

“Practical, insightful, and beautiful.”
Br. Mickey McGrath, O.S.F.S.
Artist and storyteller

Cultivating Wonder
and Gratitude
through Intimacy
with Nature

EARTH

Our Original Monastery

Reflective Questions

Introduction

- “Monastic tradition has its roots in a call to be in intimate connection with nature. The monk’s path was birthed in the forests and deserts, the places of wilderness and other wild edges that reflect an inner reality as well.” How do you respond to the monk’s call to the edges, to wildness?
- “Our work as spiritual seekers and contemplatives is to see all of creation as woven together in holiness and to live this truth. In this loving act we begin to knit together that which has been torn; we gather all that has been scattered.” How do your contemplative practices bear healing witness to the world?
- “Consider Earth as our original monastery. Earth is the place where we learn our most fundamental prayers, hear the call of the wild arising at dawn that awakens us to a new day, participate in the primal liturgy of praise unfolding all around us, and experience the wisdom and guidance of the seasons.” Where in nature do you most often experience a sense of sanctuary and renewal?
- “Everything in creation becomes a catalyst for my deepened self-understanding. The forest asks me to embrace my truth once again. The hummingbird invites me to sip holy nectar, the egret to stretch out my wings, the sparrows to remember my flock. Each pine cone contains an epiphany; each smooth stone offers a revelation. I watch and witness as the sun slowly makes her long arc across the sky and discover my own rising and falling. The moon will sing of quiet miracles, like those that reveal and conceal the world every day right before our eyes.” Which elements of nature mirror your true self back to you?
- “Earth is the first place where we experience the kind of deep physical nourishment required for our beings to thrive, but it is also a place of symbolic experience where we begin to make meaning from our experience. A matrix is a place of grounding and birthing.” Where are the places on earth that nurture your physical, spiritual and emotional well-being?
- “We are called to a holy remembrance of a wise knowing within us. We are not separate from nature and creation. We have animal bodies, and within us is a wild and intuitive capacity that goes beyond the carefully constructed plans we have for ourselves.” What contemplative practices resurrect the memory of the ancient kinship which connects you to holy creation?



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Chapter 1: Earth as the Original Cathedral

- “Some of the stories of St. Patrick tell us that he first learned to pray outside during his early years as a slave in Ireland and how his presence in the woods and the mountains summoned forth a continual stream of prayers in response to that sacred space. The Celtic tradition holds closely the idea of thin places, where heaven and earth touch.” *Where are the sacred spaces in the landscape where you live?*
- “Archetypal landscapes are spaces that are evocative and meaningful to people across cultures and time. Their existence acknowledges that we are shaped by the landscape we live in and that some landscapes speak to our hearts more clearly and resoundingly than others.” *What archetypal landscape calls to your heart—the forest, the mountain tops, the sea?*
- “Scripture is filled with holy encounters on top of mountains, in caves, and by lakes, rivers, and seas. Irish monks were inspired by the desert call to find solitude in wild places and journeyed out to the wilderness for an experience of radical intimacy with God. One of the ways to connect more deeply and intimately with a felt sense of creation as the original sacred space is to remember the landscapes that have personal significance.” *Which landscapes have personal significance for you?*
- “We each have within us many threshold places where our love of the Divine meets our love of the world, where our hearts and minds unite, where the differing parts of ourselves come together to listen to our calling in the world.” *Where are the places within you where your wild edges meet?*
- “Stability is one of the three vows Benedictine monks make. It is a commitment to a particular monastery for life. St. Benedict required his monks to commit to a monastery for their whole lives so that they would not run away when things got challenging.” *When in your life have you felt called to commit to the vow of stability?*
- “There is another aspect to the practice of stability, and that is commitment to a place. When we vow to stay and work through the challenges we feel, we are not only deepening our relationship with those we share a life with but also with the landscape that shapes us and the creatures and plants that inhabit our region.” *How has stability called you to grow in your love of the particularity of the place where you live, the particular cathedral you inhabit?*
- John Valters Paintner writes: “When we say the Bible is “inspired by God,” that isn’t to say that God dictated stories to people but rather that people were compelled to write stories about their encounters and understanding and—perhaps most importantly—even questions about God. Myths aren’t ‘made-up stories’; they are tales that point to greater truths.” *What bible story speaks to you as a mythological or archetypal tale? What insight does this particular biblical story hold for you at this point in your life? How might your relationship with the bible as your sacred book deepen if you were to begin to understand it as a book of sacred archetypal stories?*



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Chapter 2: Earth as the Original Scriptures

- “The Celtic Christian tradition maintains that we receive two books of revelation. One is the book of the scripture texts, and the other is the vast book of creation. We need both to receive the fullness of divine wisdom.” *Where does God reveal Gods-Self to you?*
- “When we pay attention to the rhythm of the seasons, we learn a great deal about the rise and fall of life, about emptiness and fullness. Spring invites us to blossom forth; summer calls us to our own ripening; autumn demands that we release and let go; and winter quietly whispers to us to rest, to sink into the dark fertile space of unknowing, to release the demands of productivity and calendars and to-do lists, and simply to be.” *What is the rhythm of the present season calling you to do now?*
- “When you bring your attention to something in nature, whether a tree or a stone or a creature, and bring yourself fully present to it, you can sense its inner stillness, meeting a place of stillness in your own heart. You can experience how much it rests in the great Being who holds all of us, with no divisions, and in that awareness you discover that place within you as well.” *How does this image of Earth as original scripture, as the first text we meet long before we encounter the holy books, alter not just your understanding of the earth, but of you too as a creature of the earth?*
- “[At a time of grief] winter's sparseness reflected back to me my own inner reality. It was during this time that I fell in love with winter and the gifts she offers. “What is it the season for?” a wise spiritual director used to ask me, inviting me to tend to my inner seasons as well as the outer one unfolding around me. She knew that nature's wisdom could offer me guidance and grace.” *What wisdom do the seasons hold for you?*
- “We are called to seek the wild spaces of our lives, to break free from the places that feel confining but also to find places of sanctuary where we are offered the gift of rest and safety. From there we can find nourishment to return again and again to the wild edges and hear nature as scripture verse.” *Where do you experience the wild spaces in your life? Where are the places of rest and sanctuary?*
- John Valters Paintner writes: “This is one of the lessons that Jesus gives through his example: before action, contemplation must take place. And for true contemplation to happen, one must step outside oneself.” *How do you get beyond the noise and confusion and chaos that surround you, that you have created around yourself?*



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Chapter 3: Earth as the Original Saints

- “The animals don't spend time in discernment; the trees don't go off on retreat to listen to their calling. They simply are exactly as they were created to be, and in that simple witness, they reveal a path of yielding, of not resisting, and of simply allowing themselves to unfold as intended.” *Why do we, as human beings, work so hard to resist our calling?*
- “We need time in silence, away from the distractions of daily life. We need guides who can help us to identify and celebrate our gifts. We need wise ones who can help us identify our shadow material—those places of resistance and refusal to be who we are most called to be.” *Who are the wise ones, the guides you turn to who help you discover who you truly are?*
- “One way to encourage a posture of contentment in our lives is gratitude. Gratitude is a way of being in the world that does not assume we are owed anything, and the fact that we have something at all—our lives, breath, families, friends, shelter, laughter, or other simple pleasures—is cause for celebration.” *What might happen if you began to cultivate a way of being in the world that treats all the things you take for granted as gifts, knowing none of us deserves particular graces?*
- “Gratitude is a practice that can begin with the smallest acknowledgment and be expanded out to every facet of our existence.” *How might gratitude help you to cultivate a healthy asceticism and a rejection of consumerism?*
- John Valters Paintner writes: “[Jesus teaches] don't worry... Matthew's Jesus gives us examples of our fellow creation that do not worry—and are all the better for it. The birds of the air and the lilies of the field are those whom we humans should look to as an example. These are the original saints. The implication of this new commandment ... is to trust in the Creator, as does the rest of creation. It is to avoid being so anxious about the little things in life that we ignore or overlook the bigger picture. The rest of creation, by design, finds balance. Only we humans are so worried about our survival that we horde and destroy.” *How might we better follow the example set by the winged angels we can see and the heavenly paradise we touch? How might the sparrows be a witness to what sainthood really means?*



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Chapter 4: Earth as the Original Spiritual Directors

- “In the tradition of both the desert and the Celtic monks, having a spiritual director or soul friend was considered essential to the spiritual life. A wise guide and mentor can help remind us of our heart’s true desires and how to live with more integrity.” *Who is your anam cara, your soul friend? To whom do you turn for compassionate and wise guidance?*
- “In Christian tradition, there were often holy men and women who were described as having a special relationship to animals. St. Benedict, for example, befriended a crow who was later said to have saved his life from being poisoned. It was said of St. Kevin that an otter would bring him salmon every day from the lake so he could eat. These special connections and relationships to animals were once a sign of holiness. The animals, as well as other aspects of creation, often acted as soul friends to the monks and mystics.” *Soul friends do not have to be only human. Which animals or other elements of the creation, offer their soul friendship and wisdom to you?*
- “We are called to live the life of the new creation in which right relationship to all creation is restored. We are not anticipating its arrival but living it’s becoming.” *In what way are you living the creation here and now, honouring the wisdom of your body and the body of creation?*
- “Merton knew that the true mentor of the soul was nature itself. The fields, sun, mud, clay, wind, forests, sky, earth, and water are all companions for our own inner journeys.” *What guidance and wisdom have you gleaned from the elements of water, wind, earth, and fire?*
- “All created things await to serve the divine purpose in our lives. There is nothing in nature that falls outside these parameters. Through every rock, every bird, every flower, and every creature, God enters into intimacy and communion with us. This is how God’s wisdom is revealed, and we would do well to listen for their spiritual direction.” *What would it mean to listen into the deep wisdom of these four elements for our own spiritual direction and guidance in life?*
- “The ancient monks used to practice a kind of inner and outer watchfulness. The desert mothers and fathers wrote about this frequently, for a central part of their spiritual discipline was to show up for life and pay attention. This kind of presence can be challenging in our modern world when our attention is pulled in so many different directions.” *How might you begin to practice presence to another as gift of reverence and mutuality?*
- “When we practice watchfulness, we become aware of the wonder that surrounds us. Walking the path of wonder is a radical act in a world numbed by cynicism and despair.” *What holy surprises await you when you pay attention?*



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Chapter 5: Earth as the Original Icon

- “Icons play a significant role in the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition. Theologically, icons are considered to be sacred as they offer a doorway to communion between heaven and Earth.” *If you believe that creation is the original icon, how do you reverence and practice presence to nature as holy text, a window to the Divine Presence at work in the world?*
- “St. Hildegard of Bingen saw the presence of the Holy through what she called *viriditas*, which essentially means the greening power of God. This greening operates on the physical level and ... and on the spiritual level. Our souls can be greening, or they might feel as if they are arid and dry.” *Is your soul greening? Can you feel the Divine working through you?*
- “Angela of Foligno was a thirteenth-century Franciscan mystic. She saw the presence of the Holy in the world as the world being pregnant with the Divine Presence [which] is the heart of the Incarnation and also the doorway into an icon.” *What are you learning about how God works in our life when you pay close attention to nature as a window into the divine nature?*
- “Nature as icon reveals to us both the glory of divine creation and also the reality of human development and the rampant use of plastics, toxins, chemicals, and fossil fuels.” *As a pilgrim on the contemplative path, can you open up toward deepened intimacy with nature and see the truth of things, discerning what you are being called to release in terms of habits, practices, and ways of being that burden us and harm to Earth?*
- “Lament releases the layers of grief we are holding and makes room within us for the Spirit to break through in new ways.” *Since we live in a culture that denies pain and suffering and encourages every possible method of distraction, what can you do to begin to acknowledge the reality of disorientation and grief in the world we all live in?*
- “To behold Earth as an icon of Sacred Presence, we must also wrestle with how Earth reveals the terrible things we have unleashed upon her. Lament is a necessary first step toward healing. We are in the midst of what St. John of the Cross might call a “dark night” experience collectively, one in which we are standing at an impasse.” *How will you begin to find ways of expressing the deep pain and anguish you feel in this state of impasse?*
- “The experiences of mystics across time reassure us that the usual rational ways of proceeding are of no use, but when we allow ourselves to have the experience of impasse—when we move fully into it and allow our hearts to experience grief—then transformation can enter in.” *What spiritual practices help you to move into and through the experience of impasse?*



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Chapter 6: Earth as the Original Sacrament

- “Sacramentality breaks through our surface obsessions in the world and plunges us into the depth of the Sacred at every turn.” *How do you respond to the spontaneous reminders of God’s creative upwelling and expansive love, calling you to love beyond boundaries?*
- “This sense of the sacramentality of all creation reveals to us the God of immanence—the One who is intimately involved in our world and who expresses divine love through the created world. However, there is also the transcendent dimension of God, in which we recognize God’s wholly otherness. The sacraments of nature can also reveal this aspect of the Divine to us.” *Walking in nature, are you able to breathe more deeply and experience a freedom from your problems and narrow vision of the world?*
- “The mystical tradition is clear that the state of ecstasy—when the human person is caught up into union with the Divine—is considered highly favorable ... The word ecstasy has become synonymous with joyous exaltation, and yet we might often find ourselves holding back.” *If you find joy difficult to embrace because of the sense of moving beyond oneself and losing some control, try to just rest in the moment and simply allow the experience to move through you, letting your boundaries soften. What do you notice or discover?*
- John Valters Paintner writes: “Seeing nature as the original sacrament does not mean doing away with institutional churches or formal sacraments or even rote prayers. The enduring universality of the psalms is a testament to their usefulness in modern spirituality—providing us with words when we lack them. But what we mustn’t do is think that these human creations have surpassed or replaced the revelatory role of nature. Nature continues to be sacramental, a conduit that connects us to the Divine.” *Does your spiritual practice incorporate elements of ancient prayers alongside wonderment of the sacramental vision of nature?*



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Chapter 7: Earth as the Original Liturgy

- “We have separated ourselves from creation by claiming consciousness only for ourselves. All elements of creation participate in this primordial cathedral, scriptures, saints, spiritual directors, icon, sacrament, and liturgy offering wisdom to us with each turn. These sacred places of encounter with the Divine are profoundly embodied.” *What wisdom have you discovered in the primordial cathedral of nature, in scriptures, from saints, spiritual directors, icon, sacrament, or liturgy? How can you not feed your soul when you are immersed in riches such as these?*
- “The psalms see all of creation itself as offering continual praise to God. The sea, the sky, the trees, the animals, the stars—all these are seen to be singing God's glory without human words but with another kind of language. All of creation is called to praise the sacredness of all things, never exhausting this possibility.” *Have you accepted the invitation to join the continual and ever-unfolding chorus of celebration happening all around you? Does your praise arise from your heart as spontaneously as it does from pines and panthers, from the sea and sloths?*
- “In an old Irish poem about a mistle thrush, the bird is celebrated for its beauty and described as giving an “impromptu sermon” that teaches his listeners much about the goodness of God. The bird is not only sacrament but also preacher and liturgist, offering his own perspective on celebration of the Divine Source.” *What impromptu sermon have you heard from the birds who share your sacred space?*
- “The psalms of praise often describe nature as alive and in perpetual celebration. Thomas Merton saw his call as a monk to listen for the song being sung through all of creation. He was invited to join in with this original liturgy already happening all around him.” *When do you make time to touch the paradise that pulses all around us?*
- “All of nature sings glory to God, even the seasons themselves. The liturgical calendar reflects the seasonal cycle of dying and rising. Nature has her own liturgy ... feast days in the calendar of creation's unfolding, times to celebrate as nature offers up her signs of what is to come.” *What feast day in nature's liturgy are you celebrating today? What liturgical hour are the birds singing you all the way back home to?*
- “We can come to know Earth as whole in this moment, while also acknowledging the great work we must do to restore the wholeness out of the destruction we have wrought. Practicing paradise is one way to restore wholeness and is built on the idea of a ‘life free from care.’” *What do you need to change in your life to live a meaningful and unburdened life? How does your life's purpose and meaning differ from what society thinks is valuable?*



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