

*Turn Toward Life -- www.turntowardlife.org
an interfaith community-without-walls
exploring reverence for life as a spiritual path*

Open-Ended Eco-Spiritual Vows / Intentions / Commitments

by Dennis Rivers, Maía, (Ms.) Gene Knudsen Hoffman, & Paloma Pavel
with illustrations by Meganne Forbes -- June, 2006, Edition -- **PDF version**

The following vows and expressions of commitment, inspired by many traditions, are offered for your consideration as one of the exuberant variety of ways in which a person might express their caring about the Web of Life. Alongside of vows, in the garden of eco-spirituality, are infinite combinations of gardening, activism, prayer, meditation, friendship, reading the biographies of eco-saints, keeping a journal focused on open-ended questions (such as those explored in Chapter 1 of our book, **Turning Toward Life**), caring directly for animals, living with indigenous peoples in order to learn their lifeways, and many more. We hope you will invent many new ways of expressing your reverence for life, and delight in life, ways that we have not yet thought of.

Given the unhappy history of creeds and vows, it is only in the context of this wide field of many worthy alternatives that we feel comfortable exploring the process of making vows and declaring intentions. Verbal affirmations of one's commitments can feel deeply supportive to many people and just as deeply oppressive to many others, so please be assured that while the Turn Toward Life community strongly supports such affirmations, it does not require or prefer them. (When a particular action is required, it usually ceases to be a gift.) The spirit of our community is to support each person to serve and celebrate life in ways that are right for them, and to explore many such possibilities. We hope the consideration of these vows will inspire you to deepen your practice of reverence for life in the ways that are most meaningful for you, to find the gift that is yours to give.



***Meditation in nature
by Meganne Forbes***

1. REVERENCE FOR LIFE

I open my heart and mind
to consider, delight in, protect and celebrate
the beauty, integrity and well-being
of all life-forms and natural systems:
people of all ages, kinds and races,
animals and plants, lands and seas,
which co-exist with me now and which will come after me
into the far future. These I take
to be my kin, expressions of the same Heart of Being,
the same Living Universe, of which my life is an expression.



Offering by Meganne Forbes

2. SERVICE

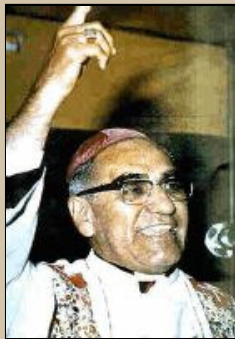
Holding reverence for life to be one of my deepest values,
I commit myself to serving the Web of Life,
to hearing the pain of both people
and our sister and brother life forms in distress,
to finding the path of service that is right for me,
and to inviting and joining, encouraging and accompanying,
others to do the same.

3. QUESTIONING AS A PATH OF TRANSFORMATION

Mindful of the way that answers can become meaningless
without the questions that evoked them,
and that even great truths can become lifeless dogmas,
I embrace the practice of creative, open-ended, questioning
of self, others and institutions as a way of deepening my engagement
with the ongoing quest for a wiser and more compassionate world.
Following in the spirit of Gandhi's teaching
"to be the change you want to see,"
I vow to translate every "Thou Shalt..."
into "How will I...?" and "How will we...?"

4. SAINTS AND EXEMPLARS

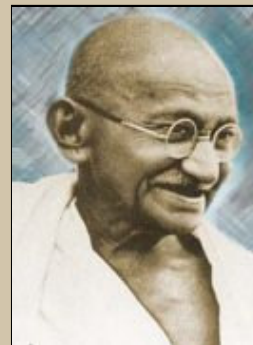
I open my heart to receive the grace
of all those who have walked before me
on the paths of compassion, caring, creativity and courage.
I open my life to receive the empowering gift
of their lives and their love for all.



Archbishop Oscar Romero



The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.



Mahama Gandhi



Rachel Corrie



Sister Dorothy Stang



Ben Linder

5. COMMUNITY

I commit myself to befriend
others who love, serve and celebrate the Web of Life,
and to work with others to build
cooperative communities of mutual support,
that honor and encourage such love, service and celebration.



Web of Life by Meganne Forbes

6. GRATEFULNESS AND PRESENCE

Learning of the countless ways
that people, the Earth, and the Universe support my life,
I vow to expand the circle of my gratefulness
becoming more fully present to each moment
of the life that is given to me,
and surrounding with mercy and lovingkindness
all that is wounded and incomplete in myself, in others and in the world
that we might journey together into a deeper completeness.

7. FORGIVENESS AND CREATIVITY

Learning from the way that nature starts anew each year
I open my heart to the new possibilities hidden in each moment
and I vow to deepen my practice of forgiveness,
to make amends for my mistakes,
to ask others to forgive me when I have injured them,
and to welcome each day as a world of opportunities
to respond to life newly and creatively.



Sacred Relationship by Meganne Forbes

8. UNIQUENESS AND VARIETY

Understanding that nature thrives in variety,
I open my heart to celebrate and to learn from difference
as well as to delight in agreement,
and I affirm the rightness of each person
to find their own path of service,
and their own unique vocabulary and community
with which to express their love for and concern about the Web of Life.

9. CHANGE

Understanding that nature is a continuous flow of change,
I open myself to acknowledge all that is changing in my life and world,
and to the periodic reevaluation, renewal and restatement
of all my commitments: to organizations in which I participate,
to points of view, citizenships, affiliations, ownerships, etc.
I will affirm and bless all those
who leave my familiar circle to follow their own path.

10. PEACE AND PERSONAL TRUTHFULNESS

Understanding that human conflicts in a technologized world
have ever more drastic consequences
for both people and the Web of Life,
I commit myself to work for the peaceful resolution of conflicts
between persons, between nations & between humans & other species.
And as part of that process, I commit myself to facing & working through
my own anger, fear, greed, ignorance,
self-deception, unfulfilled needs, and lack of skill,
such as they may be, and also the same, of my culture and my country.



Communion by Meganne Forbes

11. JOY, SORROW, PASSION AND COMPASSION

Learning from the cycle of the seasons
that holds both the harshness of winter and the pleasure of springtime
I open my heart to embrace more fully all the joys and sorrows
of my life, of all people, and of all Life.

12. EXPLORATORY SPIRAL OF ENDLESS BEGINNINGS

Understanding the limited capacity of words to hold spiritual meanings,
and understanding the temptation to try to complete with words
what can only be completed in living,
I affirm these Commitments as a way of mobilizing my inner resources
to continue my path of exploration, action, embodiment, and dialogue,
of compassion, reflection, and celebration,
not as completing, resolving or even fully describing
any of the themes they name.
I open my heart and mind to affirm and learn from
all that is reverential toward life in every tradition and culture,
and to evolve new affirmations and practices
as my reverence for life deepens.



Ancient Friend by Meganne Forbes

Reflections on Making Vows and Commitments

Choosing, creating and renewing vows. The above pages present twelve spiritual commitments that draw their inspiration from many sources, including deep ecology, Native cultures, Buddhism and Christianity. You are welcome and blessed to embrace these commitments as your own, and you are equally welcome and blessed to use them as one source of inspiration in the process of creating your own commitments or studying the traditional commitments of other spiritual communities. There is also more than enough time in a lifetime to do all of these, and stages in a person's spiritual journey when each one could be the deeply right next step.

Honoring the variety and alternations that are at the heart of Nature would suggest that we encourage one another to take the themes presented in the commitments and re-express them anew every few years in our own new words, images, dance movements, weavings, poems, music, masks, and/or seeds planted in a garden (to give only a few of the possible examples). Our gift to one another is not that we all say these things in exactly the same way, but instead that we take these themes seriously enough to each find our own heartfelt way of expressing them, living them and sharing them. We invite you into the creative labor of defining and expressing the truths that you will help to make come true through your own love and work. Our understanding and engagement with reverence for life as a spiritual path will grow better through variety of expression than through uniformity of expression.

Eco-saints and the meaning of vows. One risk of the sort of creative and individually inspired spirituality described above is that people may not go very deep, that they will settle for expressions that are too easy or too comfortable. In my view, one of the most significant responses to this challenge is to encourage people to study the lives that inspire the words. I am deeply convinced that words and ideas about the spiritual life have their deepest meaning in relation to actual lived lives, not in relation to other words in the dictionary or the encyclopedia of religion. If you want to understand courage, study the lives of Gandhi, Ken Saro-Wiwa and Martin Luther King, Jr.. If you want to understand integrity, study the lives of Rachel Carson and Wangari Maathai. If you want to understand awe in relation to the natural world, study the lives of John Muir and Thomas Berry. Human lives embody these qualities, words only point to them. Therefore I believe that the closest we can get to ensuring that people will really become engaged with the themes of reverence for life is to encourage people to study the lives of the many wonderful eco-saints down through the centuries, to make friends with them as an ongoing accompaniment to expressing commitments.

Vows as compassionate resistance. Saying yes and saying no. For many people, stating intentions and commitments is an important step toward disentangling themselves from the dominant paths of our culture. The way of continually consuming more entices us with the dream of fulfillment through buying things. The way of violence continually assures us that if we just own enough guns, we will be safe. (Never mind if the North and South Poles melt and the aging nuclear plants start to leak.) The way of domination continually reassures us that intimidating all peoples on Planet Earth with armed might will keep us secure, in spite of the fact that we are teaching the world how to intimidate us by our very own behavior. These are some of the deep, sorrow-producing illusions of our time, and they are so woven into the fabric of everyday life in many countries (especially the US, the country I live in) that it is difficult to avoid them. Thoughtfully and prayerfully defining and expressing the kind of person you want to become and the kind of world you want to build is a very personal way of compassionately resisting these dominant illusions, and of giving yourself permission to follow your heart's deepest knowledge.

Keeping alive the questions. There is a creative tension in the spiritual life, to paraphrase Rilke, between loving the questions and living, by gradual degrees, more of the answers. Vows and commitments affirm our certainty and our sense of direction in the face of all the distractions and value confusions of everyday life, and that is good. But much of the power of

the spiritual life also comes from uncertainty, from a whole set of deep, open ended questions, such as "how will I live these truths more completely?" These questions are never fully answered. They call us forward throughout our lives toward an open-ended horizon of development. Traditional religious thought describes this issue as the "mystery of God," by which is meant that although we would like to express faith commitments that are final and complete, the nature of the Divine Presence is so far beyond the grasp of our present personalities that our expressions of faith, as sincere as they may be, will never truly encompass that toward which they point.

Thus, one way of keeping vows and commitments from becoming stale or empty is to continually nurture the questions to which the vows are a response. In Chapter One of our book, **Turning Toward Life**, in which the above vows appear, we give examples of twelve deep questions about reverence for life as a spiritual path. These include such questions as, "What does reverence for life mean to me at this point in my life?" and "How am I called to serve the web of life now?" among the twelve. We invite you to study these provocative questions and to take them to heart. We also encourage you to develop your own creative questions, and to study the creative questioning of other traditions, such as Quakers and Jesuits, in order to develop a deeper sense of the dynamic role that open-ended questions can play in the evolution and unfolding of your spiritual answers.

our evolving vision...

Turn Toward Life is an interfaith community-without-walls for people who love the Earth, and who have come to understand, each through their own path, that the issues of peace, social justice and ecology, on the one hand, and the processes of enlightenment, self-realization, salvation and personal fulfillment, on the other, are infinitely interwoven. Turn Toward Life welcomes people of every religion (and of no particular religious affiliation) who are seeking to lead lives of active compassion, awareness, gratitude, forgiveness and creative co-development in relation to all people and all life.

Confronted by world continuously at war, a world of savage inequalities, and a world drifting toward ecological suicide, we seek to nurture in one another a deep reverence for life and encourage one another in a strongly compassionate resistance to the forces of greed and ignorance that are destroying the world. Taking the advice of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., we are persuaded that only a resistance grounded in love and mutual support will last long enough and be creative enough to make a difference.

For an extended discussion of Earth-inclusive spirituality, please see our book of essays, **Turning Toward Life** , of which these exploratory vows / intentions / commitments / self-permission-grantings are a part.

**A public service of the Turn Toward Life Extended Community
the URL of this document is http://www.turntowardlife.org/eco_spiritual_vows.htm
Dennis Rivers welcomes comments about the themes & topics explored in this document.
Send comments to rivers@turntowardlife.org**

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