

“All traditions call on us to serve others, and there is no greater joy or more important task than to do so together.” —Eboo Patel



# ACTING ON FAITH

STORIES OF **COURAGE, ACTIVISM,**  
AND **HOPE** ACROSS RELIGIONS

DIANE FAIRES BEADLE &  
JAMIE LYNN HASKINS, editors

# ACTING ON FAITH

STORIES OF **COURAGE, ACTIVISM,**  
AND **HOPE** ACROSS RELIGIONS

DIANE FAIRES BEADLE &  
JAMIE LYNN HASKINS, editors



chalice  
press

Saint Louis, Missouri

An imprint of Christian Board of Publication

© Copyright 2020 by Diane Faires Beadle, Jamie Lynn Haskins, and the essay authors.

All rights reserved. For permission to reuse content, please contact Copyright Clearance Center, 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, (978) 750-8400, [www.copyright.com](http://www.copyright.com).

Bible quotations, unless otherwise marked, are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Cover design: Jennifer Pavlovitz

**ChalicePress.com**

Print 9780827200890

EPUB 9780827200906

EPDF 9780827200913

Printed in the United States of America

# Contents

Introduction	1
Stories	
Care for the Environment	7
Race and Privilege	21
Immigration and Refugees	35
Sexuality and Gender Identity	51
Gender and Women's Leadership	67
Interfaith Conflict and Extremism	83
Resources for Engagement	99
Acknowledgments	103



## Introduction

### *Diane's inspiration for this project:*

It was a rainy, dreary day on the Habitat for Humanity construction site, but warm laughter and a sense of joy was palpable in spite of the weather. A few of the volunteers, like the friendly women from the Hindu temple, barely knew how to hold a hammer. Others, like the two Buddhist monks in orange robes, could have built the whole house by themselves. A Sikh man used duct tape to keep his hard hat securely fastened over his turban, and the young Imam decided to take off his long, black robe so he could more easily assemble the studs that were turning into walls around us. This, I thought as I looked around, is what I imagine the kingdom of God looks like. People of all kinds, united—and delighted—by our efforts to create safe, affordable housing for a neighbor in need. We were all motivated to be there on that cold, wet morning by the principles of our faith, which had taught us through different stories and sacred scriptures why we should care about the well-being of a stranger.

As a child, I grew up acting out the story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) at church camp. Christian Bible verses like “love your neighbor as yourself” and “I was hungry and you gave me food” are deeply ingrained in my memory. I felt a call to ministry, in large part, because of the example of clergy and churches in low-income communities that were making a tangible difference in people’s lives.

Although religion gets a lot of negative attention these days for inspiring hatred, violence, and division, in my experience religion

moves many more ordinary people to acts of love, generosity, and selflessness every day. The world is filled with young Muslim men like Deah Barakat, a dental student at the University of North Carolina, who was inspired to organize a free dental clinic for Syrian refugees. Tragically, Deah, his wife, and his sister-in-law were killed by a neighbor because of the very religion that taught them to serve others.<sup>1</sup>

When I heard the news about the murder of these three compassionate young people, I felt compelled to do something. I knew Deah's brother, Farris, because we had both helped organize the first Interfaith Habitat for Humanity build in Raleigh, North Carolina. I have been inspired to continue volunteering and speaking out for justice by colleagues and neighbors who are Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist. I have even discovered that my own faith is deepened and renewed by their example and commitment to their faith, as I have worked alongside them. It is my deepest hope that others may also find inspiration for putting their faith into action through the witness of people like Deah, Farris, and the countless other faithful people working to address the problems our communities face.

*Diane Faires Beadle loves bringing people of various cultures and faiths together. She volunteers with Habitat for Humanity of Wake County's annual Interfaith Build. Diane was raised in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and serves as Senior Minister at St. Paul's Christian Church in Raleigh, North Carolina. A graduate of Vanderbilt Divinity School and Rhodes College, Diane was born in Texas, grew up in Germany, and considers Tennessee home. She also has a great love for Sri Lanka, where she spent two years teaching English. She and her husband Michael enjoy hiking, running, cooking spicy foods, and traveling the world.*

***Jamie Lynn's inspiration for this project:***

She walked into my office and sat down on the couch with a sigh. "I don't want to talk to you because you're a Christian," she said under her breath, "but now I really need someone to talk to and you're the only one who's here." I'm a college chaplain and many

---

<sup>1</sup>Ashley Fantz, "Slain North Carolina couple and sister remembered as generous, loving." CNN. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/02/11/us/chapel-hill-shooting-victims/index.html>

students find their way to my office to laugh or cry and share what's going on in their lives. This young woman, however, had been avoiding me at all costs. She was Muslim and a part of the LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual) community and, in her words, "Christians hate gay people and they hate Muslims."

She was right, I am a Christian. But she was also wrong. I do not hate gay people or Muslims. In fact, I am a part of the LGBTQIA+ community and I have a deep respect for Islam and the people who practice it. As she settled herself on my office couch, I desperately wanted her to know that my faith tradition teaches me that all people are beloved. They are good and they are worthy of great love and respect. I follow Jesus, in part, because of the radical welcome and hospitality he offers everyone. But how could she know this without hearing my story? Tales of religious hatred and division often fill our newsfeed. At Pride parades across the country and the world, it is Christians holding signs of exclusion and hate, and it is Christians, in part, who spread harmful messages about Islam. In this moment I realized the importance of sharing our stories, the truths about who we are, in all of our beautiful complexity.

My students are Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Atheist, Agnostic, Christian, and everything in between. Until we sit down together in offices, coffee shops, classrooms, or neighborhood parks and share ourselves and our stories, we cannot truly know one another. Our experiences provide a look into our theological commitments and understanding of the holy. In our current world, with so many false narratives and assumptions, the sharing of stories is work I feel deeply called to do.

**Jamie Lynn Haskins** *delights in people and their stories, particularly those shared across faith traditions. She serves on the board of the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy. Jamie Lynn is ordained in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and serves as Chaplain for Spiritual Life at the University of Richmond. Before moving to Richmond, Jamie Lynn served as Chaplain, Director of the Center for Faith & Service, and Instructor at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, and is proud to share the stories of several Westminster students here in this book. She is a member of Seventh Street Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and enjoys camping, cooking, and exploring her new hometown of Richmond, Virginia, with her trusty pup Bernie.*



***Our hope:***

This book is a celebration of the many faiths that call us to reach out, speak up, lend a hand, and appreciate the beauty of humanity. It's not the story of "us" versus "them." Rather, it looks at the heart of the world's religious traditions; it examines the core of who we are as people of faith through our stories; and it seeks to build bridges across many divides. This book celebrates our differences and explores the countless ways we are connected, as all of us strive to stand up for justice, to side with the oppressed, and to tell the stories of our faith. As you get a glimpse into the experiences of your diverse neighbors working for justice, we hope you will gain deeper insights into how your own faith motivates you to respond to the challenging questions of modern life.

Our conversation unfolds in six chapters. Each focuses on a social justice issue our faith calls us to address: immigration, sexism, racism, sexual orientation and gender identity, religious extremism, and care for the environment. We explore each issue through personal stories from across faith traditions, and together, as Christians and Jews, Muslims and Buddhists, Hindus and Pagans, we examine how our deepest beliefs call us to work for justice and offer peace to a hurting world. Each chapter also offers reflection questions. As we strive to integrate these conversations into every aspect of our life, it is our hope that these resources might enable entire congregations to engage in meaningful conversations about justice that move us to faithful action.

When we listen to and learn from one another, we build bridges of understanding that can change the landscape of our communities and our world, as well as the geography of our own heart.

**Reflection Questions**

- Which stories from your own sacred texts and religious tradition have shaped your understanding of justice and service? What lessons and themes within those stories make them meaningful and memorable?
- Why does this book interest you? What do you hope to learn or gain from reading it?

- Would you go (or have you gone) to a worship service of another religion, different from your own? How would (or did) you feel about such an experience?
- Sometimes we have to look outside of our own religious tradition to gain inspiration. How have other religions inspired you? How have they enriched your work for justice?
- Have you heard or read any stories in the news this week about religion, or references in the news to a particular religious group? How did the news portray religion in these stories?



## Care for the Environment

### DIANE'S INTRODUCTION

I love to hike. When I am out in the woods, surrounded by the beauty and intricate diversity of nature, I feel an overwhelming sense of awe and peace. Standing on a remote mountain top or beside a babbling creek, my natural reaction is immense gratitude to the creator. In a world with so much competition and striving for success, multitudes of amazing creatures exist without the need for human effort or technology. And yet, the survival of these creatures is affected by the actions and decisions of humanity.

In the Christian creation story, God makes humans in the image of the divine and then gives them responsibility for all living things on the earth (Genesis 1:27–28). God brings the plants, animals, and celestial bodies into being and declares each of them good. Being formed in the likeness of the creator means humanity has not only the awesome ability of creativity but also the ability to delight in what has been made and to maintain its goodness.

Muslims, too, are taught to preserve and appreciate the gifts of creation. The Qur'an declares, "It is (Allah) Who hath made you (His) agents, inheritors of the earth" (6:165, Yusuf Ali) and reminds people that Allah does not love those who are wasteful (6:141). Perhaps as a faith whose earliest followers lived in a dry and arid

climate, water was held in special esteem. Believers are told “not to waste water even if they are at a running stream” (Sunan Ibn Majah 425).

Countless laws in the Jewish Torah focus on caring for the earth and preventing waste. Sabbath and Jubilee, recurring times of rest mandated by divine law, were instituted not only for humans to enjoy a break from labor, but for the creatures and the land to experience a time of renewal as well. There’s a delightful Jewish holiday called Tu B’Shevat, or the festival of the trees, on which Jews are encouraged to enjoy a variety of fruits and nuts, appreciating the bounty of God’s gifts in creation.

The first precept of Buddhism is to refrain from taking life. Both Buddhists and Hindus seek to avoid causing harm or suffering to other living creatures, and many practice vegetarianism for this reason. While living in Sri Lanka, I was surprised when a Hindu friend refused to help me kill a family of giant cockroaches that had invaded my bathroom because it was an especially holy day on which she was committed to respecting the life of all beings—even roaches!

Our well-being, both physical and spiritual, is intimately connected to the well-being of our planet and all of its creatures. The responsibility to care for all of creation, and our obligation to respect and enjoy it, is central to the practice of nearly every faith tradition.



**Katy VanDusen** has focused her efforts the past in 37 years on education, spiritual growth, sustainability, and conservation in Costa Rica. In 1981, she led a diversification study that launched a successful artisan’s cooperative and in 1988 published a book by and for campesinos in northwest Costa Rica about what they produce for home consumption. She coordinates the Monteverde Commission for Resilience to Climate Change (CORCLIMA). She has served on the board of directors of many conservation and education non-profits and as clerk of the Monteverde Friends Meeting, a Quaker (Christian) congregation. She also teaches yoga.

## Faith, Practice, and Our Parking Lot

Sweat soaked my shirt under my armpits. Could those on the bench next to me feel my trembling? Was I quaking because I was moved by the Spirit? or by stubbornness?

We Quakers worship in silence, listening for that of God within. Similarly, when we make administrative decisions during our Monthly Meeting for Business, we listen for what the Spirit is asking of us. This requires open hearts and deep listening. Now, was I truly staying open?

Next on the agenda was a request from the Parking Lot Safety Committee to consider enlarging our parking lot, shared with the school. As the previous clerk of our Quaker Meeting, I had delayed bringing this topic for decision. I had urged the committee to focus on helping the community reduce incoming traffic and, more importantly, our greenhouse gas emissions, rather than expanding the lot. Unfortunately, that help hadn't come.

William, a school administrator, spoke. "Our parking lot is still not safe. Children are often almost hit by cars. Without action, there will be a tragedy."

We paused in silence. My heart beat faster.

Emily, a founding member of our community, stood to speak. In 1950, she, her husband, and 11 other Quaker families left the increasingly militarized United States for Costa Rica, which had just abolished its army. They founded Monteverde, which became the core of the largest block of privately conserved land in Costa Rica. "We used to have just grass, no parking lot," Emily said. "We lived nearby and walked. Now I come to meeting in a car. I understand the need for change."

I took several deep breaths and rose to speak. "The Carbon Neutrality Committee has calculated that over 90 percent of our emissions are from people driving here. Transport is also the biggest source of emissions in Costa Rica. The number of cars in the country has doubled in the last ten years. Our parking lot has become unsafe because there are too many cars. We could make the parking lot safe *and* reduce our carbon footprint by 75 percent if we had a school bus."

Silence.

I worked to listen openly when Chris stood. “The School Committee and parents reviewed a bus plan. The plan was met with resistance and the committee decided that it was not a priority for now. The costs and logistics of bus transport are complicated.”

Not a priority for now? How could they say that while the Antarctic Peninsula is breaking apart; the Great Barrier Reef is dying; droughts in Syria, Somalia, and South Sudan are fueling famine and wars; and our cloud forest is drying up? Climate change is probably irreversible. It threatens the future safety of whole regions, especially poor regions. Quakers are supposed to walk the talk of stewardship. If we won’t act on climate change, who will?

Stephanie stood up. “When I raised the question of ride-sharing, my neighbors told me that we need to ‘respect our differences.’ I tried to organize a van for students. That didn’t work. And what about Meeting attendees taking responsibility for their emissions? Most don’t just drive, they fly in airplanes!”

The knot in my stomach rose to my throat. She was speaking to my condition. I drive an electric golf cart locally, with almost no emissions since Costa Rica’s electricity is 95 percent renewable, but I fly way too much. My family, including my 88-year-old mother, is in the United States. Could those of us who fly offset our footprint by supporting collective transport for students? But compensating wouldn’t be enough. I would have to decline my husband’s invitation for a trip to Alaska.

Chris stood again. “I suggest that we slow down, invite Spirit into our discussion, and be open to the possibilities.”

Slow down? According to the Costa Rican who led the COP21 Paris talks, we’re already ten years too late.

“I’d like to see efforts to improve the parking lot and the public bus system, and to create an electric bike-sharing program.”

“My friends with electric bicycles are still addicted to their gas-guzzling cars,” Harold said. “They want independence and convenience.”

I asked the Light within for guidance on how to listen to the Divine in my fellow Friends whose proposal and slow response would

inflict violence on the planet and its people. Ultimately, our clerk suggested we needed more time for discernment.

We settled again into silence, but my mind was active. Since my children left home, I found myself asking, “What am I called to do? How can I best use the next years of my life?” Perhaps I needed to move beyond my faith community by taking this climate mitigation work to the regional level. Was this the Spirit calling me?



**Fathimath Shafa** is a senior at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri. She is majoring in Biochemistry. After graduation she plans to take a gap year and then attend medical school. She holds a deep love for her people and her homeland, the Maldives.

### Following My God and Caring for My Home: Reflections on Islands and Islam

I grew up in the Maldives, a South Asian island country, southwest of Sri Lanka and India. The Maldives is a country of islands and a country of Islam. Our location is in the middle of the Indian Ocean and we are a Muslim country. Our entire lifestyle focuses on existing in harmony with our environment and with our God. In school I studied Islam from an early age. What I didn't learn as a child was that our country itself was in danger. Our very livelihood, the land we live on, is under environmental threat.

Scientists predict that we will be the first climate refugees in the world. We're a small country, about 300,000 people, and the entire country is in danger of going under water completely. Our highest elevation above sea level is approximately five feet, meaning that as sea levels rise as a consequence of global warming, our islands will be submerged very quickly. There are no mountains, no places we are able to go as the waters increase. We are a small country without much power, and so while our government strives to address this environmental crisis, there is little we can do without help from the larger international community.

People in the Maldives know there are countries out there, people out there, who are doing more damage to the planet than we are. We do not have large centers of industry and we do not burn as



much fossil fuel. We are doing less damage overall, compared to more powerful countries, yet the consequences we suffer will be dire. Even before the waters rise, even now, my country suffers. We are highly dependent on tourism and the fishing industry. These are our main sources of income, but because of environmental issues, carbon dioxide levels are high in the atmosphere, ultimately making the ocean water acidic, which in turn kills the fish. This impacts our fisherman. In addition, our underwater gardens, which are beautiful and unlike anything else in the world, attract a lot of tourists, but now the acidic ocean water is bleaching the corals and fewer and fewer tourists are coming to see them. The threat is already upon us. The consequences are already real.

Because we are Muslim, and because I grew up learning the teachings of the Prophet Muhammed, I know that care for creation and the environment are important. Hadith teaches us, "There is none amongst the Muslims who plants a tree or sows seeds, and then a bird, or a person or an animal eats from it, but is regarded as a charitable gift from him" (Sahih al-Bukhari 2320). In Islam planting trees, caring for creation, is an act of charity, and our faith calls us to acts of creation care.

The Qur'an teaches that all creatures are created in order to build a sense of community, so we must take care of one another. Nature is created to be interrelated. As Muslims we are called to be in relationship with one another and with creation and to make sure that we do not alter the creations of God. The Qur'an also instructs us to keep nature the way it was created. Otherwise, it's nearly impossible for God's people to return it to its original state. In the Maldives, we can see it even now, the damage the world has done. The polar ice caps are already melting; the sea levels are rising; my people and my home are suffering.

Many people assume that Islam is a religion of violence, that it teaches Muslims to hate and destroy. This is simply not the case. Islam is a faith that calls us to care for our fellow human beings and instructs us to live in peace with one another and with creation. It is a beautiful religion that has taught me so many things: to be a better person day by day, to love and live in peace, and to be thoughtful. My faith teaches me to care for my people, my country, and the world. My great hope is that others will join me in this work—that Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Atheists and Christians will all

be able to see that we are all working toward the same goal—to save our planet and thus save creation for all those who come after us.



**Lindsey Bressler** cares about sustainable development and strong Jewish-Muslim relations. She is a senior at Northeastern University, majoring in International Affairs and Economics. Lindsey's spirituality has been influenced by her Jewish communities in Tucson, Arizona, and the Moishe Kavod House in Boston. Lindsey has completed internships at the Environmental Protection Agency, the Poverty Action Lab, and the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies in Israel. In her free time, Lindsey likes to pick up a good cup of black coffee, go for a run in the desert, or learn a new song on the ukulele.

### Finding Jewish Faith in the Soil

For much of college I believed that the spiritual foundation of my commitment to climate action was not my Jewish heritage but my newfound appreciation for Hinduism. I spent three summers in India and learned about the concept of multiple paths. In Hinduism, there is the idea that spirituality is a mountain leading to God. Although people can choose to travel different journeys to the top, there is still the same end. It is why, in Hinduism, there is tolerance for a variety of different forms of worship, different gods, and different rituals.

On my personal journey, I learned multiple paths to caring about climate action and multiple paths to being covered in sweat. As for what I learned about sweat, I have defined three categories. The first is the type that bubbles up on the sides of your nose in the middle of eating a spicy *dosa*, unexpected and sudden. Then there is the classic, more obvious kind of sweat that emerges from the intersection of humidity and long skirts. Perhaps most importantly, I experienced waves of sweat while sitting on a boat in the middle of the Ganges River at five in the morning. Watching the sunrise, sleep deprived, my body did not know what to do but to perspire, a third path to a damp body.

On that river I realized how deeply I cared about climate change. The Ganges, which winds through the Northeastern states in

India, is ascribed supreme spiritual significance. You can go to Varanasi to watch the dead be cremated, their ashes dumped into enormous funeral pyres on its banks. You can also track the Ganges River not by its religious sites but by its pollution. Going to the river and being in India incontrovertibly showed that the changes happening as a result of anthropogenic pollution were inordinately about humanness. I went to the river and I saw a way of life, a religious practice, a landscape being altered by pollution and rising temperatures and dwindling resources.

When I decided to spend a month farming as a part of a multi-faith institute for Jews, Muslims, and Christians, I was not able to understand how my Jewishness and my love for the earth lined up with each other. In an abstract sense, Judaism is linked to environmentalism. The holiday of Sukkot marks the joy of the harvest. Jews celebrate Sukkot by erecting a temporary outdoor structure with a leafy roof to see the stars. Another holiday, Tu B'Shevat, is entirely about trees. I remember donating my leftover change to charities that promised someone, somewhere would plant trees.

Even with these traditions in mind, I believed that Judaism and loving the earth came separately. In my heart, there were two types of people: strong, suntanned people, who camped and made compost piles in their backyards and had ancestors with green thumbs. These were a separate species from my people, who breathed in Bronx traffic fumes and were afraid of bugs.

At the farm, in a presentation on the basics of Islam, a wise Sufi woman shared that the word "religion" is based on the Latin root word *ligio*, which means to connect. In any type of religion, we strive to form links. Now I see that I care about the environment because I am Jewish and not in spite of it. Loving the earth and working to mitigate climate change is essential to living out a full spiritual practice.

While at the farm, I picked up a copy of *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible*<sup>1</sup> by Old Testament scholar Ellen F. Davis. In the book, I found a new meaning to liturgical passages. I realized that the Torah, a document I had so long felt

---

<sup>1</sup>Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

not relevant to me, provided a strong validation for an ethic of land care and climate justice. For instance, the biblical practice of giving agricultural land a Sabbath rest shows that humanity has a need to care for and show reverence for natural forces.

It was not until I got my fingernails dirty that I learned that faith—Jewish faith—is in the soil just as naturally as it is a part of my people and my text. Although my grandparents may not have been farmers, I know that pursuing a more environmentally just world is rooted in who I am and not something that I have to look entirely outside of my heritage to find.



**Todd Fields** and his wife have been involved with the Raleigh Mennonite Church for most of their 43 years of marriage, but he became interested in yoga and Buddhism about 15 years ago. That interest led him to become a certified yoga teacher and an ordained Buddhist minister in the tradition of the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. Today he is mostly retired from a remodeling contracting career, lives in Raleigh, and relates to The Community for Mindful Living UUFR (Thich Nhat Hanh tradition), Won Buddhism of NC (Korean tradition), Moving Mantra Yoga, and the Raleigh Mennonite Church.

### **What the Buddha Showed Me about Mother Earth**

In the post-1960s era, I was studying and practicing Christianity whole-heartedly. I had been influenced deeply by the socio-political movements of the day, particularly by growing awareness of “the environment.” In 1973 I took Ecology 101 at the University of North Carolina. I believe it was one of the first college ecology courses ever taught. I built a passive solar house, composted my waste, did some vegetable gardening, and heated with wood when the sun wasn’t enough. You could say I was an environmentalist, but I was not a “tree hugger.” My concern for the environment did not have a spiritual component.

Around the age of 50 I began to encounter the teachings of the Buddha. It could be said that the Buddha was the first environmentalist, but his view was a little different from what we normally think. We tend to think of the environment as all the

stuff around us. The Buddha taught that we are not separate from the environment. We actually *are* the environment. Our bodies are made of minerals from the soil, moisture from the clouds, oxygen from the atmosphere, and energy from the sun. Even our emotional, mental, and spiritual selves cannot be separated from that of our parents, friends, and society. Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh coined the term “inter-being” to describe this reality. We all “inter-are” with everything and everyone on the earth.

In meditation or when walking in the woods I am sometimes able to touch this truth in a deep way, and this realization inspires a feeling of understanding, love, and compassion. I have the feeling that the earth really is my mother. The term “Mother Earth” is no longer just a quaint phrase. She has created me. Her DNA is in every cell of my body. With every breath, every bite of broccoli, she sustains me. I begin to feel that I am in love with Mother Earth. Sometimes I actually do go and hug a tree. I put my arms around it, my cheek up against the bark, and I offer gratitude for the oxygen she supplies. In this way my environmentalism becomes very deep and spiritual.

Many Christians believe in a Kingdom of Heaven. We may think of this as a place far away, filled with beauty and inhabited by saints, where we may be able to go in the future. Many Buddhists also imagine a Pure Land of the Buddha, which is said to lie far to the west, and to be full of flowers, songbirds, and many Buddhas and bodhisattvas (any being who has completely devoted herself to ending the suffering of others). Pure Land Buddhists believe if they recite the name of the Buddha many times and keep the precepts, they may one day be reborn in the Pure Land. Perhaps there is some truth to these visions, but Zen Buddhism also teaches that the Pure Land of the Buddha is actually here and now. This magnificent, beautiful earth is our mother, our refuge, our sustainer. This is it. There is no place else to go. Whether our environment is heaven or hell depends on us. The Pure Land is not a place, organization, government, or church. A Pure Land is anywhere there is beauty, understanding, compassion, joy, and equanimity.

In Christianity we generally think there is only one Kingdom of God, but in Buddhism there can be many Pure Lands of the Buddha, because there are many Buddhas. Jesus was the Son of God, very holy and unique; but from a Buddhist point of view, who is not

a child of God? Each of us is a Buddha-to-be. We only need to open our hearts to the Holy Spirit. With the Holy Spirit we can each create a Pure Land for ourselves and the world around us by living with mindfulness and compassion in each moment. With each breath, each step, each word and action we manifest our love for God, for Mother Earth, and for all her children. In this way we become true environmentalists.

Our planet is in a dire situation. Many species are becoming extinct. The warming of the atmosphere is causing irreversible changes. Our air, water, and soil are increasingly polluted. In a hundred or two hundred years it may not be possible for humans to live on the earth. All of this has been caused by our lack of understanding, greed, and selfishness; but I don't think becoming an angry, panicked activist is the answer. In this critical moment in human history I believe that what is needed more than ever is the energy of love, peace, and wisdom. I am thankful for Jesus' teachings about this spirit, and I am thankful for the ways in which my Buddhist training has given me tools to manifest healing in myself and in the world.



**Sarah Franklin** is a Celtic-Pagan who works to build bridges between religious communities and educates people about Paganism to dispel myths and fears. She has spoken at interfaith events at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, where she currently works in the School of Public Health. Sarah runs a religious organization for Pagan, Wiccan, and other earth-based faith students at UAB. She earned her degree in Public Health and has conducted and collaborated on studies examining Hepatitis B, HIV, maternal and child health, and non-communicable diseases. She has co-authored multiple research papers and currently has three more in consideration for publishing.

### Return to the Earth

Imagine this: *When the earth was created, there was no time and no gods, and no man walked the surface of the land. But there was the sea, and where the sea met the land, a mare was born, white and made from the sea-foam. Her name was Eiocha, and from an oak tree that grew in the land there sprouted a plant. This is where Eiocha gave birth*

*to the first god Cernunnos, who then mated with Eiocha and created more gods; however, the gods felt lonely and wanted to be adored, so from the wood of the oak tree they created the first people as well as other animals. Giants, too, are born from the bark of a tree that Eiocha hurled into the water.*

This particular story is from Celtic legends and is one of many creation stories in ancient mythologies across the globe. It shows the deep connection that our gods have with the universe. The gods and goddesses are not just the creators of the planet, but they were brought up from the trees, ocean, and sky themselves. They did not create the earth, but instead they are one with the earth. Being a Pagan means that our religion is almost completely enmeshed with nature and her beauty. The gods assigned themselves roles according to what they look after in the universe, making themselves gods of the sky, oceans, earth, trees, rain, sun, and every other aspect of the natural world. Most Pagans, including myself, feel obligated to protect and preserve the world around us because it contains the essence of our gods and is our home. The planet Earth is often referred to as a feminine force or a goddess; even in modern-day terms we call her Mother Nature or Mother Earth. To Pagans the Earth is our mother, and we belong to the universe. The other animals on the planet are my family. My pets are not my property but my brothers and sisters. As a Pagan, I feel the spirits of my loved ones in the wind, trees, and my surroundings.

Pagans believe all of nature is connected, from the largest tree to the smallest worm. Pagans try to respect life on Earth and do not kill other creatures unless necessary to eat. Killing for sport is largely viewed as disgraceful, as is wasting life for the sheer joy of killing. Because I am a Pagan, I am also a vegetarian and an animal-rights activist. I chose to stop eating meat because I could not bear the idea of my brothers and sisters suffering for my pleasure when I could easily relieve their suffering.

With climate change and the ice caps melting, many species are losing their homes, causing deterioration or extinction. To me, helping the planet and others is an act of worship; when I see a little animal in the road and I stop to help it cross, I say a prayer and ask the goddess of animals to keep this creature safe.

The planet and its resources can replenish and heal over time, but it is evident that the resources we require are being used up at a

rate that the planet has never seen before. I fear we will bring about the destruction of our own species, yet I am comforted by the idea that the human race may come to an end and leave behind other creatures to recover and exist comfortably. I think the biggest conflict I have come across with other people is the belief that a deity would not let the earth and humans be destroyed; however, we cannot deny the evidence that is literally in front of our eyes. I think most Pagans differ from other religions in that we do not consider ourselves the gods' greatest creation. We know that the gods would let our own species die off so that the Earth could heal and other species could be saved. I feel that we as a race have no sense of self-preservation and will destroy ourselves as well as the environment around us, so maybe it is a good thing that our species could eventually become extinct. The planet could exist perfectly without us. Mother Earth will recover, but we will not. We are not destroying the planet; we are destroying ourselves and taking others down with us. I believe the key point right now would be just to try to preserve what we have left. If we do not change our habits and consumption, there will no longer be a human race. The planet and the ecosystems can evolve to fit the changing world, but we might not be able to exist in the changing environment.



### Reflection Questions

- Lindsey Bressler discovers resources within her Jewish tradition that encourage care for the earth. What holy texts, stories, or traditions in your own religious or spiritual background foster concern for environmental justice?
- Katy VanDusen writes of listening to the Spirit's call for her to stand up and do more about climate change, beyond a faith community that does not share her sense of urgency. Have you felt frustrated by your faith community's response to calls for justice? How has that impacted your faith? How have you been moved to respond? What are some ways you would like to work for change within your faith community?



- The Quaker tradition relies on silence and listening in its worship and decision-making. What practices help you in both your spiritual life and your work for justice?
- The Qur'an calls for all creatures to exist in interconnected community with one another. How does your religious or spiritual background teach you to relate to other living beings, beyond humans? How do you view the connection between your actions and the well-being of others whom you may not even meet, such as people who live in the Maldives? Do you believe you have a responsibility to them, and if so, in what way?
- How do you believe the world and everything in it came to be? Does your religion have a creation story or an origin story? How does your understanding of the earth's origins impact your sense of responsibility for caring for the earth?
- Sarah Franklin sees helping the planet as an act of worship. Do you view your justice work as a form of worship?