

BUSHWHACKING A PATH TOWARDS THE ECOZOIC ERA: NATURE IMMERSION EXPERIENCE AND THE FIELD OF RELIGION AND ECOLOGY

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In this essay I offer my reflections on the field of religion and ecology from two different angles: first, as an educator, both as a professor of undergraduates across two different departments at the University of San Francisco—Theology and Religious Studies, and Environmental Studies—as well as an independent outdoor ecotheology educator; and second, as the current co-chair of the Religion and Ecology Unit of the American Academy of Religion (AAR). From those different angles, I consider a fork in the road of human civilization and, indeed, of the whole Earth community. On one side an Ecozoic era is ahead, and on the other side a Technozoic era. To start, let me explain those terms, which are likely familiar to many of the readers of this special issue.

In 2019 I received my PhD in the Ecology, Spirituality, and Religion program at the California Institute of Integral Studies, which was then one of the few programs to offer a graduate degree in this field of study. There I was introduced to the work of Thomas Berry. In *The Great Work*, Berry speaks of the choice

humanity needs to make as we transition from the Cenozoic era, which began around 65 million years ago after the extinction of the dinosaurs, to a new Earth era. At this fork in the road, we are to choose whether we transition into the Ecozoic era, where humans inhabit the planet as a mutually beneficial presence on the Earth, or we choose the Technozoic era, where humans continue to destroy the Earth community through extractive technologies and exploitative socioeconomic systems. The Great Work of our time is to choose and bring into being the Ecozoic.

Our own special role, which we will hand on to our children, is that of managing the arduous transition from the terminal Cenozoic to the emerging Ecozoic era, a period when humans will be present to the planet as participating members of the comprehensive Earth community. This is our Great Work and the work of our children.¹

This fork in the road is aligned with the Anishnaabe prophecy as told by tribal members Winona LaDuke (Ojibwe) and Robin Kimmerer (Citizen Potawatomi).² In the Anishnaabe story, humanity stands at this crossroads. The scorched Earth path is well-trodden and familiar. But if we continue on this road we may not survive, and many of the species with which we coexist may not survive either. The other path is the green path. It is lush, but unfamiliar. It is the harder choice for some, since it requires so much change, but it is our best way into the future.

When I learned of this fork in the road, I thought to myself, “Oh, this decision will be easy. Of course, humanity will choose the green path.” This makes the most sense. Aren’t all natural beings attracted to green, lush places? This perspective was informed by the work I did before embarking on my graduate studies. I spent four years working as a field instructor for a wilderness therapy program serving at-risk youth. I lived a nomadic life, immersed in nature, tied to the rhythms and cycles of the natural world. I was away from phone lines, internet access, and the built environment for two weeks at a time. On my time off, I lived in my car and camped in the numerous regional and national parks of the American west. The peace and depth of belonging in nature I experienced during this immersive time in the wilderness was unmatched to this day. Even though I lived with nothing more than the things I carried on my back, I had everything I wanted. I have never experienced such a sense of wholeness, purpose, and passion as I did in the solitude of the desert wilderness, and during my time exploring the wild.

¹ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower), 7-8.

² Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 360-373. Winona LaDuke and Deborah Cowen, “Beyond Windigo Infrastructure,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 119:2 (April 2020): 243-268.

Having had this experience, it seemed natural that everyone would want to experience this sense of wholeness and belonging. It is our birthright, plain and simple. But as of late, I am seeing how entrenched we are on the scorched Earth path and how deeply it has its hooks in us. Choosing the green path as a collective will be much more challenging than I previously considered. The rise of electric cars I see on the road (and not new light rail), new gains in AI technology and research, and the continuous disregard of the seriousness of our environmental crisis awakens me to observe how embedded our technological habits of mind, body, and spirit are.

This is especially true after the COVID-19 pandemic, when schools pivoted to online teaching as technology provided some salve for the challenges presented by lockdowns and social distancing. I have seen a rise in technologically addictive behaviors in the classroom as well. Just a few weeks before writing this piece, a student in my classroom was absentmindedly, and very loudly, typing away on his computer during my lecture. I stopped and politely told him to close his laptop, and he did so immediately and respectfully. However, within a matter of seconds, his hand impulsively reopened the laptop, and he went back to work (or perhaps play). The whole experience reminded me of a child sneaking a cookie from a cookie jar. The looks on the student's face told me he knew he should not have reopened his laptop, but it was as though his hand had a mind of its own, a Technozoic mind. This compulsive and sneaky demeanor of that student's hand is a metonym for the attitude that will lead humans to take the scorched Earth path. Long-term planning and systemic thinking are developmental achievements that take intention.

This New Story of our evolving cosmos and our living Earth community is an important narrative that invites people into the promise of the green path. Being captivated by screens and saturated by information and media noise make it difficult to tune into deep time, collective thinking, and intergenerational planning. Too much screen time has resulted in increased anxiety, shorter attention spans, lower pain tolerance, and disconnection from one's body and emotions. These are all symptoms of what Richard Louv calls "nature-deficit disorder."³ To tackle nature deficit disorder, connecting with nature is the tonic to alleviate these symptoms, giving people a sense of purpose, and raising their general sense of well-being.

The attention economy feeds off our sacred awareness. It bombards us with ads, triggering news, polarizing narratives, making spaciousness and calm rarer and rarer to find. During her final presentation, a student shared an epiphany she had in my Nature Immersion course. She exclaimed, "It really shows how far off

³ Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2005).

of the path humans have gotten when spending time in nature feels so unnatural!” She was referring to the lack of tolerance students experience when exposed to the elements for prolonged periods of time. This is why a guide is important to teach students how to tap into their inner knower, how to deal with boredom, and how to connect with the sacredness of the Earth community. Time in nature can help us reconnect to that space, as the silence, solitude, and intentional awareness of our evolutionary entanglements can be seen, felt, and experienced.



Photo by [Dmitry Ganin](#) on [Unsplash](#)

As an outdoor ecotheological educator I guide people of all ages to experience the sacredness of the natural world through outdoor nature immersion experiences. I have taught numerous groups and demographics including students from international universities, students at the University of San

Francisco, and clients from my nonprofit organization, Wild Women—a 501(c)3 whose mission is to educate and empower people in the outdoors, while deconstructing and critiquing the colonial, dominator narratives projected onto the wilderness. American wilderness culture, including bushcraft and survivalism, are essentially masculine-coded spaces. I offer outdoor educational experiences which include backpacking, adventure, and wilderness survival skills through an intersectional ecofeminist theological lens—an alternative to traditional colonial narratives of wilderness.

Included in my offerings are elements of the Universe Story which I offer as I lead backpacking trips and daylong excursions in the California wilderness. I teach ancestral skills—including friction fire making (bow drill as well as flint and steel), cordage, traps, plant identification, and tracking—while opening people to the sacredness of the cosmos and facilitating awe-inspiring experiences. This is aligned with Pope Francis’ visions for an “ecological conversion,” which he calls for in his ecological encyclical, *Laudato Si’*. The Pope is not calling for people to convert to Catholicism in the wilderness; rather, he is calling “every person living on this planet” to convert to ecology.⁴ To me, connecting to the external wild is connecting to the wild within. Awakening oneself to this wildness is connecting to a deeper, more abiding, ecological self.

Awakening to an ecological self is reinventing the human at the species level. Nature immersion experiences are a catalyst to shed our skins of false selves, tapping into an identity that is tied to land and Earth. Being grounded in nature allows us to realign our morals and values with our ecological and cosmological context. I am realizing now that people need to be introduced to nature (both inner and outer) and guided in order to experience this sense of wholeness in the outdoors. It is not just about spending time in nature. What is required is time with intentional engagement in nature.⁵ This is what drew me to found Wild Women. My slogan is, “You can’t protect something you haven’t met yet, and you can’t love something that you don’t know.” Of my many goals for the future, one is to partner with other ecofeminist organizations who empower Indigenous women in their local communities as well as those involved in international politics. For example, the Women’s Earth and Climate Action Network (WECAN), founded by Osprey Orielle Lake, is a great organization to follow. In addition, when Wild Women grows, I envision offering free spiritual resources for environmental and climate activists.

As the chair for several years of the Religion and Ecology unit of the AAR alongside Joseph Wiebe, and as a steering committee member for a few years

⁴ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015), sec. 3.

⁵ Miles Richardson, Iain Hamlin, Carly Butler, Rory Thomas, and Alex Hunt, “Actively Noticing Nature (Not Just Time in Nature) Helps Promote Nature Connectedness,” *Journal of Ecopsychology*, 14:1 (March 2022): 8-16.

prior to that, I have seen the field shift over the past decade taking seriously the call for greater inclusivity in the field. We have partnered with the Native Traditions in the Americas Unit and Indigenous Religious Traditions Units to create co-sponsored sessions each year to develop shared discourse and dialogue regarding our concerns for the future of the planet. Our steering committee vets paper proposals with an eye for interreligious dialogue, offering spaces for marginalized perspectives to not only be included, but be centered.

We are blessed to have a skilled team of caring, intelligent, and informed committee members. Scholar and former Religion and Ecology unit chair Christopher Carter has highlighted racial perspectives in the field, creating space for scholars traditionally marginalized in the field, and hosting difficult conversations. Steering Committee member Terra Schwerin Rowe, studying the crossroads of religion and petrocultures, recently created a seminar on energy and extractivism. The future is full of problems, to be sure, but it is also incredibly rich with promise.

We feel the call for more practical engagements within the field as our moment calls for action and activism. In coming years, we will highlight activism and non-anthropocentric perspectives as forms of religious resistance to the dominant colonial, consumer culture. As we work to create a more inclusive field, in the many meanings of this terminology, the goal has always remained the same: to protect our sacred planet and all life on Earth, for present and future generations.