social calling we have as children of God to unify the world together. Bahais seek to eliminate the extremes of poverty and wealth, and welcome the diversity of race and culture while affirming each race/culture’s fundamental unity with others. On the one hand, the Bahai tradition is a religious tradition that is quite individualistic, with a great amount of personal freedom, but on the other, it is as powerful a unifying force as many of the other older world religious traditions, in part because these prior traditions are incorporated into Bahai faith and practice.

The Bahai Tradition and the Environment

Bahais will be the first to say that constructions of nature within the Bahai tradition are similar to other religious traditions’ constructions of the natural world. In fact, according to the Bahai Statement on Nature, “Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world” and “the grandeur and diversity of the natural world are purposeful reflections of the majesty and bounty of God.” These ideas of nature as “God’s creation” are similar to those found within many other religious traditions – especially the Christian, Islamic, and Jewish traditions. Given the abovementioned incorporation of prior traditions into the Bahai faith, this is not unexpected.

But what is unique to the Bahai tradition is the ethical calling we have as a result of these constructions. Bahaullah writes, “Is not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions? For if the character of mankind be not changed, the futility of God’s universal Manifestations would be apparent.” It would follow that treating the natural world ethically and mindfully is an
obligation if we are to be true to the Bahai faith, as our actions in the natural world are too reflections of how the “whole character of mankind” has been “transformed.”

The strong social callings within the Bahai tradition to promote economic justice, education, and equal rights all stem from the guiding principal that all humanity is one and a creation of God. In the Bahai view, “the major threats to our world environment such as the threat of nuclear annihilation are manifestations of a world-encompassing sickness of the human spirit, a sickness that is marked by an overemphasis on material things and a self-centeredness that inhibits our ability to work together as a global community.” So, according to Bahai teachings, living without any regard to the environment not only inhibits our purpose to “work together as a global community,” our “sickness of the human spirit” also inhibits our purpose of growing in our relationship with God. The environmental crisis is not a secondary issue; it has direct and all-encompassing implications for who we are as practicing Bahais, human beings, and most importantly, as children of God.

Sources for Further Reading
4) http://www.bahai-library.org/published.uhj/statement.nature.bic.html
5) http://www.bahai.org

Notes: The Bahai Tradition

1xxxii http://www.bahai.org/article-1-2-0-1.html; Internet.
1xxxii http://www.bahai.org/article-1-2-0-1.html; Internet.
1xxiv Bahaullah, 159.
1xxv http://www.bahai-library.org/published.uhj/statement.nature.bic.html; Internet.
1xxvii http://www.bahai-library.org/published.uhj/statement.nature.bic.html; Internet.
The Pagan Tradition

A Summary

Of all the religious traditions represented in the Spirit in Nature interfaith paths, Pagan traditions are perhaps the most misunderstood. In an effort to clear up some of the misconceptions of what Pagan traditions are, let us begin our discussion of Paganism by denoting what it is not.

First, Paganism, like all religious traditions, is not a single, monolithic religion. Several different traditions stemming from diverse cultural settings and historical contexts are deemed “Pagan” and can be quite varied from one another in ritual, belief, and practice. Some of the larger Pagan traditions are:

1) *Asatru*, a Norse Pagan tradition.
2) *The Church of All Worlds*, which celebrates the natural world, its flora and fauna, and the Mother Earth – in other words, *Gaia*.
3) *Druidic* traditions, which originated from the ancient Celts.
4) *Wicca*, also known as Witchcraft or simply the Craft. Wiccans are often associated with healing arts and magic.

Secondly, the Pagan tradition is not associated with Satanism. According to the Pagan Educational Network, “Witchcraft (*Wicca*) has no relationship with Satanism; all Pagans, including Witches, emphatically disavow Satan or any other personification of evil.” Therefore, the Pagan tradition is not fundamentally opposed to any “positive faiths,” including Christianity.

Paganism is not a centralized religious tradition in that primarily, “it is up to each individual to develop a relationship with Divinity as s/he defines it.” But to say that there is no *institution* within Paganism is somewhat problematic. For example, the Coven of the Goddess, a tradition within Wicca, does ordain priests and priestesses, and therefore, has some sort of an institutional structure, albeit a small one. There is no recognized “church” within the Pagan tradition. Most Pagan worship practices are small group and solo practitioner centered. There are also specific principles within each Pagan tradition that are incumbent upon any follower of that tradition.

Pagans, at least in the United States, do not recognize any form of violence in their ritual systems. Rituals are often quite varied; however, many Pagans celebrate the solstices and equinoxes. This
calendar is known as the Wheel of the Year, and is followed by Wiccan, Asatru, and Druid traditions, among others.

According to Margot Adler, “if you were to ask modern Pagans for the most important ideas that underlie the Pagan resurgence, you might well be led to three words: animism, pantheism, and – most important – polytheism.”

By nature, polytheist, animist, and pantheist worldviews lead to diverse worship practices and emphasize individuality. This polytheist worldview also implicitly calls for revering the natural world, and has thus been called “earth-centered” or “nature” religion. Pagans find the Divine to be immanent within the world and nature, although some Pagans acknowledge the transcendence of the Divine as well.

While sometimes divergent among specific issues, the Pagan ethic can essentially be summed up by the Witches’ Rede, “If it harms none, do what you will.” This combines the personal freedom characteristic of the Pagan tradition with community responsibility. The Law of Threes or Law or Return, “What you send returns three times over” is another principle indicative of the Pagan ethic. According to Starhawk, “Witches do not see justice as administered by some external authority, based on a written code or set of rules imposed from without… Witchcraft strongly imbues the view that all things are interdependent and interrelated and therefore mutually responsible. An act that harms anyone harms us all.”

The Law of Return and the Witches’ Rede embody this sense of interdependence and responsibility.

The Pagan Tradition and the Environment

Recent concern about the environment has helped thrust the Pagan tradition to the forefront of world religious dialogue, as it has been frequently understood to be a “nature tradition.” In fact, the word “pagan” comes from the Latin root *paganus*, which means “country dweller.”

Of course, it would be ahistorical to believe the Pagan tradition has always contained an “environmental consciousness” in the modern sense. Nevertheless, the Pagan tradition’s unique perspective fits well in providing a lens by which we can examine the contemporary environmental crisis. According to Sharon Devlin, a Wiccan priestess, “Paganism is the spirituality of the ecological movement.”

We mentioned earlier that Paganism lends itself to a sense of “personal freedom” linked with “social responsibility” from the principle, “If it harms none, do what you will,” and specifically responsibility to the planet. This idea can be a powerful guiding principle for environmental action. One’s personal freedom allows for
independently thinking and acting individuals to work within their particular environmental situation. The very affirmation of “do what you will” is therefore a malleable one, unlimited by circumstance. On the other hand, the potential dangers of “do what you will” is curbed by the preface, “If it harms none,” reminding us that we, as free individuals, must first be responsible for our actions and that harming the environment is a break of this code. In sum, if we truly live by this principle in full, all actions would be positive actions, whether it be with respect to the environment or something else.

Pagans often acknowledge a God and a Goddess immanent in the world, although there are some traditions that acknowledge only the Goddess and some that acknowledge none at all. The God and the Goddess represent different cycles of the world, and their overall relationship involves many themes of fertility and rebirth. The God and Goddess’s function as creators of the cycle of fertility and rebirth show us that the process of replenishing and rebirth is a sacred act seen in all of nature and is worth revering. This Pagan idea of fertility is especially important because so many environmental problems today are fertility based – the fact that more species have gone extinct in the past hundred years than at any time since the age of the dinosaurs is a good example of this.

Furthermore, the idea of Divine immanence in the world is a powerful element within the Pagan tradition that lends itself to positive environmental action. The entire natural world is considered sacred from this concept of Divine immanence, including humankind. As a result, we see a denial of a split between the spirit and body, human and environment, and a general subsumption of the human ego to the larger cycle of sacred life.

Perhaps the most important thing we can take away from Pagan thought with regard to the environment is the understanding that humankind and nature are essentially two parts of the same cycle, and that as a result, a balance must be sought between all parts of nature, including ourselves. Pagan celebration of the cycles of the world in the Wheel of the Year, and fertility rituals reaffirm the value of balance. We have seen within just a few short years that the balance of the natural world is fragile, and maintaining it is difficult and can easily be broken. Recent issues of overpopulation and distribution of resources show us that such a balance must always be taken into account. The ideal of balance, coupled with the ethical principles found in the Witches’ Rede, show us that one task of humanity is to keep this balance intact.
Sources for Further Reading


Notes: The Pagan Tradition


xciii “What is Paganism?”, SpIN Archives. Compiled by the Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans (CUUPS), Inc. To contact CUUPS, write to: 8190A Beechmont Ave. #335, Cincinnati, Ohio 45255-3154, or CUUPS@uua.org, or visit their website at http://www.cuups.org.

6. Interviews With SpIN Interfaith Path Coordinators

Introduction to the Interview Section

The creation of SpIN represents a difficult endeavor: to bring together a diverse community with the goal of gaining a better understanding of nature using religious principles. Each of the individuals involved in initiating the SpIN project clearly has a story to tell, and a unique journey that brought them to Vermont; to Middlebury; and to their own faith and environmental convictions. It is the intention of this section to illuminate some of the foundations and beliefs that led each path coordinator to become involved with Spirit in Nature, and at the same time to offer some interpretations of the wider trends that run throughout all these varied experiences.

We also hope that this section can serve to connect particular themes and expand earlier insights that have been raised in the preceding pages of this book. The individuals interviewed commented that they utilize the paths not only for spiritual reflection, but also as a place to gain a greater understanding of concepts of natural history, education, and land use that have been included in our book. This greater understanding can then in turn lead to a stronger connection to the natural world and a desire to become involved in environmental activism. In addition, these interviews demonstrate that oftentimes differences exist between how religion and the environment are portrayed doctrinally and how this translates into people’s lives. In the previous section, we have introduced the way that members of the religious traditions represented at SpIN might formally conceive their connections to nature. However, such connections are based on sacred texts, traditional cultures, doctrines, and underlying principles that may or may not be represented by individual religious experience. Therefore we wanted to speak with each of the people who serve as “Path Coordinators” for their respective tradition for several reasons. First, in order to form a more complete picture of how their experiences, including natural history knowledge or picnics as a child, led them to activism. Secondly, we wanted to hear their interpretation of what their religious tradition as a whole professes to believe about the environment, and also to explore with them how these overarching institutional beliefs translate into personal practices and ideas about the connection between nature and spirituality.

For the sake of clarity, we purposely chose to first introduce the various traditions, and then provide readers with this additional information about how people come to understand their personal relationship with that tradition. We hope that this layout will encourage readers to learn more about a tradition they may be familiar with, and
then to reflect on their personal sense of the relationship between environmental issues and faith. In addition, this section helps to demonstrate the diversity of people involved in the SpIN project, and to display the varied motivation and ideas of those who take part in the project, including very different approaches to religious involvement.

During the time I spent interviewing, my conversation partners were asked to reflect upon how they became involved in their particular religious tradition, what their daily practices included, and how these practices fit in with their environmental sensibilities. In addition, we discussed how nature fit into the larger framework of each individual's faith- and together asked questions about whether they had been drawn to nature because of their faith or in some way had been drawn to faith because of their experiences in their natural world. When speaking with interviewees, I also tried to discover if they had a sense of how their tradition as a whole related to nature, and what their feelings were about that larger connection. Lastly, we talked about how they became involved in the SpIN project, and in what ways they thought their faith community benefited from the space.

I thoroughly enjoyed the time I spent with the individuals who helped to create SpIN. I found them to be a diverse group of caring people, all committed to the final goal of preserving nature using their faith as a foundation for that work. I heard wonderful stories of personal experiences in nature, I saw many smiles, and a few tears. For every person I interviewed, what was most apparent was a common, deep, unwavering commitment and respect for the world which we inhabit.

Because the goal of this section of the project was not only to hear the fascinating stories of these individuals, but also to reflect on what had lead them to becoming involved with environmental activism and SpIN, I tried to find themes which ran through the comments of each person. I found several trends to examine in this regard, including: an environmental commitment from only a few individuals in each tradition, a clear difference between institutional and personal practices, a prior commitment to activism, a childhood connection to nature, and a strong motivation for place-based environmentalism in Vermont. I will elaborate on these trends more fully in the “Conclusions” section of this chapter. Having introduced the motivation for this work, I feel it is important to let you hear the excerpts from the voices of those involved with the SpIN project, and let their own stories speak for themselves. Enjoy!
Interview with Paul Bortz (Unitarian Universalist):

I spoke with Paul several times about the project, once after a SpIN soup and bread supper at the Kirk Center in Middlebury, and other times on the phone. In both instances his body language and voice portrayed his intensity and belief in the Spirit in Nature project. He has devoted his life to this idea, and his comments clearly reflect these convictions.

On changing lifestyle: "It is these slow actions that help us to really test- to see if we can drop out of our heads for a moment, to be about to act on our heart, to be able to hear the questions and concerns of others who don't want to adopt a different lifestyle and not be bothered. You can't teach someone to move form their head to their heart, I don't know how to show them a certain way."

On composition of SpIN members: "I would say that 1/3 to 1/2 of all SpIN members are secularists. They get their spiritual needs answered by being outdoors. We really wanted the path center to be a place for those without spiritual traditions as well...for me, this slowing down and walking is a way to make the connection to place physical-it is very important that individuals find ways to connect to place."

On personal spirituality: "For me, the earth itself is God, everything people describe about God is in nature."

On getting involved: "I began to feel that nothing was more important that Global Warming... The churches weren't doing anything. They were too busy trying to keep up membership, for over the last ten years they weren't dealing with real issues."

Interview with Nirmal Kameth (Hindu):

I spoke with Nirmal many times by phone and e-mail. Although she does not live locally, she has been excited to be involved with the Spirit in Nature project. She had insightful comments to offer on how Hinduism can relate to the environment and how her own love of nature is manifest in her religious faith.

On the practice of Hinduism: "It [nature] fits in very well with my faith. Divinity and nature are two sides of the same coin; in fact if we take care of nature, we can reach divinity."
On Hindu involvement with SpIN: “I have been talking about it in the Hindu community, and trying to get people to clean the path in spring and fall. It is truly a great way to integrate divinity and nature. However, I am not sure we have done much at SpIN lately, unfortunately. I would like to see more Hindus visiting the paths; I would like our spiritual center to have a Friday meeting there, to get the vibes of the place.

On personal connection to nature: “There is a deep sense of quiet we experience in nature. When our mind is quiet we can experience God in that silence and being in nature is perfect. Also, it makes us think of nature as something to not be destroyed, so humans can live peacefully. We can’t conquer nature, but we can be friends with nature. If we destroy nature, we destroy ourselves in the long run.”

Interview with Dan Shea (Buddhist):
I spoke with Dan on the phone several times and corresponded with him by e-mail. As the founder of a new Spirit in Nature in Massachusetts, Dan represents the first member of a “second generation” of SpIN enthusiasts. Each time I spoke with him his excitement and caring for the project was readily apparent. He was eager to tell me the ways the project had changed him and his many hopes for involvement in the future.

On Buddhism and nature: "Nature and the environment are very important in our Buddhism. We have a concept called Dependent Origination that teaches all life is interrelated, and that nothing exists in isolation, independent of other life. The image of two bundles of reed is used to demonstrate the meaning. Neither bundle can remain standing without the other, if one bundle is removed the other will fall. When we realize the myriad interconnections, which link us all to all other life, we realize our existence only becomes meaningful through interaction with, and in relation to others."

On personal connection to nature: "I’ve always been in relationship with nature, but prior to becoming a Buddhist it was quite superficial. Now it is quite different. Due to my practice, it seems I commune with nature on a spiritual level, and try hard not to just be a taker of resources from our earth."

On becoming an activist: “the biggest thing that has happened to me is that Spirit in Nature has transformed me into an activist. Acting on
behalf of the environment and showing people the benefits associated with spiritual path walking is very satisfying.

**Interview with David Eldeson (Jewish):**
*I spoke with David Edleson by phone and e-mail. Although he has not taken up the formal position of path coordinator for the Jewish path, he agreed to an interview, and had some wonderful insights on how one connects to spirituality in their own personal practices.*

On Judaism and the environment: “I believe that Judaism has a fairly strong environmental ethic. Although the world is not itself divine, nor is it evil. Judaism embraces this body, and this earth as holy and as God's creation/gift to us. There is not the sense that this is some evil trial, or that the material world is of the devil. We live our lives in this material world and since it is the only world of which we are sure, we had best be good stewards and live moral lives."

On personal practice: "My everyday practice is no longer particularly Jewish. I meditate. Most Jews I know do not have a daily practice… my relationship to nature very much challenges my Jewishness. In fact, I have moved [more] toward earth-based religious practices."

**Interview with Catherine Nichols (Christian):**
*Catherine Nichols and I met in her office at the Episcopal Church in Middlebury. We both sat in comfortable chairs in a room decorated with posters depicting the natural world and spiritual faith. Catherine was excited to tell her story of compromise between being an Episcopalian Priest and environmental activism, and how she has changed after coming to Vermont.*

On nature and faith: "Nature is so integral (to my faith) it is even hard to talk about. Western Culture as a whole is so out of touch with nature, I can't live that way. For example this morning I spent two and a half hours outside, getting ready for winter, transplanting beds, loading wood. I need this time in nature. If I don't get outside I get tenser and ungrounded, and caught up in the hard parts of my work. I like to be alone to sit by the river near our house, or garden, or rake, if not I get out of touch. Honestly, this need has nothing to do with being Episcopalian and everything to do with being a person of faith. The sense of creation you find in Genesis and Judaism, the idea that God created it all. As science has become more advanced, I have had a
stronger belief in God, not as a personal being, but as a powerful creative force. Creation is inherent in everything that we do."

On congregational involvement: "We don't have many activists, and only a few members of SpIN. I don't think any of the institutional churches have many members [who are activists]."

On place-based environmentalism: "Many more people care about nature here [in Vermont], than in suburban Boston or Houston. Most people came here because the out-of-doors is important to them.

**Interview with Carol Spooner (Christian):**

I spoke with Carol Spooner and her husband Reggie in the front room of Weybridge House. As the two of them sat together and discussed answers, each portrayed unique histories and motivations for becoming involved with Spirit in Nature.

On how to be hopeful: "[We are] trying to find something hopeful in all the grimness. We can't let people lose hope. People who seek out SpIN, seem to find it helpful, it seems to be spreading slowly, expanding. It works in one way because people don't think about what church they belong to, it is very uniting."

On congregational involvement: "It is tough because there is an individual [environmental activist] in every church and that is about it. People have so many things to do and no time."

On prior social justice involvement: "I have always challenged the status quo…I have worked on inner-city housing and racial issues… I think I became an environmentalist as an extension of my civil rights experiences."

On place-based environmentalism: "My relationship to nature is stronger in Vermont- when I lived in New Jersey you couldn't even see the sunset…I feel like my surroundings have pushed me along."

**Interview with Ann Taylor (Quaker):**

I spoke to Ann in the living room of Weybridge house at Middlebury College. Sitting on a couch, her hands folded on her lap, Ann constantly smiled during the interview, until she was moved almost to
tears when trying to articulate her deep and abiding connection to the natural world.

On communion with nature: "Once I was hiking in Robert Frost woods and the trees called out to me. 'Come and hug me it said' I felt the first tree and it was non-responsive, and the second was responsive. I felt the tree giving me energy, and at first I felt that I was just receiving without giving back, but then I realized that in returning the embrace I was making the experience reciprocal."

On connection to the natural world in American culture: “I felt often that my life, my experience was a gift from heaven. It was as if, as if heaven was embedded in nature, and we all have the capacity to see it, but we are so busy, too busy. We are off-center; so busy trying to be affluent. There is something more important, but our adolescent culture can't see what is right in front of them. Sometimes I want to call people back to nature. I have often thought of leaving this culture, but it is the world now that is having this problem, TV, McDonalds, everyone is looking for nurturing and doesn't know where to find it. People fill their longing with a materialistic urge."

Interview with Mahmond Hayyat (Muslim):
I met with Mahmond Hayyat in his eyeglasses shop in Middlebury. Sitting at a desk, surrounded by quotations from the Qur’an and pictures of his children, he proceeded to tell me about his sense of connection between Islam and nature.

On the Qur’an and nature: "There are numerous verses and chapters that talk about the nature. When I was older and more religious I understood it was my duty and responsibility as a Muslim to preserve nature. You see, in Islam, Muslims have several responsibilities that Allah bestows as sacred duties. "God had chosen humans to be the gardeners, or halifa, of the earth, so it is a Muslim’s duty to protect nature."

On knowing nature: In Islam, you are fitra, born knowing God. You are born honest, and born knowing nature. When you grow up, some remain virtuous, and some do not, some have a connection still to nature, and some do not."

On childhood connection to nature: "I loved to go to the mountains around E-Biri, to run around the hills and play on the olive trees. Nature played a big role in my life. Who doesn't love the nature?"
Interview with Elaine Lathrop (Bahai):
I spoke to Elaine several times by phone and corresponded by e-mail. Each time we chatted her lively voice portrayed her genuine love and respect for her faith tradition and its connection to the environment. After our last discussion, she thanked me for allowing her to reflect upon these issues, so integral to her self-conception, to which normally she does not give much thought.

On connection to the environment: “I guess I would say that the Bahai Faith has helped me to appreciate nature more although even as a child and as a Methodist, I felt that God was everywhere and part of everything. Bahaullah uses nature in many allegories in the writing, such as [references to] “the soft scented streams.” Without a knowledge of nature, I don't think it would be possible to appreciate and understand the writings as well. Nature is here for us to enjoy and learn from and use responsibly. It's like a precious gift from God to mankind.”

On environmental consciousness: "We believe that the solutions to the balancing of the environment with human needs will be understood only with an emphasis on spiritual values in our lives. The material needs and the spiritual values must be in harmony. The essential message of Bahaullah for the Bahais is that of unity. He taught that there is only one God, one human race, and all of the world's religions are stages in the revelation of God's will and purpose for humanity."

Interview with Joel Lowy (Pagan):
I met with Joel Lowy at Weybridge House after a meeting he had in Middlebury. He was attentive and articulate when discussing his role in the formation of the Pagan path, and eagerly talked about the expanding Pagan group in the area, which he leads.

On connection to nature in childhood: "During my childhood, I thought that being in nature was spiritual, I found my real spirituality and God in the natural world."

On new Pagans: "Some of the people who become interested in Paganism have grown up Christian, and don't know anything about Paganism. They just like the orientation (toward the earth). Paganism is different in that it does not include salvation through divine intervention; there is a certain variety to the sources of power. For example we have rituals throughout the year that combine symbols and meanings with the natural world. We do this to put us in harmony with
who we are. Paganism is really the religion closest to nature as divinity. We don't see a difference between the creator and the creation, and therefore nature is sacred."

**Interview Conclusions**

As I have said, I found my work on these interviews to be an extremely rewarding and thought-provoking experience. Each of the unique people involved with Spirit in Nature paths have contributed much to a project that seems likely to continue to grow in the future. It is my hope that others will be inspired by the example of these individuals and will seek to serve their own religious communities in similar ways. In our own lives, it often seems difficult, as many of the interviewees noted, to find the time and presence of mind to become involved with a cause, however closely connected that cause may be to one's faith and values.

The idea that people are too busy or otherwise involved is the first trend that ran throughout the interviews. For most of the traditions, only one or two people in each congregation were involved in environmental activism. Each interviewee seemed frustrated by this reality, and most often cited lack of time or interest as the reason there was not very much involvement. Some of the individuals, including Carol Spooner, noted that several members of a congregation were indeed encouraging the younger members of the clergy to become involved with environmental issues, hoping this prompting would encourage them to do so. Catherine Nichols, in addition, focused on the problem of balancing environmental concern with a host of other world problems and worthy issues. The special needs of both local and global communities often lead people to choose other charitable projects, especially if they feel no personal connection to nature.

The second trend connects back to the ideas in the previous section on religious traditions. For many of the coordinators involved, there seemed to be large differences between their sense of their religious tradition and their on-the-ground practices. As we have seen in the previous “Traditions” section, each of these religious traditions contain legitimate conceptual connections (often scriptural or doctrinal) to contemporary environmentalism. Although many of the people I interviewed felt secure in their faith, some felt that their environmental concern was at odds with what they had been taught about a tradition, especially about Judaism and Christianity. For many, they found more solace in a walk through the woods or a moment sitting by a stream, than in being indoors worshipping God. Some even went so far as to locate God within nature itself. While for a few individuals the location of God in nature is explicitly advocated or, more frequently, implicitly
articulated within the bounds of religious doctrine and practice, for many it seemed a personal adaptation rather than a recognized tenet of their tradition. While each tradition has the seeds of modern environmental responsibility in its sacred texts or ritual practices, such seeds may not have been sown in the religious communities in which they were raised.

The third trend is that most of the people involved seemed to have a social justice background. This is not applicable to all the path coordinators, but for many it seemed that their commitment to environmentalism was one in a long list of social justice activities, many related to faith convictions. The social justice dimension connects back to the idea of lack of involvement and lack of time. Many of the path coordinators, including the founder Paul Bortz, had gone through some type of transformational experience that had led them to believe that environmental issues were the correct place to focus their energy and commitment. For such individuals, environmental activism was not in competition with other charitable work, but was seen as an extension of social justice involvement. A few people noted that while others perhaps held environmental convictions, they had chosen not to become active within the movement, perhaps because they had not made the “social justice” connection, or did not have a history of prior social activism.

The fourth trend is also reflective of personal history, and that is that each individual had experienced a clear “connection to nature” as a child. Almost every one of the interviewees talked about their experiences outside while they were young, and how formative such experiences had been, both in terms of their care for the environment, and in many cases, their connection to faith as well. Without having had experiences and memories of nature as children, several people suggested that they may not have been motivated to care for the environment. Many of the interviewees, including Reggie Spooner, noted that the influence of parents or grandparents helped to formulate their environmental ideas.

The fifth and final theme noted in the interviews is the idea of place-based environmentalism. This theme is really one that runs throughout our book, and one that we hope you will carry with you. When speaking with the path coordinators, there was a clear dialogue running throughout my conversations about the need for connection to “place,” and the importance of living in Vermont to the formation of their environmental ideas. Several people who had previously lived elsewhere, including Joel Lowy, noted that when in an urban environment it is harder to connect to the natural world and to develop the kind of place connection prompted by Spirit in Nature.
The significance of the trends and stories presented here lies in the fact that each of these people came from diverse backgrounds and have contributed a piece to environmental awareness in the local community. The creation of the initial SpIN in Ripton, Vermont (and its successor SpIN in Massachusetts) demonstrates the growing national awareness of connecting environmentalism to spirituality, and more broadly using a specific place to connect to self and the world around us. In giving of themselves, each of these individuals has become part of a unique movement for sustainable, compassionate living that will continue to reverberate into the future.
7. Conclusion

As we reflect on our project, we feel that we have created a book that can highlight the Spirit in Nature Paths as an excellent resource for both Middlebury College and the surrounding community. It is our hope that our work will add to SpIN by serving to educate the users of the path system in both religion and natural science. Both adults and children can benefit from this information; adults through reading the sections on religion and natural science, and children by being involved in the educational activities.

We hope that one of the biggest accomplishments of this project can be a greater understanding of the Spirit in Nature paths for a wider audience. Several of the group participants had little or knowledge of this community resource before we began the project, and now are convinced that use of the paths could be an asset to the community. We hope our work will encourage more people to visit the paths in Ripton and to become more involved with SpIN and with environmental issues in their local spiritual or secular communities. Those already involved may also be able to use this book as a means of recruiting new members because it will provide them with comprehensive information about the path center.

In addition, our group has come to realize that SpIN represents a larger regional commitment to environmentalism. We do not believe that it is purely by chance that this community center began in Vermont. Instead, it has been suggested that the members of SpIN are characteristic of the commitment to the environment that is found throughout the state of Vermont. This state has served as a model, and hopefully the influence of this action group will continue spreading, as it has already reached Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

One of the most exciting aspects of the project was its truly interdisciplinary nature, as we were able to combine religious studies, natural science, and environmental education. Some of us were able to become more familiar with religious traditions and their relationships with nature, while others learned about the flora and fauna of Vermont and how these can be used for nature-based education. We also learned valuable lessons by interviewing members of the community, as it gave us a realistic view of the interaction between religions and environmental commitments in individual lives. The interviewees, who were representatives for each of the paths at SpIN, demonstrated the ideals of community and connections to the members of our group. We were impressed by the level of caring shown by these individuals and thoroughly enjoyed the process of working with them to improve the resources of SpIN. Although we learned that only a few individuals
from each religious group were active in SpIN, it was encouraging to see that there are so many religious traditions represented and that such activism is growing.

To complement the use of our book by the SpIN group itself, it is our hope that the local educators will utilize the nature-based activities described in this book when forming their curriculum, perhaps including several field trips to SpIN in different seasons. In addition, the basic ideas presented here could be used to develop more complex lesson plans. The list of the references for the educational activities could also be a resource for educators wanting to take environmental education in new directions. Our suggested activities present what we believe to be a healthy balance of hand-on exploration and environmental respect. We trust that each educator (whether teacher, parent, or friend) will remind children, and themselves, to experience nature with all the senses while also practicing “living lightly” on the land.

The history of the land provided in this book could also be used as a starting point for educational activities or as a basis for a more extensive study into the history of the area. There is much more that could be gleaned from town records and further researching the division of farmland crudely described in some of the deeds. The remains of stonewalls found on SpIN property are certainly wonderful clues pertaining to this historical division. We hope that history buffs using this book will take the opportunity to find out more about what has happened on the property now being used by SpIN and will share this history with SpIN board members so that the educational process can continue.

There is room for more work to be done with the natural science component of this book as well. It would be possible to gather more information in order to determine the ecological relationships between the flora and fauna at SpIN paths. It would also be interesting to conduct a more detailed biological survey of the land to identify a wider range of plants and animals, to determine approximate populations for each species and to track the population dynamics of the flora and fauna over time. Using the land history information, another possible project would be to establish the history of the forest that now stands at the SpIN site and to try to determine the age of the forest and how the species composition has changed through the years.

The map that is included in this guide should be especially helpful because it will make it easier to follow the paths, and to gain a greater spatial understanding of the place. More accurate distances can be calculated with the geographic data obtained, and, on a larger map that will be displayed at SpIN, the topography of the area will now be
visible. Using this larger map, visitors will also be able to see where the nature notes and spiritual sayings are located, two items which are not marked on current maps. In addition to the map published in the book, there are also plans for making it available through the SpIN website.

Due to the nature of religious traditions, some of which have developed over thousands of years, the religious traditions component of the book is far from comprehensive, and in no way is meant to imply that what is contained within the pages of this book is the end-all-be-all of what each religious tradition has to say about the environment. The significance of the environment as symbol and ritual, which is an important component in all the religious traditions’ connections with nature, has regrettably been left out due to research limitations and time-dependent reasons. Further research on these aspects would be a valuable and duly needed step toward further education on what perspectives each religious tradition offers with respect to the environment. Also, different examples of specific individuals who have helped shape an understanding of their respective tradition and the environment would be a useful contribution, as these examples could offer unique perspectives that show what even a single individual can provide to positive environmental discourse.

One of the overall lessons gained from our work on this project was that natural places, such as SpIN, can be shared by adults, children, theologians, and scientists. Science and religion do not need to conflict. Adults and children both have much to learn. All disciplines of study can be appreciated by those who are drawn to such places as SpIN. Those who are interested in making connections across traditional areas of study, or between different aspects of life experience have fertile ground to do so by visiting SpIN and by using this book.

In conclusion, we feel that the goals for this project were well met, and we hope that the final product will be a valuable resource for the community. We were able to create a comprehensive interdisciplinary publication that combines studies of religious traditions with studies of natural science. It is an educational resource implicitly, by providing reference material, but also explicitly, by providing educational activities for children in nature. We mention opportunities for further research and activities, not because our work is not done, but because we feel there is always more work to do. We were given the opportunity to provide a service to our community by spreading the word about a rich physical and spiritual resource that can be enjoyed by people in this area and beyond. We took that opportunity gladly, and are grateful for it.

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8. Appendices

Appendix A
Biography of Warren and Barry King (Authors of original Nature Notes)

Warren King is an ornithologist. After doing graduate work at Cornell University, he began his work as an assistant to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institute who was the President of the International Council for Bird Preservation. After traveling the globe for his job at the Smithsonian, Warren settled in Vermont where he began work at the Keewaydin-Environmental Education Center on Lake Dunmore. Warren worked for the educational center for thirteen years before settling into retirement. Dedicated to volunteer work, Warren King has since been involved in many state conservation organizations and serves on the board of Audubon Vermont and the Nature Conservancy’s Vermont chapter.

Barry King graduated from Middlebury College in 1974 with a degree in American History. After graduation, she traveled out West and began work in an environmental education center and discovered that outdoor education is her calling. Upon return East, she worked at the Keewaydin-Environmental Education Center for twenty-one years. Since then, she has pursued freelance environmental education work. Now, Barry works in the program “Paddling Ecology” with the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum. This program takes school groups into canoes and tests water quality. In addition to their other endeavors, Warren and Barry have established a business in which they produce laminated cards that identify animal tracks, trees, and other aspects of nature.

Since the King’s completed the nature notes, they have remained involved with SpIN. Warren acts as an advisor to SpIN, and both he and Barry will be running environmental workshops on the premises within the year. Furthermore, the Kings continue to walk the paths for enjoyment, and are convinced that SpIN has acted as a significant addition to Ripton’s resources.
Appendix B – Nature Notes

1. **White pine.** Look for the big evergreens with blackish bark and long, slender needles in fascicles (bunches) of five. White pines require well-drained soils. They germinate best following events like fires, clear-cuts or abandonment of fields. The white pines in a stand are likely to be the same age, even though the trees may vary considerably in size. Sometimes the white pine shoot weevil, a beetle, kills a tree’s lead shoot. Side branches then vie for the lead, resulting in white pines with multiple trunks or trunk detours.

2. **Ferns.** Forest glades with cool moist soil promote the growth of many kinds of ferns. Interrupted fern grows waist-high, the fronds spreading in a circle from a central point. The center of the shaft of some fronds bears several shriveled specialized brown leaflets that bear spores, thus “interrupting” the shaft. The closely related cinnamon fern has separate specialized cinnamon-colored spore-bearing fronds. Royal fern, with leaflets more widely separated on branching fronds, betrays the presence of saturated soils. Sensitive fern, with its fronds displaying fingers rather than individual leaflets, is among the first to die back from autumn chill. Spinulose wood ferns have chaffy stems and spore cases on the back of most fronds. Bracken is tall and leathery, the central shaft branching into three below the leaflets.

3. **Stone walls.** Stone walls, stone piles and barbed wire reveal a history of land use quite different from today’s. One hundred years ago 85 percent of Vermont was cleared. Sheep grazed pastures on all but the steepest hillsides. Today, 75 percent of the state is forested. Frustrated by fluctuating wool prices, rocky soils, and challenging access to markets, farmers gave up the battle to clear land and headed for northeastern mill towns or for the deep, rich soils of the Midwest, leaving behind this evidence of their lives.

4. **Beaver pond.** Beavers are one of two species that modify their environment to suit themselves; we are the other. Although the plant-eating beavers that created this wetland have moved on, they left behind evidence in the form of dams and lodges. Their handiwork, no longer watertight, now sports a range of plants such as joe-pye-weed and touch-me-not. Willow, aspen and birch, the beaver’s preferred foods, grow back gradually, and in a decade or two this wetland will be ready for occupancy again.

5. **Forest succession.** Natural or human-induced gaps in the forest canopy promote the growth of opportunistic sun-loving plants like blackberries, purple-flowering raspberries, aspen and cherry. Sun-tolerant plants create understory shade hostile to their own regeneration. In their place will come shade-tolerant species like sugar maple, yellow birch or hemlock. Thicket-adapted birds like chestnut-sided warblers and common yellowthroats have their day in the sun, but are ultimately followed by black-throated blue warblers, ovenbirds, vireos and thrushes, which thrive in shade.

6. **Decomposing trunks.** Decomposition of trunks and stumps provides many species with an opportunity to flourish momentarily. Woodpeckers find insects like carpenter ants, while chipmunks, mice and snakes find shelter in the dead stump. Mosses, lichens and mushrooms find nutrients and a hospitable surface for growth. Seeds from trees like yellow birch sprout on the stump. Their roots snake down to the ground, and, after the stump has disappeared, prop the new tree up on root stilts.

7. **Ground cover.** The diversity of this mixed northern hardwood forest is enhanced by the colorful variety of plants that grow at ground level. Indicative of acidic soils and plentiful here are most of the following: Canada mayflower (lily-of-the-valley-like), goldthread (three-leaved and shiny), bunchberry (four- or six-leaved), wood sorrel.
(shamrock-like), starflower (several lance-shaped leaves in a whorl), wild oats (leaves clasping the stem), blueberry (shiny oval leaves and woody stems), and partridgeberry (ground-hugging, round-leaved). Accompanying these wildflowers is a club moss, also called ground pine, a primitive group of a dozen species which, like ferns, reproduces by spores.

8. **Tip-up.** In saturated or ledgy soils where their roots cannot grow deep, trees blow over and expose bedrock or mineral soil. Winter wrens nest in the tangle of tipped-up roots. Their loud, high-pitched melody belies their tiny size. The opening in the forest canopy encourages growth of early successional, sun-requiring plants like blackberry.

9. **Serviceberry.** This understory tree, also called shadbush, typically grows in a clump. Older trunks die and are replaced by younger ones. Thus, the age of the clump may be several times the age of the largest trunk. An apple relative, serviceberry produces small but tasty and nutritious fruits eaten by bears, fishers and raccoons, who climb for the berries in late summer. Look for their claw marks on the relatively smooth, grey, faintly striped serviceberry bark.

10. **Cut stump.** The presence of cut stumps and logging roads reveals recent land use history. Although the year of the cut cannot be determined precisely from observation alone, the fact that some white pine stumps still retain their bark suggests it took place in the last 20 years. This is borne out by the presence of young, thickety growth around each cut stump, where the canopy was temporarily opened up to an episode of intense sunlight.

11. **Speckled alder.** Speckled alder is a common woody shrub of saturated soil, and an indicator species of wetlands. Another water-tolerant species growing here is false hellebore, with its deeply ribbed leaves. This poisonous plant is often mistaken for skunk cabbage in the spring before its stem has elongated. Also present are moisture-loving members of the grass-like sedges.

12. **Mountain ash.** An understory tree related to apple and of importance to wildlife is the mountain ash. It is unmistakable with its compound leaves with numerous small toothed leaflets, relatively smooth dark bark with lenticels (eyes), and, in autumn, clusters of orange berries. After several hard frosts the berries sweeten. Bears, fishers raccoons and other tree-climbing wildlife eat this fruit, often leaving behind claw marks on the trunk. Moose strip lengths of the apparently tasty bark.

13. **Stream erosion.** Youthful streams with steep gradients erode downward, while more mature streams erode sideways through the cutting of banks. The intertwining roots of forest trees encourage stream bank stabilization, which promotes water clarity. The valley this stream is creating has been forming since the last glacial retreat some 12,000 years ago, cutting through glacial till, the unsorted glacial debris left behind by the glacier. Finer parts of the till get carried farther by streams than larger ones. Rocks and boulders, some rounded from stream wear over millennia, may move only in severe floods.

14. **Spruce/hemlock.** These conifers, or cone-bearing trees, grow in cooler, shadier, rockier sites than broadleaf trees. Because these trees are shade-tolerant, trees of small stature can wait for decades, scarcely adding new growth each year, until, an overshadowing conifer’s death from cutting, lightning, wind or disease triggers a canopy opening and, thus, a growth spurt. Dense conifer stands shade the forest floor and their needles increase the soil’s acidity. Hence, such sites often have a sparse understory.
15. **Norway spruce**. The trees in this planted stand of conifers are Norway spruce, a non-native species. Because they shade the understory and their fallen needles add acidity to the soil, it is difficult for understory plants to grow. Much of the snow here melts or sublimates from the branches before it reaches the ground. In winters of high snowfall white-tailed deer seek out such sites, which offer mobility and shelter. At such times deer live largely on stored body fat from autumn’s apples, acorns and beechnuts. These benefits outweigh the lack of live woody browse.

16. **Black cherry**. Mature black cherries have crinkly bark, sometimes described as black potato chips. The species is susceptible to black knot, a benign fungal disease that causes irregular elongate swollen growths along some twigs and smaller branches. It also develops burls, wood outpocketings, along the trunk. Cherry burls are prized as a source material for colorful wooden bowls.

17. **Striped maple**. Striped maple, also called moosewood or goose-foot maple, is a common short-lived, brittle, understory relative of the more familiar sugar and red maples. Growing to a maximum height of 30 feet and a diameter of 8 inches, this tree has green and white striped bark that gradually browns with age. The green color of the trunk betrays the species’ ability to photosynthesize before leaf-out, thereby giving it a jump on its taller neighbors each spring. Moose scrape the bark of striped maple saplings with their lower incisors (they have no upper incisors) to get nutrients.

18. **Hayscented fern**. This fern is a wide-spread understory plant of the northern forest and forest openings. Fronds grow individually rather than in a cluster. Some imagination is needed to discern the scent of hay in a crushed frond. This species, as well as some forest trees like butternut, pracit ice allelopathy, which means they secrete chemicals that suppress the growth of other plants in the same area. Thus, a stand of hayscented fern in a forest glade can remain established for decades before it is gradually weakened by reduced sunlight and outcompeted by more shade-tolerant species.

19. **Stump sprouts**. Several tree species, like this red maple, produce stump sprouts when cut down. The distance across the ring of sprouts can give an idea of the original tree’s diameter long after the trunk has rotted away.

20. **Clones**. These smooth grey-barked American beech saplings are all one plant sharing a common set of roots. Cloning is a frequent means of vegetative reproduction in plants. All clones have exactly the same genetic make-up. Thus, they lack the variability inherent in sexually reproduced plants. Variability provides an important safeguard against environmental change. But beeches, and most other plants, reproduce sexually as well, as the presence on the forest floor of the small spiny husks of beechnuts each fall can attest.

21. **Apple orchard**. Apples were introduced to North America from Europe in colonial times. Their persistence in the forest offers testimony to earlier farm activity in the area. By contrast, hawthorns, a native species also present in the orchard, has serious thorns and fruits that look similar to apples, only far smaller. Deer and bears both fatten on the autumn apple crop. Several trunks in this small orchard show claw marks of bears unwilling to wait for the apples to fall. Lines of small holes in the bark of apples and several other trees are made by sapsuckers, woodpeckers that use their brush-tipped tongues to feed on sap and the insects adhering to it.

22. **Squirrel midden**. High on the red squirrel’s list of foods are the seeds embedded beneath the scales of pine cones. Red squirrels often cut down cones before they ripen.
fully. These cones are harvested and cached underground individually, to be retrieved and eaten later at a preferred site. Such sites soon become middens, raised areas littered with cone scales and cone cobs and penetrated by interconnecting tunnels which offer the squirrel instant protection from predators.

23. Bear sign. Sometimes bears mark their presence in the woods as they climb for beechnuts, serviceberries and apples. Other times marks are intentional. Bears claw and bite gashes in the bark of certain prominent trees, especially pines and balsam fir, along their habitual travel paths. These trees have sticky, aromatic sap. Bears often leave hairs, and doubtless scent, on the oozing trunks. Look for clawmarks nearby.

24. Beaked hazel. A common shrub of forest openings and edges, beaked hazel is the first plant in the woods to flower in the early spring. Tiny scarlet starbursts bud along its naked branches in March. In June the leaves are heart-shaped with double-toothed serrations along the edges. By July fruits have developed, paired spheres with slender cylindrical beaks extending off in opposing directions. These nuts are tasty, and the squirrels, deer, and turkeys know it, so don’t expect to find any that are fully ripe.
Appendix C – Interview Transcripts

All interviewees were asked for permission to be interviewed, and they gladly gave us that permission. We also fully explained the project to them and they agreed to have their names used and the full transcription of their interview included in this text.

Interview with Paul Bortz, Founder of SpIN and Unitarian Universalist Path Coordinator

As the founder of SpIN, Paul Bortz credits his own spiritual journey with bringing him closer to nature. His childhood was one filled with the rigors of Presbyterian Sunday School and a strong religious upbringing. However, he notes that “I drifted as a teen, it wasn’t until I was eighteen or so that I had a renewed interest in religion.” And yet even when he did not find a home within a traditional religious setting, Bortz always found a home in nature.

An avid sailor in his youth, Bortz would spend whole days on Lake Erie, embraced by “a powerful connective force… I would feel the wind, the weather and temperature, and my sailing became instinctive.” This love for the physical experience of nature stayed with him as a late teen when he began to explore the Ethical Culture society and several other intellectual and spiritual groups before heading off to the Peace Corps in India. There he explored Hinduism and began to see “a deep unity in all of the World’s religions.”

Bortz’s desire to live this type of unified spirituality stayed with him when he returned to the United States. After living in Washington, D.C. for several years, He returned to Vermont, “to connect to land and nature” and begin a life of homesteading. He grew strawberries in Vermont through his twenties, earning enough from that product to survive largely on his own. However, he “profoundly missed people” and decided to return to a more community-based lifestyle.

He then founded the Gardenway Living Center, a store that offered over 5,000 products for canning and living off the land. He worked at this business for eight years, turning it into a multi-million dollar enterprise. During the energy crisis, he left that endeavor and began a stove company, while also writing a book on how to get more energy from your fireplace. The company eventually experienced significant financial troubles, and Bortz felt himself again reaching out to nature and a sense of spirituality to guide him.

“I was looking at the book, ‘A Guide of the Perplexed’ written by a Jewish Rabbi [Maimonides],” notes Bortz, “and I realized that the Middle Way that the book was advocating was the same one found in all religious traditions and teachings. At that point I felt called to ministry, I wanted it to be my job to help others through the confusion I was facing.” Bortz chose to be ordained as a Unitarian Universalist minister because he found this group to be “the most open” and to incorporate a strong sense of justice, economic and gender equality. The combination of interfaith themes and a strong “back to the earth” focus in the Unitarian tradition motivated Bortz to deeply involved with this tradition after his ordination. Bortz took part in many social justice activities, including protesting against the Gulf War and fighting sexual discrimination in the state of Vermont, while also leading a Unitarian Parish in Rutland.

Bortz can clearly recall, however, when his interests in social justice began to coalesce around environmental causes. One fall afternoon he was offering “home hospitality” to a gentleman named Steve Kyle, the father of a Middlebury student. As an astrophysicist and lead scientist at the Sunspot New Mexico Observatory, Kyle had spent significant time studying the phenomena of ozone depletion, and had just returned from Antarctica where he was monitoring the current levels of ozone. When Bortz asked him about his research, he commented, in Bortz’s words, that “it’s not going to effect you and I, but it will our children, and I am not sure we would want to live in a world like that.”
During the course of that afternoon, Bortz came to the decision that nothing was more important than addressing the pressing environmental problems such as ozone depletion and global warming. “I began to feel that nothing was more important than global warming” explains Bortz.

As he looked around at other spiritual institutions, Bortz began to realize that none were even beginning to address the environment as a significant social concern. “The churches weren’t doing anything,” he explains, “they were too busy trying to keep up membership, for over ten years they went on, refusing to deal with real issues.” This lack of spiritual involvement in the environmental movement deeply affected Bortz, and motivated him to leave his parish to begin Spirit in Nature.

Bortz felt that a series of paths with quotes from different religious traditions could help to give those concerned with the environment a way to connect it to their spiritual conceptions of creation and earth. In Bortz’s personal spirituality, he had begun to feel increasingly that “the earth itself is God, everything people describe about God is in nature.” He felt that by offering people this visceral connection to the earth, he could more easily motivate people’s actions and education as well.

He was also motivated by the concept of “unity in diversity” best represented by the sacred circle to which all the paths in SpIN lead, and also by the “Seventh Principle” of the Unitarian Universalist tradition: the recognition of the interdependent web of the earth. As his project grew and took form, Bortz’s spiritual connection to the earth also deepened.

Bortz mused, “The central thing for me, really, is the spiritual component of Body as Earth, if you are trashing your Body, you are trashing the earth.” He explained that he went through a long process of becoming aware of how to connect and learn from the earth, including his experiences with walking meditation. “Usually when I do walking meditation, I have a theme and then do deep breathing. As I walk slowly and journal, I find that my body becomes grounded into the earth, to the point that I am earth.” In the last few years, Bortz has begun to share his knowledge of walking meditation with others through workshops on taking care of yourself using walking meditation as a guide.

In addition to walking meditation, Bortz feels that “grounding into” our body is deeply important to all aspects of our lives. He notes that our culture does not discuss the need for this type of connection, especially though sensual experiences like lovemaking. He further explains that “young people can bowl forward, but as you get older, your conviction has to move from your head to you heart.”

For Bortz, this transition took place slowly over the course of several years, spanning the opening of the SpIN center. During this time, he was instrumental in creating the “Faith and Global Warming Action Coalition” in the Middlebury area, and began changing his lifestyle to become more energy efficient. Such changes included buying a Honda Insight, a hybrid car, and re-insulating his home. Between those two changes “we have saved 30% in energy costs, and cut our emissions by half, between our car and our house” Bortz explains, “it is these slow actions that help us to really test - to see if we can drop out of our heads for a moment, to be able to act on our heart, to be able to hear the questions and concerns of others who don’t want to adopt a different lifestyle and not be bothered.” Even as Bortz found the personal motivation to move in this direction, he noted that “you can’t teach someone to move from their head to their heart, I don’t know how to show them a certain way to make it happen.”

For Bortz, the motivation for these changes came in part from reading the writings of Bill McKibben, a well-known environmental journalist, as well as taking part in the series of discussion groups offered by the Vermont Earth Institute. “You know, if you go though one of those discussion groups, your life will be changed,” Bortz explained, “the group becomes a community. And you know what- we now have eight hybrid cars in Middlebury.”
Bortz is also happy to report that the influence of SpIN is by no means limited to those of strong religious convictions. “I would say that 1/3 to 1/2 of all SpIN members are secularists. They get their spiritual needs answered by being outdoors. We really wanted the path center to be a place for those without spiritual traditions as well.” The other important piece of the path center for Bortz is its emphasis on walking, rather than hiking, the paths. “For me, this slowing down and walking is a way to make the connection to place physical—it is very important that individuals find ways to connect to place,” Bortz explained. Bortz’s firm belief that a “connection to place” can be healing is not limited to his work with Spirit in Nature. As a private counselor, he always asks his clients how grounded they are in nature: “I have come to realize the importance of the mind-body-earth connection… I feel like no one talks about this, but it is integral to our human psyche.”

Bortz is also happy to note that during the five years since Spirit in Nature began, religious traditions have also started more environmentally focused programs. “Especially at the local level, the Unitarian Church has been doing positive things, I would say that fifteen to twenty percent of SpIN members are Unitarian” Bortz notes, “but we still don’t have an environmental department at the national level.” Although Bortz is frustrated about the slow progress of institutional religious response to environmental problems, he speaks excitedly about the future of SpIN. “We are working to pay more attention to members, to really form a community,” he explains, “as a small community, we can be leaders, take interactive, be more action oriented, but we can’t do it all.”

He is happy to report that four other SpIN centers have opened in New England, and he is excited to invite more potential groups to come visit and learn how to start their own SpIN in their community. It is Bortz’s motto of thinking globally while acting locally that has made Spirit in Nature a reality. He feels that although we need to stretch ourselves to think of global concerns, “we can’t forget to pay attention to home, to take care of each other in our own community.” Bortz is able to meld the international with the local by offering solutions to make his community more energy efficient. These include a pedestrian friendly walkways, bike paths, and more efficient use of motor vehicles. In addition to working for community efficiency, Bortz also serves on the board of the Middlebury Area Clergy, giving SpIN recognition as a formal spiritual institution.

Bortz is aware that although much has been accomplished with SpIN to this point, much remains to be done. “I know I need to take the time to be grounded, to take care of myself, know what I need to do” he muses, “so many people don’t take the time to sit in the woods or to work on any type of spiritual awareness. Now more than ever we need to be connected to cycles, to seasons, the years, even the moons. SpIN gives people an opportunity to connect, to slow down. Oftentimes it is in opposition to culture, and that is what makes it so powerful, that is what we are trying to do.”
Interview with Nirmal Kameth, Hindu Path Coordinator

Nirmal Kameth comes from a very different background than many of the other Spirit in Nature activists. She explains, “I was born a Hindu, so I have practiced it [Hinduism] all my life. Growing up in India we prayed every day as a family, we have altars in our homes so we don’t need to go to temples if we don’t want to that day. We also visited a lot of temples in South India.” She goes on to note, “There are a lot of ancient ones to various gods and goddesses. Also, since India is a very spiritual country there is a something holy every day of the month, where you can fast, worship, sing, or do penance. When we came to the United States we kind of slackened off a little, then we found our spiritual teacher in India and we have been involved for 24 years.”

Kameth describes the Hinduism she practices as “an individual religion, it is actually a way of life- it can permeate your entire day, any thing and everything that you do during the day can be dedicated to your religion. It is hard for me, say if I do things just like other Hindus or not [because it is so individual]. Kameth is eager to point out that for her, religion consists of ordinary daily practices that keep her grounded. For example, she explains, “For me if I am walking in the morning I do japa (reciting a mantra) to keep my mind occupied. After September 11, I began saying a mantra so all humankind will be happy. I listen to a lot of classical music during the day and I sing devotional songs when I am cooking or doing other so-called mundane duties. We say prayers with our family every day and also before every meal. We get together at our home every Friday for singing, meditation, and reading and we celebrate the holy days.”

Due in large part to the individual and integral nature of Kameth’s practice of Hinduism, she feels very close to the natural world. She explains, “It [nature] fits in very well with my faith. Divinity and nature are two sides of the same coin; in fact if we take care of nature, we can reach divinity. Kameth explains that within the Hindu tradition, divinity is explained in two aspects, masculine and feminine. Nature is seen as the female aspect. This concept of divinity allows Kameth “to be close to nature and close to God at the same time.” She goes on to note, “From time immemorial, Hindus have worshipped and revered all the elements and planets. She knows that this ethic is present in all of Hinduism, however she comments, “I am not aware of the stance of Hinduism as a whole [in relation to nature]”.

Kameth got involved with SpIN at the prompting of a friend: “My friend who lives in Middlebury asked me one day if I knew someone who is Hindu to help with SpIN and I said I would gladly be involved. I got together some of my Hindu friends and chalked out the path and then cleared it, and got the signs ready, all with the inspiring help of Paul. We enjoyed every minute of it.”

Although Kameth and others in the local Hindu community enjoyed the process of SpIN, she is finding similar difficulties in attracting people to the project. “I have been talking about it in the Hindu community, and trying to get people to clean the path in spring and fall. It is truly a great way to integrate divinity and nature. However, I am not sure we have done much at SpIN lately, unfortunately. I would like to see more Hindus visiting the paths; I would like our spiritual center to have a Friday meeting there, to get the vibes of the place.”

For Kameth, it is not simply the physical surroundings, but rather the combination of the physical and the spiritual that makes the place special for her:

I must say that the quotes are very deep and sages of thousands of years ago had such a deep understanding of nature and divinity. There is a deep sense of quiet we experience in nature. When our mind is quiet, we can experience God in that silence and being in nature is perfect. Also, it makes us think of nature as something to not be destroyed, so humans can live peacefully. We can’t conquer nature but we can be friends with nature. If we destroy nature, we destroy ourselves in the long run.
Interview With Dan Shea, Buddhist Path Coordinator

Dan Shea became involved with the Buddhist faith later in his life, after struggling through a childhood of unsatisfactory religious practices. “I grew up Catholic, was an altar boy, had a Catholic education and at one time in my life I considered being a priest.” He was moved however, by his experiences as a young soldier, at a time when his Christian faith could not fill the longing and pain in his heart: “I experienced Buddhism in 1966, by observing the monks in Vietnam. There was an old monastery on top of a mountain near my base camp in Phan Rang. I was quite curious about this religion because the practitioners seemed happy and at ease, even though they were in the midst of a war all around them.”

“I was spiritually bankrupt after the war, and left my religion behind. In 1970 I took up Transcendental Meditation and practiced right up until I experienced Vipasanna (Insight Meditation) at a three-day retreat in Barre, MA in 1996. It was so much more powerful than TM. But even with this powerful meditation technique I had no place nearby to practice with others. So I was still in search of a Buddhist sect with a place to practice and learn.”

After his experiences in Vietnam, Shea knew that Buddhism could offer him the spiritual home he had been seeking. “In 1998, a friend of mine on the West Coast told me about his Buddhist organization. I was still seeking at the time. Following up on his referral, I visited Soka Gakkai International in Boston and interviewed some of the members there. I chanted for a while and left to think it over. It was an easy decision to practice with this sect.” Shea explained that Soka Gakkai International-USA is an “American Buddhist movement that promotes happiness for oneself and others through activities in peace, culture and education. The practice is based on the philosophy of the Nicherin School of Mahayana Buddhism.”

Now Shea is a devoted Buddhist, practicing daily and finding spiritual sustenance in a variety of practices:

At home I have my own altar, consisting of a Butsadan (a place to house the object I chant to, called a Gohonzon), and offerings such as candles, incense, a fruit, evergreens, and fresh water. A Gohonzon (or mandala) is the fundamental object of devotion for Nicherin Daishonin Buddhism. Daishonin is a honorific title that means ‘great sage’ or ‘teacher.’ Basically a Gohonzon is a scroll that was inscribed by Nicherin in 1253 for the observation of one’s mind. We chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo as a universal practice of attaining enlightenment. The sound is vibrational and resonates beautifully when many people chant together. When I chant this mystic law, I attune myself to the perfect rhythm of the universe.

Shea points out that “as a Nicherin Buddhist, I believe that Buddha-nature exists in all beings and is characterized by the qualities of wisdom, courage, compassion and life force. Enlightenment is not a mystical or transcendental state. Rather, it is a state in which one finds fulfillment in one's daily activities, and comes to understand one's purpose in being alive.” Shea’s voice grows softer as he explains:

Each morning and evening I recite Gongyo, two chapters from the Buddhist Liturgy of the Lotus Sutra in phonetic Japanese, then I chant for 15 minutes. When I recite the Lotus Sutra it helps to awaken me to the universal truth that a change in our heart or attitude towards our environment can transform anything. We gather in each others home three times per month to pray together, learn, teach, and dialogue. We have a large book similar to a Bible.
called the Gosho, which is a book of teachings written by Nicherin Daishonin. There are many opportunities to learn about Buddhism via lectures, magazines, newspapers and plenty of books. At our culture center, we gather with about seven hundred people once a month to chant together for Kosen-riho, a prayer for peace throughout the world and happiness for all humanity. Occasionally we gather regionally to celebrate with culture festivals.

Shea notes that while all people within his sect practice similarly, “American Buddhism can be quite varied in practice. I know we differ from Zen and Vipasanna and Tibetan. Silent meditation versus chanting daimoku is totally opposite in style, as one type is inward, while the other is outward for oneself and others’ enlightenment. I think there are differences because the philosophies are different, one is Mahayana and the other Hinayana [Theravada]. The overlap is the ideal of the Bodhisattva, which is a very compassionate notion.”

As he has grown in his Buddhist faith, Shea has found his relationship to nature deepening as well. “Nature and the environment are very important in our Buddhism. We have a concept called Dependent Origination [or “dependent co-arising”] that teaches all life is interrelated, and that nothing exists in isolation, independent of other life. The image of two bundles of reeds [balanced on each other] is used to demonstrate this meaning. Neither bundle can remain standing without the other, if one bundle is removed the other will fall. When we realize the myriad interconnect ions, which link us all to all other life, we realize our existence only becomes meaningful through interaction with, and in relation to others.” For Shea, the teachings of his religion mandate his care and protection for the natural world.

“I’ve always been in relationship with nature,” Shea notes, “but prior to becoming a Buddhist it was quite superficial. Now it is quite different. Due to my practice, it seems I commune with nature on a spiritual level, and try hard not to just be a taker of resources from our earth.” She also believes strongly that, “Buddhists everywhere want the environment to remain pure and protected. Our organization has taken steps to educate people on the environment in many parts of the world. For example, we advocate on issues of climate change in Brazil. We support the environment with lots of meetings and dialogue concerning the Earth Charter [a declaration of fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful global society in the twenty-first century]. SGI has created an exhibition on the environment. The ‘Ecology and Humanity’ exhibit travels around the country visually showing the devastation that's going on around the world. The education arm of SGI is the Boston Research Center in Cambridge. They put together a book called ‘Buddhist Perspectives on the Earth Charter’. In some colleges around the country it serves as a text on the Earth Charter.”

As an extension of his faith, Shea has greatly enjoyed his involvement with SpIN:

In the summer of 1999, I happened upon the first temporary SpIN sign. It was placed on a piece of property I was considering buying, just down the road from SpIN's path center. I followed the sign to see what SpIN was about because my curiosity had peaked. When I walked the Buddhist path and sat down at the end of the extension, I felt like this space was special. It made me very happy to discover SpIN this way. Once I found the sacred circle, I knew it was a spiritual place of great significance. Rev. Paul Bortz asked me to bring an SGI group up for a service after I contacted him about subscribing to SpIN's newsletter. Apparently at the time there were not very many Buddhists to help with the paths and care for them. After I walked the same path again in the early spring of
2000, I called him back with a date to have a service in August. The group had such a wonderful experience at SpIN that we were convinced Spirit in Nature should be supported from Massachusetts. Following our August visit, Paul asked me if I'd try to take the SpIN concept to Massachusetts. At first I was hesitant, but after his workshop explained how to make it happen, ten interfaith volunteers took on the project. On December 2, 2001 it will be a full year that our group has been working on the SpIN project.

For Shea, being involved with SpIN has been “quite a ride…for a few months in our beginnings our group struggled with how to find land in a suburban setting. Rather than get stressed about it we brainstormed together and thought, hey, we can make SpIN portable, and take it to beautiful conserved places around Massachusetts. This meant we could have the fun of walking paths, putting up nature quotes, have nature dialogue in a sacred circle and learn as we go. This concept really motivated our group because we were putting our ideas into action well ahead of schedule. Once we began to practice a moveable form of SpIN the membership grew a little each time we had an event. All in all it's been very engaging work, rewarding and well worth the effort. The diversity of our group is what makes it interesting. I've learned so much about other religions and can clearly see the overlap of beliefs in everyone's faith.”

Shea is also happy to report that the wider Buddhist community has made use of SpIN. “In October of 2000 I met with SGI's board. Our group’s proposal asked for support to help make SpIN prosper in Massachusetts. It took a while to get an answer but headquarters in LA agreed to let the New England Culture Center support our efforts. The SpIN Pathways group membership is about thirty percent Buddhists right now. SGI likes the idea of Spirit in Nature and feels good about condoning an activity that promotes interfaith dialogue.”

On a more personal level, Shea has also connected deeply to the physical setting of SpIN:

My first impression of the Buddhist path was spiritual. I sat on the bench and looked out at a vista of wild flowers, grasses, ferns, and tall trees. It was real quiet and no one else was on the paths. I decided to chant for ten minutes to give thanks for finding this space. I just sat there afterwards quietly listening. Then it seemed nature filled in the blanks for my senses to enjoy. It's difficult to describe it in words. I have re-visited the same area to chant and do Gongyo during different seasons, and times of the day. I've been observing the changes of the environment there closely, and still enjoy the experience of peacefulness and tranquility this special place offers. I am honored to have two quotes from my religion [or sect] placed on the Buddhist path.

From all his time in nature and working on the SpIN project, Shea comments, “the biggest thing that has happened to me is that Spirit in Nature has transformed me into an activist. Acting on behalf of the environment and showing people the benefits associated with spiritual path walking is very satisfying. I write so much correspondence by E-mail to communicate about SpIN, that my interest in writing has grown over the months. I've always loved nature photography, and since I've walked many of the SpIN paths I've learned what it means to see nature at the spirit level. This combination of events has actually inspired me to begin training for a new career as a freelance writer and photographer. I don't know if you can get there from here at middle age, but I'm committed to being there seven years from now…SpIN has presented me with many rare
gifts for a simple offering of time, resources, and energy. I owe Spirit in Nature a debt of gratitude.”

Shea remains excited about the possibilities of SpIN to touch the wider community:

I think that SpIN has a lot to teach, because the SpIN concept acknowledges all religions, so I think anyone that walks on their religion's path, will also be drawn to walk other faith paths at some point. In doing so, this simple act of respect for other religions will begin to break down any differences that present obstacles for understanding. Once this happens, a foundation for dialogue opens up a whole universe of interfaith possibilities. SpIN teaches tolerance, and brings people together in a pure, powerful and positive way. I expect SpIN will advance its message of environmental hope year to year and will bring about change in the individual first, then ripple outward to neighborhoods, communities, and from state to state over time. Nature can teach us many lessons if we just show up to listen and observe. Walking in the woods enhances one's state of mind just as meditation and prayer does. The realm of nature is one of my realities. My Buddhist practice is the mystic law defining this reality for me. I don't see a big difference in the lessons, because the source of the lessons are the same entity.
Interview with David Edleson, Jewish Path Coordinator

When asked about his childhood, Edleson began by noting, “Both my parents are Jewish, though my mother was raised in a Baptist home. They raised all their children as Unitarians, as they did not embrace sectarianism. We did celebrate Jewish holidays occasionally, and went to synagogue in very Reform southern temples. I became more connected to Judaism after a series of pretty horrific anti-Semitic incidents made me want to know why these people hated me. This led me to study Judaism and eventually become a rabbi.”

After growing up and attempting to form a personal practice, Edleson notes, “My everyday practice is no longer particularly Jewish. I meditate. Most Jews that I know do not have a daily practice. More traditional Jews do pray three times a day, but more secular Jews do not. My relationship to Nature very much challenges my Jewishness. In fact, I have moved more toward earth-based religious practices.”

In commenting on the Biblical roots of the Jewish tradition, Edleson articulated a cautious approach:

“I find that the Biblical view of a creator who gives humans control of the earth to be damaging, untrue, and awfully anthropocentric. That being said, there are absolutely breathtaking Psalms and books in the Bible, like the Song of Songs, that I love and easily express my sense of the divinity of nature. I believe that my love of nature is one of the core areas of my spiritual and religious life. To be sure, my love of nature pulls me toward a religious life and this pulled me toward Judaism, as it was my heritage. For me, when I am in the land of Israel, praying in Hebrew out in the ‘holy land’ that is where my Jewishness and my love of nature come together in ritual or transcendent experiences of the divine. The legalism and rationalism of Judaism [however] do not inform my relationship to nature.

Although Edleson feels that there are several problematic aspects of Judaism’s construction of the natural world, he also notes:

“I believe that Judaism has a fairly strong environmental ethic. Although the world is not itself divine, nor is it evil, Judaism embraces this body, and this earth as holy and as God’s creation and gift to us. There is not the sense that this is some evil trial, or that the material world is of the devil. We live our lives in this material world and since it is the only world of which we are sure, we had best be good stewards and live moral lives. Judaism, despite the hold [by some streams] to the idea of a messianic redemption, is not particularly apocalyptic.

Edleson goes on to explain that: “Growing up in the South surrounded by Christians who denounced this world, I did strongly feel blessed to be raised Jewish and Unitarian with a love and appreciation of the earth. Judaism is at its roots a nature-based religion. The pilgrimage holidays of Sukkot, Pesach, and Shavout are each an agricultural holiday that keep Jews connected to the natural agricultural cycle of Israel. Later mystic holidays, such a TuBeShavat only reinforced this.” In is clear that because of his Jewish upbringing, Edleson was able to maintain a strong connection to the natural world throughout his youth.
He explains that in the recent past, “With the growth of Zionism and the connection to the land of Israel, the nature-connected aspects of the holidays have been reinvigorated. On kibbutzim in Israel, the Jewish holidays have indeed become nature holidays. More orthodox movements maintain a distance from that stance. Reform Judaism, which focuses on social justice, has fully embraced environmentalism as part of Tikkun Olam, ‘repairing the world’, that is each person’s responsibility.” Just as many Christian denominations have sought to embrace an environmental ethic, so too have many Jews incorporated natural practices into their holidays and rituals.

In addition to holiday practices, Edleson notes, “There are clear Jewish laws about waging war in a way that does not destroy the environment. For example, when laying siege to a city, you can’t choke off the streams that feed trees. There is also a strong connection between agricultural and the divine responsibility to the poor, that they can glean the corners of the field. Also, first fruits are to be offered to God, not eaten, as a sign of their holiness. In general, Judaism is of this world, believes that we are responsible through our moral actions for being good stewards of the earth. That ethic is growing strongly in many streams of Judaism.”

As Edleson grew to understand Judaism as a tradition moving closer to nature and his own sense of spirituality, he became interested in working with the Jewish path at Spirit in Nature. He comments, “I was asked to contribute to the Jewish piece. I agreed to help but only if I could get others to do it with me. When that failed to materialize, I backed out.” Due to his own prior commitments, he knows that he could not create the Jewish path by himself. However, he noted, “I believe having an interfaith space to worship in nature would benefit any religious community. I deeply wish there would be a Jewish path.”

Part of Edleson’s own connection to nature and natural rituals has occurred because of his experiences at SpIN. He spoke of “lovely walks and meditation at SpIN on various paths.” In addition, he explained:

In nature, I gain a sense of the ‘bigger picture’ and what really matters. I also find humility and a sense that the divine is not an intellectual pursuit. Mythos is not Logos. I do find nature’s lessons different than Judaism’s, though there are some clear similarities. Judaism, as a historical religion, sees God working through history, but also celebrates the cycles of the seasons with its yearly holy days. Nature teaches the ‘myth of eternal return’ and also that death is an intimate part of the living process. Judaism embraces these beliefs as well.
Interview With Catherine Nichols, Christian Path Coordinator and Episcopal Priest

Catherine Nichols grew up surrounded both by the natural world and a strong religious faith. “My father was a priest in the Episcopal Church, and I grew up hiking in the White Mountains. I lived in New York during my childhood, but we went to the AMC huts in New Hampshire and Maine every summer. I think I complained all through those first hiking trips, but it taught me to love creation, and it became an important part of my life.” The Church remained an integral part of Nichols’ life through Junior High School, and less so in High School, although she continued to sing in the Choir even through College. “I feel like sacred music has been a big part of my faith journey” Nichols explains, “it allowed me to grow unconsciously in faith just by being involved in the music.” Nichols took flute lessons with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and has always been somehow involved with playing.

However, although music remained a tie to religion, during her college years at Radcliffe, Nichols strayed somewhat from both nature and the church: “I was busy meeting different people, learning about different people’s family lives. I stayed in touch with big faith questions, and I loved to go and hear the big Preachers that would come to Harvard. I also bicycled and canoed a little, and nature remained important although I didn’t spend as much time outside.”

For a few years after college, Nichols experimented with Quakerism. “I was drawn to the sacrament of silence, that type of prayer seemed like listening to God through people and nature. I learned about listening from the Quakers.” During this period of experimenting with silence and spirituality, Nichols was also intimately connected with sound, as she was in graduate school for music. “I was attending a Quaker meeting in Cambridge, and I found it to be too cerebral, there was no sense of community. Also, I began to miss the sacraments, so I returned to the Episcopal Church.”

After returning the faith of her youth, Nichols underwent another spiritual awakening when in her mid-thirties, and decided to return to seminary school at age thirty-five. “I had been interested all along, and when women were allowed to become ordained in 1976, I decided to go. It was relatively easy for my family, because I could attend Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, right next to where we lived in Belmont. Seminary really allowed me to explore and grapple with faith’s meaning.” After becoming ordained in 1983, Nichols moved to Houston, Texas with her husband and children to assume the role of Canon Pastor at a large cathedral. “Houston was really hard nature-wise” Nichols recalls, “it was a big sprawly city and it was very hot. I was there eight years, and each year it became tougher and tougher. I missed the seasons and the changes of New England.”

Although the natural world was not accessible to Nichols in Houston, she nonetheless enjoyed her work as Canon Pastor. “At both the parishes I worked at there was a very high learning curve. I was in a suburban congregation first, and then in the inner city. Both places I was the first woman, and really on the cutting edge.” As a whole, Nichols’ experiences in Houston allowed her to grow within her faith, but she still felt acutely her lack of the connection to nature.

In 1991 she moved to Vermont, and became the first woman rector of the Episcopalian Church in Middlebury. “It was hard because people had to adjust,” she notes. However, Nichols’ return to New England had offered her a renewed relationship to the natural world:

Nature is so integral (to my faith) it is even hard to talk about. Western Culture as a whole is so out of touch with nature. I can’t live that way. For example, this morning I spent two and a half hours outside, getting ready for winter, transplanting beds, loading wood. I need this time in nature. If I don’t get outside I get tenser and ungrounded, and caught up in the hard parts of my work. I like
to be alone to sit by the river near our house, or garden, or rake, if not I get out of touch. Honestly, this need has nothing to do with being Episcopalian and everything to do with being a person of faith. The sense of creation you find in Genesis and Judaism, the idea that God created it all. As science has become more advanced, I have had a stronger belief in God, not as a personal being, but as a powerful creative force. Creation is inherent in everything that we do.

For Nichols, it has become a kind of mission to bring this awareness and love for creation into her ministry. “I noticed that the Episcopalians were out of touch with creation, and I was happy that the new prayer book affirms creation more often. One of the four liturgies for the Eucharist (communion) now used contemporary language to incorporate nature. I also look to the Psalms and the Canticles (some by St. Francis) to affirm creation.” Nichols understands that retaining a sense of wonder is often difficult in our modern world. “Primal people understood we are just a part of a wider whole. I feel like nature was always a natural part of life until we became civilized.”

One of the problems with her tradition, Nichols explains, is that during its history it has always been extremely focused on reason and “left-brain” activities. She explains that she tries to counteract this trend by adding “the capacity to love and the gift of tears and laughter” to the end of her Eucharistic prayer. “I feel like there needs to be a better balance of ying and yang, left and right brain. The Episcopalian church is made up of readers, we have the Book of Common Prayer in addition to the Bible, and it is a great resource, but it is very left-brain. I try to balance this through music, which opens people creatively.”

Nichols credits the beautiful scenery in Vermont with helping to connect people to the natural world. “Many more people care [more] about nature here, than in suburban Boston or Houston. Most people come here because the out-of-doors is important to them.” However, even with a greater respect for nature, Nichols doesn’t see many people in her congregation becoming involved with environmental issues. “We don’t have many activists, and only a few members of SpIN. I don’t think any of the institutional churches have many members.” Nichols did note, however, that seven Episcopalians have gone to the solstice services, and about six members of her parish, St. Stevens, have been active within SpIN:

That is still a small percentage out of a church with three hundred members. There are lots of reasons why people don’t get involved. Some people walk the paths but aren’t members; in families with working parents they are just too busy.

Even as she and others try to simplify their lives, Nichols bemoans the fact that “our culture is frenetic. For some of us, the last thing we need is another organizational meeting or event to come to.”

Nichols herself first became involved with SpIN by default because her second husband, Paul Bortz, was the founder. “At the beginning it was really Paul’s and my dream. It was an empty slate when we started, and we designed it over a period of time. Paul left the ministry because all your energy goes into maintaining the institution, so there is not enough time to do other things.” Amazingly, Nichols has found the time to continue to support SpIN while maintaining her congregation. She has started campaigns at her church to simplify Christmas, and held workshops to advocate for a more balanced lifestyle.

Unfortunately, not all Christians see her work in a favorable light. “Some Christians get offended because their God is in a smaller box that mine,” she notes. For her, the whole world contains God, and the activities she has engaged in with SpIN,
walking the paths and attending events, “have greatly enriched my spiritual life. Many people have given a lot to the idea. The soup and bread series, the worship services and the yellow bike program with the college have all been wonderful.” In addition, Nichols feels that the lifestyle changes adopted by her and Bortz have begun to prompt community-wide action. “Sixty-five people have driven our hybrid car, and my sister just bought one. It feels good to be a part of a little organization that is thinking about the environmental crisis and making choices informed by faith.”
Interview with Carol and Reggie Spooner, Christian Path Coordinators

Carol and Reggie Spooner have devoted their retirement years to social involvement and activism, both within their church and through the Spirit in Nature paths. Having married later in life, at the Spirit in Nature paths themselves, they are deeply connected to both the sentiment behind the paths and the place itself. Some of this connection stems from the strong religious foundation Carol received as a child. “My parents were Congregationalists,” Carol explains, “When I was younger we were non-denominational, basically just a part of the larger Protestant tradition.” Carol grew up within this church and then joined a Methodist church when she married her first husband.

Conversely, it has not been until his adulthood that Reggie got involved with the church. “My father was a farmer,” Reggie explains, “I didn’t go to church until fourth grade. Then my mother made me go. I guess I had a little bit of religion when I was in the (military) service, but basically I had only the values of my grandparents to guide me.” Both Reggie’s grandparents were full-fledged Vermonters and instilled in Reggie an ethic of “waste not, want not”:

> We never wasted or harmed anything, especially the animals that were on the farm. I worked on the farm from a very young age, and it taught me that everyone had a function, there was always a job, and no time was wasted. We had few things that we couldn’t waste. We cherished what we had. When you are in the economic place of a poor family, you survive by not wanting too much.

Although Carol’s family was not in a similar situation growing up, she learned to question rampant materialism and the inequalities of American culture. “I have always challenged the status quo,” she explains, “When I lived in New Jersey (with my first husband) I worked on inner-city housing and racial issues. I served on the mission board of our church as well.” Clearly, the ethic of helping and service has stayed with Carol as she has gotten older. “I think I became an environmentalist as an extension of my civil rights experiences,” she muses. “My relationship to nature is stronger in Vermont, where I used to live in New Jersey you couldn’t even see the sunset.” Carol goes on, “I also think that marrying Reggie has made me a lot more aware of the land, the trees, the animals, even the birds in my garden. I feel like my surroundings in Vermont have pushed me along.”

Reggie, as well, continues to hold dear the values he got from his grandparents, and has now translated them into action within the Weybridge Church, of which he and Carol are a part. “I have served as the Deacon of the church,” he explains, “that means I deal with spiritual issues of the church.” As Carol and Reggie have strong connections to both the natural world and their small-town church, it makes sense that they became involved with the Spirit in Nature project. Carol explains, “Paul asked us to go to a meeting with some of his long time friends to plan for SpIN. We agreed to be the representatives from the Weybridge church.”

In addition to their own sense of social involvement, Carol and Reggie liked the emphasis on connecting their faith to the environment. “You didn’t hear about it [the environment] in the church, you don’t hear it preached” Carol notes. “I think it is in part because within Christian theology, Jesus was here for such a short time, and he was more concerned and interested in human beings.” Although Carol sees this as the dominant interpretation of scripture, it does not keep her from “trying to bring her congregation a greater awareness of how important it is to connect their faith to actions for the earth.”

“I do think that some of the younger ministers will be blending earth into sermons,” Carol notes. She continues:
A lot of other Christian groups like the Quakers and the Unitarians, have a larger environmental consciousness. I think some of the other groups, like the Unitarians, are more connected to world issues at large. I have always tried to be involved in these issues as well. I worked with housing, the poor, civil rights, and now the environment. Right now, the environment seems like the most important.

“I think that part of my awareness stems from living in a college town,” Carol goes on, “Certain people are very aware of the changes we have to make, like recycling. The state we are living in is more aware than others. For instance, our town has a green-up day, many other towns don’t do things like that.” Reggie explains that with his farming background, his biggest concern is conservation on agricultural land. “We need to focus on grazing properly,” he explains, “we need to use good tree management, and to be more conscious of our impact. For instance, dairy run-off is a big issue here. We need people to be educated.”

Carol adds that education is not limited to direct conservation issues, but also to the larger cultural forces that encourage us to consume. “Our church has a one-hundred dollar Christmas initiative, trying to teach people the value of non-materialism. But not everyone embraces it. You just have to do the best you can with like-minded people, and hope that that progress is made.” Carol turns to Reggie as she goes on, “my son is very consumerist, but last time he came, he wanted to see SpIN, and when we left, he said he wanted to see it in every season. The same with my daughter, she goes to Ames to shop every time she comes to visit, but I still take her to SpIN. I take my granddaughter too, she is the most environmentally minded of my family.”

Carol ponders for a moment on why her religious family isn’t more environmentally oriented, confessing that there is not much that she has found in the Bible about the environment:

You can look at the Old Testament, I guess, and the Psalms about nature. It is also just that Christianity and culture are so intertwined. I picked the Christian quotes, trying to find something hopeful in all the grimness. We can’t let people lose hope. I have found that about ten people will come to the Christian services at SpIN. Now we are going to have ecumenical services. It is tough because there is an individual in every church and that’s about it. People have so many things to do and no time. However, although the group may be small, people who seek out SpIN, seem to find it helpful, it seems to be spreading slowly, expanding. It works in one way because people don’t think about what church they belong to, it is very uniting.
Interview With Ann Taylor, Quaker Path Coordinator

“I have always been a Quaker in my heart” begins Ann Taylor, as a slow smile begins to spread across her face. “My grandmother was a Quaker, and although I grew up Presbyterian and Congregational, I always felt very connected to my grandmother.” As she grew older, Ann realized that she was drawn to charismatic individuals who could speak clearly about faith. In college, she attended the Episcopal church, and later, at Union Theological Seminary, she loved listening to the sermons of Paul Tillich and Ronald Nieber. During this time she also did field work in Harlem with inner city Hispanic children. “At that time, at Seminary, they described my theology as neo-orthodoxy, but really I came to believe it was more Unitarian Universalist” Ann explains.

After college, Taylor muses that she became “the perfect Methodist Minster’s wife.” While her husband was working as the Chaplain at the Tilton School, Ann received an offer to serve as the Unitarian Education director in Concord, New Hampshire. She engaged in that work for several years until her family became involved in the Peace Corps in the 1960’s.

“I had kids that were six and eleven, and we ended up in Peru.” Her eyes turn away as she remembers: “I was working in bilingual education, teaching English through Folk dance and Music. We started a Peruvian Dance exchange, it was amazing.” However, the pleasant times were not meant to last. “Peru had a military dictator, and the situation was really challenging for a time, finally we were forced to return to the United States.”

After the move back to the U.S., Taylor and her husband separated. She decided to pursue a master’s degree in Art and Teaching at Lesley College, and did a lot of work with education and Sufi Dance. She then served again as Educational Director for two Unitarian Universalist Parishes, this time in Summit, New Jersey and Lincoln, Massachusetts. While Ann was in Lincoln her father died and she was still feeling the effects of her recent divorce. “I was really going through a hard time, I even contemplated suicide at one point” she sighs, “but it was also during that hard time that I became Buddhist. I went to a sitting in Cambridge, and I felt the relief I had been searching for from my pain, embedded in the stillness.”

After her conversion to Buddhist belief, Taylor visited many other spiritual communities, including Green Gulch (Buddhist) in California, and Findhorn (Celtic / Christian) in Scotland. When she returned to Vermont, she settled into a flexible identity as a Buddhist/Quaker, again feeling the roots of her Grandmother’s tradition. “I took me over a year to find the Quakers in Vermont, I went searching for a meeting, in the interim I went to the Unitarian Church, as I had always been comfortable there and I think a big cross-over exists between the Unitarians and other faiths.” When Taylor finally found the Quaker service, she knew she had found her home. “What is most important to me is the silence, the silent meditation,” she explains, “for me a Unitarian service is too verbal. I love the idea of inner light, for me it is a really helpful concept. I think my greatest teachers are the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh.”

For Taylor, however, it is not merely reading the words of these spiritual leaders that fulfill her. Rather she “goes out into nature to renew my spirit. I feel that nature also has an inner light, we feel loved when we go out into nature. For me the connection with nature is like family.” Taylor sighs again, looking away again for a moment. “On September 11, (2001) I couldn’t reach my family, so I went out into nature. The trees, the water sustained me. I guess, as a whole, nature for me is a process of finding. In my house, I have a Buddhist statue of Quan-Yin, an important female deity. I sit in front of her and meditate, and when I am through I look past her, to the flower beyond, and beyond that the birds in my feeder. Through experiences like these I strive to be constantly aware and grateful for the beautiful universe.”

Taylor was in a damaging car accident five years ago, and has lost much of her mobility, but is still able to be grateful for the gifts the accident taught her:

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It was really the gift of being stopped. To see, to be quiet, to experience the beauty in the world. I feel that the natural world offers the same gifts, to be still and experience. When I draw pictures of flowers, I try to get into the center of the blossom. For me it is a metaphor of trying to get into the center where the light is.

Just as Taylor is drawn to the doctrinal inner light of the Quakers, she is eager to find that same light in the natural world around her.

To deepen her experience of both nature and spirituality, Taylor engages in several practices, including chanting and meditation. She has found that “things tend to come intuitively if I am centered. We all get wisdom, and it is not necessarily cognitive.” Several visceral experiences in nature help Taylor to feel so strongly about her own intuition. “Once I was hiking in Robert Frost woods and the trees called out to me. ‘Come and hug me,’ it said’ I felt the first tree and it was non-responsive, and the second was responsive. I felt the tree giving me energy, and at first I felt that I was just receiving without giving back, but then I realized that in returning the embrace I was making the experience reciprocal.”

Before her accident, Taylor was also an avid cross-country skier. “I once lived in Aspen Vista, outside of Santa Fe, she explains, “When I was about Santa Fe, skiing, I felt often that my life, my experience was a gift from heaven.” Here Taylor hesitates, as her eyes fill:

It was as if, as if heaven was embedded in nature, and we all have the capacity to see it, but we are so busy, too busy. We are off-center; so busy trying to be affluent. There is something more important, but our adolescent culture can’t see what is right in front of them. Sometimes I want to call people back to nature. I have often thought of leaving this culture, but it is the world now that is having this problem; TV, McDonalds, everyone is looking for nurturing and doesn’t know where to find it. People fill their longing with a materialistic urge.

Taylor connects the sadness she feels about the rampant world material with her activities for SpIN. “My commitment is to help people to see, and that is why my spiritual journey lead me to SpIN. A friend of Paul Bortz invited me and I offered to be the Quaker representative. The process included meeting with the Quakers to gather and choose quotes to be placed on the paths and inviting people to be part of the physical work of building the paths themselves. I didn’t feel like there was a whole lot of group support, but there was enough” muses Taylor, “so that all the projects got finished. Last summer, I led international students through SpIN paths, I took a Japanese Buddhist woman and an English Quaker, and it was a magical experience to see the paths completed.”

As can be seen in her experiences, one finds parallel drives within Taylor, first the desire to be alone in nature, skiing above Santa Fe, and also the need to be with other people, to learn from others while sharing a strong experience in nature. “I got involved with the Art and Nature component of SpIN because I see great beauty in expression, it is tapping into the heart,” she recalls.

Taylor even likens her present experiences with SpIN to her early experience of teaching Harlem students about the natural world: “These Puerto Rican children 8, 9, 10 years old, were living in Tenements, and had never had any experience of nature. We walked across to Ward’s Island, a small area with some grass and trees. And I will never forget -Jose Graciana threw himself at the ground and just lay there in awe of the grass. It made me realize that you just have to invite people to nature and be patient.”

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Taylor has found patience to be a virtue when trying to encourage others in her faith community to get involved in SpIN. “There have been a few, but not many,” she admits, “I am not sure why. I find the connection of inner light in me and in nature to invite me into nature. The Quakers believe that everything has inner light, and also in the value of silence.” These two beliefs have led Taylor to be a strong advocate for protecting the inherent silences in the natural world.

In the future, Taylor hopes to be involved in more children’s programming with SpIN, as she finds that children’s “openness to receiving and being creative” makes them perfect participants for drawing and doing art in nature activities. “Perhaps we could even offer the children a moment of silence, to experience place and express.” It is this kind of expression Taylor has been engaged in her whole life, and continues to do in her work with SpIN.
Interview with Mahmond Hayyat, Muslim Path Coordinator

Mahmond Hayyat has always loved nature; from the time he was a child growing up in Palestine. “I loved to go to the mountains around E-Biri, to run around the hills and play on the olive trees. Nature played a big role in my life, who doesn’t love the nature?” It was not until later in his education, however that Hayyat began to connect his faith with the treatment of the natural world:

There are numerous verses and chapters that talk about the nature (in the Koran). When I was older and more religious I understood it was my duty and responsibility as a Muslim to preserve nature. You see, in Islam, Muslims have several responsibilities that Allah bestows as sacred duties. God had chosen humans to be the gardeners, or halifa, of the earth, so it is a Muslim’s duty to protect nature.

After moving to Middlebury twenty-one years ago to set up an optical practice, Hayyat continued to enjoy spending time in nature, taking his family and guests on picnics and visits to Lake Dunmore, near the town of Middlebury. “I especially love to look at the mountains,” he explains. When his children were young, he taught them to be respectful of animals and nature, to be respectful “to all living souls.” His emphasis on this point stems from the actions of Mohammed and the Qur'an:

We are under the rules and regulations of God. As Muslims, we have the belief in our hearts of total submission to God’s will. It is the most fundamental thing. The word Islam means peace and submission to the will of God. It means peace with self, God and the surroundings. God is beautiful and loves the beautiful; he loves nature because it is holy and beautiful. As I grew in faith, my connection to nature became stronger.

“In Islam, you are fitra, born knowing God. You are born honest, and born knowing nature. When you grow up, some remain virtuous, and some do not, some have a connection still to nature, and some do not.” Hayyat was quick to point out that the main prophet of Islam, Muhammad, kept a strong connection to nature throughout his life. “When he was meditating in a cave near Mecca, before he was enlightened, he would look at the stars, the sky, the wilderness. He didn’t know God yet, and it can’t be an accident that mediating on these objects helped him to receive the message of Islam.” Hayyat also mentioned that several other aspects of Islamic culture, including poetry, devote long passages to talking about nature and wilderness, especially about the desert.

This clear connection of Islam and respect for nature lead Hayyat to become involved with SpIN. The first time he heard about the project was from Paul Bortz, and immediately he wanted to become a part of the path center. “I loved the idea. My whole family helped to make the path, there is not a large Muslim group in the area, so we received help from others in cutting the trees and making the path.” The Muslim community in Vermont is centered in Burlington, and while they share the same feelings of respect and love for creation “they may not go out of their way to do anything.”
Interview With Elaine Lathrop, Bahai Path Coordinator

Although she grew up within a firm spiritual tradition, Elaine Lathrop never felt entirely at home. She explains, “My mom and dad are members of the United Methodist church. My childhood spiritual training was in the Methodist church and I attended Sunday school until the middle of high school.” For Lathrop, this training included visiting different traditions and learning about them. However, she notes “Even after visiting all of these churches, I was still feeling incomplete and looking for something.

In order to stay within a community, Lathrop decided that although she was unsure, she would remain in the Methodist church. “I went through the study group to become a Methodist and I joined the church with the others in my Sunday school group. I actually became a Sunday School teacher for the first and second graders.” Lathrop’s engagement with the church, however, remained superficial at best:

I didn't like going to church and seeing everyone falsely be so nice to everyone and then talk about them once their back was turned. I remember coming home one Sunday very frustrated and very unhappy…I was in my room lying on my bed and had what I call a day vision. A radiant figure of a man in flowing robes and a turban appeared and the message was ‘seek and you shall find me.’ I was filled with joy and a feeling of being loved and protected. I knew that I would find my spiritual place.

It was not until college that Lathrop found the beginnings of a spiritual place with which she could connect. She recalls:

I first heard about the Bahai Faith when I went to college at SUNY Alfred. There I met a man whom I later married who was a Bahai. As we got to know each other he told me a little about the Bahai Faith and took me to a fireside meeting where the Bahai Faith was being presented and discussed. Unfortunately, I was not receptive at that time in my life being fully involved with the ‘college’ scene and not into religion of any kind. I’m also not a person who likes large groups of people and found it rather intimidating to be in such a large group and feeling ignorant that I didn't know anything. I continued to learn a little about the Bahai Faith but really wasn’t interested until after Tom and I were married and moved to North Carolina. There I met other Bahais on a one to one or two to two basis and was made to feel welcome.

After she again felt connected to a community, Lathrop began to investigate the Bahai faith more fully. She recalls:

It was in the home of one of these Bahais that I saw the picture of Abdu’l-Baha, known as the Exemplar and the successor of Bahaullah, the divine messenger of the Bahai Faith. Once I saw the picture, I knew I had to check it out further as the memory of the ‘day vision’ from childhood returned. My biggest concern in studying the Bahai Faith was that I wanted to be sure that the religion was true and that I wasn't going to be damned for changing. Once I realized that Bahaullah is whom he claimed and that he fulfills the prophecy of Jesus in his return, I became a Bahai October 1975.
To convert to Bahai, Lathrop had to sign a declaration card proclaiming that she agreed that Bahaullah was the true savior. Lathrop was extremely happy about her conversion, and notes “It is a decision I have never regretted.” She explains that although not many people know about Bahai, “the Bahai Faith is like any of the major religions. It has its rules of conduct and laws, right and wrong in behavior. And like all religions, each person follows it to his or her own best ability depending on their own spiritual growth. Bahais are instructed to pray, meditate, and read the writings daily. There are three obligatory prayers given to us and we are to say one of them every day. Meditation for us is to reflect on what we have read in the Bahai writings.”

For Lathrop, personally, the practices of the Bahai faith help to structure her day. She explains:

My day starts out with a morning prayer session of about 20 minutes; it includes a morning prayer which praises God and asks Him to illumine my soul. This is usually followed by a few prayers for myself and others dealing with healing, spiritual development, tests and difficulties, and protection. I usually read a short passage from one of the Bahai texts. I then feel ready to start my day. I usually choose to say the short obligatory prayer that needs to be said once a day between the hours of noon and 6 p.m. and I usually say this as soon as I get home. Sometimes, during the day, I will spend a few minutes reflecting on something I've read or something I have to do with the Bahai Faith. Evenings vary depending on my time and my mood. We are instructed to read daily and I try and do my reading at this time for at least ten minutes. When I go to sleep I have a couple more prayers that I say including one to keep me safe during the night.

The ordering and break-up of Lathrop’s day into prayer sessions and times from reflection help to keep her grounded in a hectic world. In addition to daily practices, Lathrop explains:

Every nineteen days is Feast. This is a time for spiritual growth as a group. We meet in one another's homes. This meeting has three parts: one is spiritual where we read from the Baha'i writings and sometimes read from the Bible and the Bayan (major religious book of the Babi religion, which is the forerunner to the Bahai Faith). The second part is when the community talks about projects and community matters. The third part is for socializing with one another. Since Feast days happen on specific days, it is a wonderful feeling to know that Feast is being observed worldwide and feel the spiritual energy being generated. The Baha'i's of Addison County also meet on Sunday mornings to have children's classes, and spiritual deepening for the community and public.

In relation to nature, Lathrop commented that “I guess I would say that the Bahai Faith has helped me to appreciate nature more, although even as a child and as a Methodist, I felt that God was everywhere and part of everything. Bahaullah uses nature in many allegories in the writing, such as the ‘soft scented streams.’ Without a knowledge of nature, I don't think it would be possible to appreciate and understand the writings as well. Nature is here for us to enjoy and learn from and use responsibly. It's like a precious gift from God to mankind.”

As a Bahai, Lathrop has adopted a certain code of conduct toward the environment. She reflects:
Bahais believe that the solutions to the balancing of the environment with human needs will be understood only with an emphasis on spiritual values in our lives. The material needs and the spiritual values must be in harmony. The essential message of Bahaullah for the Bahais is that of unity. He taught that there is only one God, one human race, and all of the world's religions are stages in the revelation of God's will and purpose for humanity. Some of the Bahai principles concerning the human environment through unity are: the oneness of mankind, world peace, social justice, universal education, and moderation. We believe that as more people apply these principles (as well as others) to their daily lives, the imbalances in the human environment will diminish. I have never consciously thought about my relationship with nature and the Bahai Faith. I grew up in a very small town/country environment where nature has always been important as far as gardening and farming. As a child, there was no concern about burning trash because it would pollute the air, putting on gobs of sunscreen and then jumping into the river or lake. As I have matured, I have become more aware of the environment and have made some changes in my life to help. No more sunscreen and then into the lake; no more back yard trash burning, recycling glass, metal, paper, and buying appliances and equipment that are more environment friendly.

Lathrop notes that as she grew firmer in her Bahai belief, it led to a role of path coordinator for SpIN. In answer to the question of how she became involved with SpIN, Lathrop answered:

I became involved in SpIN when Darren Haynes, a Bahai in Shoreham, contacted Paul Bortz, after seeing it in the paper. Once SpIN became a reality and we had a path, that is where I really became involved. Darren was unable to participate due to job commitments and one of the Bahais needed to be a representative. I said I would do it, and I have been a member since then. Our first year, we really worked on the path, clearing it, putting up the quotes/signs and holding meetings in the sacred circle. We got the Bahai youth attending the Bahai youth weekends to come and help with the upkeep. This past year, we were not able to do as much, and I have only been there once. I've enjoyed what I have done, but the summer months are the most demanding at work and with putting in lots of overtime and other activities, I have not been participating. The wider Bahai community contributes time and energy to enhance the beauty of a natural area and gain a chance for tranquility and appreciation whenever we can meet there. It gives us a chance to enhance the inner beauty of the soul with our teachings and bring peacefulness to those who read the quotes. Thus we are gardeners of both the spiritual nature of mankind and the physical nature of our environment. It also allows us to be of service to mankind through our beautifying efforts and sayings. I think that visiting SpIN gives me a chance to reassess my life and where I'm going and what I'm doing, and whether I'm doing what I want and what God intends me to do. It offers a time of reflection and allows the tranquility of the woods to permeate my inner being and is another form of rejuvenation.
Interview With Joel Lowy, Pagan Path Coordinator

From his days at the Andover Theological Seminary to his Lutheran upbringing, Joel Lowy has always had religion as a part of his life, although he has never been entirely comfortable with the diverse doctrines with which he was a part. “During my childhood, I thought that being in nature was spiritual, I found my real spirituality and God in the natural world.” After straying from the church, only to attempt to return to the liberal United Church of Christ, he realized that he really belonged in a Unitarian Universalist and Pagan environment.

After receiving his master’s in psychology, he was practicing in Chicago when he encountered mediation and Hinduism, first by reading “Be Here Now” by Ram Dass, and later by exploring an alternative view of spirituality at the Lotus Temple in Chicago. “The temple was a blend of Pagan and Hermeticism - it included a variety of esoteric disciplines, such as alchemy, Kundilini Yoga and meditation.” As time went on, Lowy became involved in the running of the temple, and found a spiritual place for himself within this discipline.

After several years, Lowy moved to Vermont, finding that “the rural environment helped me to get involved with spiritual thinking again. I tried to return the United Church of Christ, and got a Master’s of Divinity from the Andover Divinity School. Unfortunately, the school viewed my theology as too ‘out there’ so I was asked to stop my involvement. It was at that time that I returned to some of the practices I had experienced at the Lotus Temple, and also when I began to fully practice Paganism.”

Lowy became quite active in the small pagan community in Vermont, forming the Champlain Valley Circle at the Unitarian Church. Now he describes his spirituality as a mix of “Hindu and Pagan traditions. I still draw on both the hermetic roots of Yogananda and the Pagan tradition in my meditation practices.” He clarified that all Wiccans are Pagans, but not all Pagans are Wiccan. All believe in earth spirituality and spiritualists and alternative spiritual traditions:

About seventy-five percent of the Pagans I know are Wiccan. Some of the people who become interested in Paganism have grown up Christian, and don’t know anything about Paganism. They just like the orientation [toward the earth]. Paganism is different in that it does not include salvation through divine intervention; there is a certain variety to the sources of power. For example we have rituals throughout the year that combine symbols and meanings with the natural world. We do this to put us in harmony with who we are. Paganism is really the religion closest to nature as divinity. We don’t see a difference between the creator and the creation, and therefore nature is sacred.

For Lowy, connection to nature is nothing new. “I have always been close to nature, I have always gone into the woods to worship” he explains. “Even when I lived in an urban environment in Chicago, I tried to connect to the four elements- earth, air, fire and water. That is a part of all the Pagan rituals. You set up a circle, which expresses the spirit of each quarter, similarly to many shamanic and Native American traditions. At SpIN we have had ‘circles’ which means that we raise a circle of the four quarters. We have had ten rituals over two years at SpIN, including full moon celebrations and drumming to raise the energy of the group.”

Lowy readily acknowledges that Paganism is different from most other religious traditions:

It is much less analytical and doctrinal. We connect to the spirit intimately through the practices that we perform, versus a second-
hand connection you will find in many other traditions. Paganism included a doctrine of the 'Priesthood of all believers'- there is a leader, to bring unity and bring people together, but really Paganism is a full time thing, all actions become connected with it whatever you do in life.

As part his connection to the Champlain Valley Circle, Lowy found out about the SpIN program and realized that there wasn’t a Pagan path. “There were some objections in the Christian community, I and two other Pagans went to several SpIN board meetings and explained paganism. The meetings were difficult, and there were some hostile views, mostly due to misinformation and stereo-typing. Finally, we succeeded in getting a path.” After the process of acceptance was completed, Lowy turned to the wider on-line community of Pagans to pick the sayings for the paths: “I had Pagan communities vote on the best sayings out of seventy-five quotes I had chosen. In the final vote, it was reduced to ten. Because Paganism has no central text, the quotes come from a wide variety of sources, from teachers like Starhawk to Mikhail Gorbachov.”

After the establishment of the Pagan Path, Lowy found that many Pagans were interested in taking advantage of it and want to help support SpIN. “They enjoy the multi-faith environment, and value the paths as a place to gather and get in touch with nature, like in the rituals we perform at the sacred circle.” The use of the natural space allows from many of the qualities important to Pagan ritual:

At SpIN we are able to get in touch with the nature spirits and spiritual entities, and to raise vibrations. Then we can see clearly the light within, which many people call the God or Goddess within. Our ultimate goal is to raise the level of energy, and to feel divinely in tune with nature. We can then be part of one universal experience, getting to our center, getting in touch with everything around you. I can’t explain it, it is like a manila or a pentagram, and you are moving toward the center. In that deepening of experience, you find true connection to everything, which is the final goal of Paganism.