As I write this article, the apple trees in my back yard have yet to burst into bloom. But by the time you read this Earth Letter, perhaps sometime around Earth Day on April 22, I may be on a ladder wrapping quarter-sized apples in paper bags to protect them from bugs.

Earth Day belongs to no religion and every religion. It was not designed as a religious day, but from the outset, communities of faith were invited and encouraged to participate. Every religion can relate to the call of Earth Day to live sustainably on the planet and to nurture the planet so that it will continue to nurture us and all creatures.

If you look very far in any religious tradition, you can find some version of the Golden Rule, which says to treat others as you would have them treat you. But all religions also contain some version of what we could call the Green Rule, that is, to treat the earth as we would like it to treat us. Here are a few examples of what the Green Rule looks like in the writings of various religions:

- Jainism: One who looks on the creatures of the Earth, big and small, as one’s own self, comprehends this immense world.

Continued on page 12
ABOUT US

Earth Ministry engages the religious community in environmental stewardship. We work in partnership with individuals and congregations to respond to this great moral challenge through education, modeling sustainable lifestyle choices, and organizing for social change through environmental advocacy.

Founded in 1992, Earth Ministry has a history of leading the way in caring for the environment from a faith perspective. Our Greening Congregations Program was the first in the country to help houses of worship implement sustainable practices, and our faithful advocacy program is on the cutting edge of empowering clergy and lay leaders to speak out on public policy issues.

Earth Ministry supports a growing network of congregations and has a national membership. While Earth Ministry is rooted in the Christian tradition, we actively engage all religious communities on climate and energy issues through Washington Interfaith Power & Light. Our programs and resources are available to all.

www.earthministry.org  www.waipl.org

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it! (Ps 118:24) Although this Psalm is specifically referencing the Sabbath, one can certainly make the case that every day is a joyful day in the eyes of God. We might also expect that April 22, Earth Day, is especially pleasing to our Creator, as it celebrates the very gift that God has given us: our one and only planet.

All across the country — all across the world — people are joining together this Earth Day to care for our common home. Communities are hosting educational events, green-living fairs, speeches, rallies, and hands-on ways to take action to protect God’s good gift of creation.

In this issue of Earth Letter, we celebrate the interfaith nature of this global event. Rev. Meighan Pritchard’s cover story introduces us to how different world religions embody the Green Rule, which instructs us to live in right relation with creation. In addition, two insightful articles provide Jewish and Muslim perspectives on Earth Day and environmental stewardship — Rabbi Seth Goldstein’s take is on page 8, and Fatima Ashraf’s viewpoint is on page 10.

Rounding out the issue with personal reflections, science teacher and candidate for ordination Laura Baumgartner writes an Earth Day letter to her students, and I share a bit regarding how my thoughts about the holiday have evolved over the last 20 years.

Earth Day is a true interfaith holiday when all humankind honors our beautiful island home. Earth Ministry/WAIPL invites you to carry forward what you learn this Earth Day into your everyday life as you continue on your journey as a steward of creation.

Blessings,
GOINGS-ON

Earth Ministry relies on donations from individuals like you to make this important work possible. Join or renew your membership in Earth Ministry, sign up for monthly giving, or make a special gift at www.earthministry.org or by calling (206) 632-2426. Thank you for your support!

Pope Francis and the Thin Green Line

Thanks to Pope Francis’ blockbuster encyclical on the environment, creation care has had quite the buzz over the last 10 months. Earth Ministry made “Pope Francis and the Thin Green Line” the focus of our winter Colleague Consultation, which brings together congregational Green Team leaders and Earth Ministry/WAIPL members from around the region.

Hosted by Bellevue First Congregational UCC, the gathering focused on the encyclical in the context of current Northwest issues – specifically, how people of faith can help hold the “thin green line” that is preventing coal and oil companies from shipping fossil fuels from our coastal ports.

Participants from 15 houses of worship learned the key messages of the pope’s letter, and returned to their congregations with concrete ways to put faith into action for climate justice – including providing timely comments on oil proposals and opportunities to attend Congressional town hall meetings.

Stepping It Up at the State Capitol

Throughout the legislative session, Earth Ministry/WAIPL members made sure the faith community was heard on bills that matter to the health and safety of our communities.

Religious leaders and nurses joined forces for a drop-in day in support of the Toxic-Free Kids and Families Act (SB 6440) on January 8, and dozens of members participated in a “literature drop” on toxics and children’s health during Interfaith Advocacy Day on February 4.

Over 80 people attended the Spokane Legislative Workshop at which Earth Ministry’s Jessie Dye presented on the Toxic-Free Kids and Families Act. At Interfaith Advocacy Day in Olympia, Jessie led two workshops on our environmental priorities, and Randi Abrams-Caras, campaign director of the Washington Toxics Coalition, provided specific policy details on the toxics legislation as well as a Jewish perspective. Jessie and Outreach Coordinator Jessica Zimmerle supported nearly 300 faithful activists as they met with their elected officials. An additional 600 people attended Catholic Lobby Day on February 8, calling for toxic chemical reform.

Several members took the extra step of attending legislative hearings in support of the Toxic-Free Kids and Families Act, including Darcy Huffman, who is the resource and communication director at The Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Olympia. She provided powerful testimony in a Senate Health Care Committee hearing in favor of SB 6440, urging lawmakers to act on behalf of the most vulnerable in our community.

Thanks to the efforts of Darcy and countless others of you who made the moral voice heard, the Toxic Free Kids and Families Act passed the legislature and will soon become law!
Spiritual Activism, Climate Change, and Liberation Theology for Our Times

University Congregational United Church of Christ, an Earth Ministry Greening Congregation partner, held a lecture series on spiritual activism and climate change featuring Scottish activist Alastair McIntosh in February.

Author of several books on faith and environment, Alastair spoke on how we can sustain our activism for social, environmental or religious change. He used a case study in Scotland to explore the ways community empowerment has had a positive impact on tackling climate change. He also explored what theology has to say about the driving factors behind climate change, and how spirituality and theology might help us cope with climate impacts yet to come.

Earth Ministry hosted a lunch discussion with Alastair in partnership with University Congregational UCC, in which Alastair was eager to hear the perspectives of Washington State religious leaders on faith-based climate work in the Northwest, and shared the ways our efforts overlap with Eco-Congregations in Scotland.

Standing Up to Oil

People of faith turned out in force to stand up to oil this winter. Earth Ministry members participated in back-to-back comment periods on oil projects threatening our waterways, ecosystems, and communities.

We certainly made big oil take notice, as evidenced by the withdrawal of one of the proposals in Grays Harbor!

Right after wrapping up the comment period for Grays Harbor, we turned our attention to the Tesoro and Savage proposal in Vancouver, WA. If built, this would be the largest oil-by-rail facility in the United States, shipping a staggering 360,000 barrels of crude oil a day. To put it in perspective, that’s 42% of the capacity of the (rejected) Keystone XL pipeline.

Public comment on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for this dangerous project intersected with the busy holiday season, but that didn’t slow down a record-breaking 289,256 people who submitted comments and attended 3 public hearings in opposition to the Vancouver oil terminal.

Rev. Richenda Fairhurst from Camas United Methodist was the enthusiastic rally emcee for a packed house of over 1,000 at the first hearing in Vancouver. Earth Ministry Board Member Rev. Holly Hallman, members of University Unitarian, and many others represented the faith community at a second Vancouver hearing. Religious leaders in Spokane also turned out in force, with Lutheran Bishop Martin Wells giving strong testimony. Rev. Barbara Rossing from Leavenworth, Rev. Tom Soeldner of the Earth Ministry Board, and many other people of faith attended to show their opposition to big oil.
Mind the Store
As part of the Toxic-Free Legacy Coalition, Earth Ministry/WAIPL has remained engaged in the Mind the Store campaign that advocates for retailers to implement store-wide safe chemical policies.

In October, Earth Ministry volunteers were ready to participate in a national day of action at Macy’s. We canceled at the last minute because Macy’s management committed to phasing out products with flame retardants in their stores mere hours before our planned events. That’s people power!

An encouraging number of retailers are listening to consumer demand and plan to stop carrying furniture and other products with these toxic chemicals. However, others still need to step up to the plate. Many people of faith contacted Fred Meyer’s president in the midst of the busy holiday season to request implementation of a safe chemical policy. Together, we are making sure that retailers mind the store.

Tacoma Methanol Plant
On Ash Wednesday, over 1500 Pierce County residents turned out to oppose a plan to build the world’s largest methanol production plant on the Port of Tacoma’s tide flats.

People of faith asked that the whole cycle of fracking and transporting the natural gas, producing and shipping the methanol, and manufacturing the end plastic products be part of the environmental review. The project poses critical questions about the source of the massive amounts of water and electricity this plant will require, and the chemicals that will be in the run-off from operation of a 125-acre industrial plant.

United Methodist pastors also offered Ash Wednesday ashes to all who attended the hearing – believers and non-believers, those who were for or against the plant or still deciding – as an invitation to consider our own mortality and repentance.

Northwest Innovation Works, the Chinese-backed company behind the project, has since put their plans on hold thanks to “the tone and substance of the vocal opposition that has emerged in Tacoma.” Once again, your voice has been heard!

Earth Ministry Brunch BINGO!
Save the date for Earth Ministry’s first-ever Brunch BINGO fundraiser! Enjoy a delicious brunch buffet and play four rousing rounds of BINGO for fabulous prizes while raising funds to protect our air, water, and forests. You, our community of friends and creation care heroes, are the stars of the show! We can’t wait to celebrate with you.

Saturday, April 16, 2016
11am–2pm
Brunch buffet opens 11am
BINGO games begin 11:30am
Fremont Abbey Arts Center
4272 Fremont Ave N
Seattle, WA 98103

Tickets are $50 per person and include brunch, mimosas or beer, and your first card for each round of BINGO. This event is 21+ and pre-registration is required: purchase tickets and get more information at brunchbingo.brownpapertickets.com. Still have questions? Call Jessica at (206) 632-2426. Come to support Earth Ministry’s good work, have fun, and WIN!

brunchbingo.brownpapertickets.com

Rev. Katie Klosterman, Rev. Jenny Phillips, and Melinda Giese (candidate for ordination) giving out ashes at the Tacoma methanol hearing
A Letter to My Students  By Laura Baumgartner

I have taught chemistry and environmental science to high school students for over 20 years. Some of my students arrive more ready than others to think about how environmental issues affect them. However, Earth Day is something all my students can recognize. It’s a good starting point for a conversation.

Sometimes, though, I struggle with not being able to explain myself fully to my students. I believe in the power of public education to provide opportunity, regardless of a student’s faith or family background. I always try to make my classroom a place where my students are safe and heard, whether they are from a Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Jain, Jewish, or non-religious family.

I wish I could tell my students how participating in Earth Day events is an act of faith for me. I limit myself to saying that I am passionate about environmental issues because I think we have a responsibility to care for our common home. I help them see ways we can care for the earth that are relatively straightforward if we work together. Here is what I wish I could say to them.

To my students,

You are God’s beloved children, from a diverse set of religious traditions, in whom I place much trust for the future of our planet because I know you are beautiful people, created and born to do beautiful things.

We share a sacred space on this planet with everything else that is here: all the atoms and molecules, all the crystals and rocks and nutrients, the trees and plants and animals. All this stuff on our planet is part of one big system. It’s all interdependent, and it’s all important. We make choices every day that allow us to remember – or forget – the importance of everything else that is here with us.

We make decisions like what to eat for lunch and how to treat people who are different from us that either strengthen or weaken the connections between us. When we are making choices that strengthen our connections, we are acting in ways that honor our place in the created world, the place where you were born to do beautiful things.

When you go from my classroom, strengthen the connections among each other and with the rest of creation. Love beauty and know your strength.

Your teacher,
Laura

When I think of my students reading my note to them this Earth Day, I imagine that they will somehow hear deep in my message something that resonates in their souls. I imagine that they come to know in their very beings that they have a connection to the ground on which they stand that goes back to the time before their parents and grandparents, that draws them to make wise choices for the earth and stand up for what is just and right.

And maybe, sometime not that long from now, my students will pass that understanding on to their children and students as well.

Laura Baumgartner is a high school science teacher and candidate for ministry in the United Methodist Church. She is currently serving as a seminary intern at Earth Ministry.
The first Earth Day in 1970 saw 20 million Americans demonstrating for a healthy, sustainable environment in rallies across the country. Now, Earth Day is the largest civic observance in the world, with more than one billion people in 192 countries participating each year.

As a global holiday, Earth Day has become a truly interfaith event. Every major faith tradition has creation care as a core value, and faith communities have become key organizers of Earth Day activities. All of us rejoice in the coming of spring and the renewal of life, and we unite in celebration of our one and only planet.

I suppose this is where I come clean and say that I haven’t always been a fan of Earth Day.

I value the sentiment behind the day, of course, but in practical application I’ve sometimes found it wanting. Earth Day 1994 stands out prominently in my memory – my coworker and I were on a 6-month, 30-state national tour organizing for federal fisheries reform, and we were in southern California in April.

What I remember most about that Earth Day were the miles of booths in the Los Angeles convention center selling scented candles, upcycled glass art, plastic bag dispensers, and other “eco-gifts.” I was appalled by the display of thinly disguised consumption in the name of the earth.

I was also frustrated that for just one day a year, people would recycle a can or buy an organic vegetable and think they had done their part for the earth. Then Earth Day would pass, and everyone would go back to their old habits. But as I’ve grown older, I find myself having more compassion for nascent environmentalists and appreciating the emphasis that Earth Day puts on changing our behavior – especially as the day gains more momentum and exposure.

It’s said that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, and Earth Day opens the door. We start by making just one good decision today – to bus to work, to buy organic, or to not buy at all. Then we make another good decision tomorrow. And the next day. And soon what began as an Earth Day activity becomes a lifestyle choice, supported by the ongoing awareness that Earth Day brings to the environment.

Earth Day has grown so vast that it can no longer be contained in a single day, and events are now spread throughout the entire month of April. There is a diversity of meaningful activities from which to choose, including habitat restoration work parties, environmental lectures, creation care worship services, and interfaith climate justice events. Earth Ministry has hosted all of these and more, and we invite you to join us again for this year’s Interfaith Earth Day event at Seattle University on April 21 (see www.earthministry.org for details).

Earth Day is a time to celebrate the bounty and the beauty of the earth and commit to be good stewards of it. I hope that you find a new way to celebrate, reconnect to, and honor the gift of creation this year. And remember that every day is Earth Day!

LeeAnne Beres is Earth Ministry’s Executive Director, a position she has held for over 10 years.
Each fall, the Jewish community returns to celebrate the High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashanah is the beginning of the New Year, and Yom Kippur, ten days later, is the Day of Atonement. Together these days are the most sacred time of the year, a time for self-reflection, for taking stock of our lives, for recognizing where we have erred in the past and need to make amends.

This last idea, of making amends for past wrongs, is a process in Hebrew known as teshuvah. Commonly translated as "repentance," teshuvah literally means "turning" or "return." When we do repentance, we turn away from past wrongs or harmful behaviors and towards a new vision of ourselves.

The High Holidays, the time of return, come during the change of seasons from summer to fall. The weather turns a bit colder, leaves on the trees change color, and here in the Northwest the rains begin to fall. It is also the time the salmon are running, making their way from ocean waters to rivers and streams to spawn and renew their cycle of life. Thus, as we engage in a process of spiritual return, nature is engaged in a process of return as well.

Every year during the High Holiday season I leave the synagogue and take a walk in the woods, in order to take the opportunity to watch the salmon running. And every year when I do so, I note this confluence between spirit and nature, and am reminded of the deep connections between Judaism and the environment.

It is not just Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur that highlight this connection to nature. The major Jewish festivals have both a historic reason and an agricultural basis. Sukkot, for example, celebrates the wanderings of the Israelites in the desert on their 40-year journey from slavery to freedom. At the same time, Sukkot is a fall harvest festival, and we dwell in booths (sukkah) and wave the lulav and etrog, a cluster of four plants representing the totality of plant species.

Passover celebrates the exodus from Egypt and the process of liberation. Passover is also a spring harvest festival complete with symbolic foods like greens and eggs to symbolize new life and growth. And both of these holidays begin on the full moon, highlighting our connection to the lunar cycle and its rhythms.

Because of these connections, my commitment to my faith tradition calls me to commit to care for our natural world. Knowing that the practice of Judaism is rooted in natural cycles moves me to recognize that I am dependent on and in relationship with the environment, and I therefore have an obligation to care for it. It is a religious obligation as much as loving one’s neighbor as oneself. (And indeed we have one holiday, Tu Bishvat, sometimes called the “new year of the trees,” which is exclusively about nature.)

I know my concern is shared by many others. Earth Day each spring is an opportunity to transcend our individual traditions, join together with other faith communities to celebrate our natural world, and pledge once more to protect it. This year, Earth Day is particularly poignant because it falls on the eve of Passover.
On Passover we recount the story of the exodus from Egypt, a paradigm for redemption, and ask ourselves how we can manifest redemption in our day. This year, then, as we sit around our Passover Seder tables, we can offer a prayer for the redemption of our natural world, of a world renewed with new life and hope for a better tomorrow.

Jewish teachings make our role in attaining this renewal explicit. Numerous *mitzvot* (sacred obligations) found in the Torah direct our hearts to care for our world. For example, we read in Deuteronomy 20:19: “When you wage war against a city, and you have to besiege it in order to capture it, do not destroy its trees, wielding an ax against them. You may eat from them, but you must not cut them down.”

Setting aside the issue of waging war for a moment, we are taught that we should not wantonly destroy natural resources, a principle that gets codified in later Jewish literature as *bal taschit*, “do not waste.” This principle can guide our decision-making on contemporary environmental concerns and practices, from recycling and compost to renewable energy sources.

Jewish sacred scripture, the Torah, begins with the story of creation. The first chapters of the Book of Genesis tell the story of the creation of the world, how God spoke and made the world in six days, continually refining: separating light from darkness, ground from sky, water from land, and populating the land with plants, animals, and humans.

The story of creation for me is a story of spiritual truth, not scientific fact. It tells us of our fundamental relationship with the natural world. For when humans were created, the text teaches, they were put in the Garden “to till and to tend it” (Genesis 2:15) — *l’avdah u’l’ishmrah* — to use the earth for what is necessary, but to do so in a way that cares for and protects nature.

An ancient biblical commentary (known as a *midrash*) makes this more explicit. Adding details to the story of creation, the authors of the commentary imagine God giving the first human a tour of the Garden:

> When God created Adam, God led him around the Garden of Eden and said to him: “Behold my works. See how wonderful and beautiful they are. All that I have created, for your sake did I create it. Now see to it that you do not spoil and destroy my world, for if you do, there will be no one to repair it after you.” (Kohelet Rabbah 7:13)

I think about this each fall when I watch the salmon around Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah has another association as the “birthday of the world”—the anniversary of the events of creation. It is a time that we can put ourselves in the place of the biblical Adam, who is charged with the great responsibility to care for the earth.

This is the one world we have, and our one chance to get it right. If we do not do what we can do to protect our world, there will not be anyone after us to rectify our mistakes.

Rabbi Seth Goldstein is Rabbi at Temple Beth Hatfiloh in Olympia, Washington, and is also currently a board member of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association.
Earth Day was established in 1970 to raise awareness about the environment. Islam, however, did a little more than that (if only Muslims knew); it provided clear directives for action, as early as the seventh century. The Qur’an is filled with verses and the Sunnah is filled with actions, on how to be green stewards of the earth.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, “the earth is a mosque.” You can pray anywhere. The entire planet is meant to be a place for worship of its Creator. You can kneel down in awe and gratitude of Allah on grass, on sand, on a mountain, in a cornfield to worship. Therefore, the planet and its people deserve to be protected for their divine nature.

To demonstrate the connection between Islam and the environment, let’s talk about waste, water, watts, and food. These four topics are especially important because civilizations have been built and destroyed on their ability or inability to manage them. Think about it – a society that cannot remove its trash, preserve its water, create energy, and distribute food – will not flourish.

As Muslim-Americans who live in this country, we create waste, drink water, use energy, and eat food. We need to start thinking responsibly about our actions and how they impact the environment. Knowing what our Deen says about being green is the perfect place to start.

America leads the world in waste production. We are less than 5% of the world’s population and create over 25% of the entire world’s waste. Allah (God) says, “Corruption has appeared on the land and in the sea because of what the hands of humans have wrought. This is in order that We give them a taste of the consequences of their misdeeds that perhaps they will turn to the path of right guidance.” (Qur’an, 30:41) Scholars have cited “corruption” in this verse to be synonymous with pollution or waste. “The path of right guidance,” means the path of justice and righteousness towards the planet.

We have become a society that takes water for granted. The average American uses 150 gallons of water per day. Those in developing countries barely use 5 gallons per day. Still 1.1 billion people on the planet do not have access to safe and clean drinking water.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) urged moderation and thriftiness in the use of water. He warned against wasting water when doing wudu, even if one lives near a river. Water is from God and should therefore be freely available to all. There is a stipulation in the Shari’ah that prohibits the sale of water. Those selling water, for example, the bottled water vendors at Hajj, cannot charge for the fluid. They can only charge for the cost of the packaging.

The United States consumes 5 times more watts of energy than China and renewable energy only accounts for 7% of our energy use. Non-renewable sources are extracted from the ground. They are taken from the earth. Renewable sources are
gifts that come from above. Allah reminds us repeatedly in the Qur’an of the power of the sun and wind, “Among His Signs is this, that He sends the winds, as heralds of glad tidings, giving you a taste of His Mercy — that the ships may sail by his command and that you may seek of His Bounty...” (Qur’an, 30:46) Allah reminds us that wind is a useful blessing!

Although the United States is the world’s super power and richest country on the planet, still millions of Americans do not have access to healthy food. In New York City alone, 3 million people live in “food deserts,” neighborhoods without grocery stores or access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

Allah allows us to eat heartily, but warns us against excessiveness. “O Children of Adam! Wear your beautiful apparel at every time and place of prayer: eat and drink; But waste not by excess, For Allah loveth not the wasters.” (Qur’an, 7:31) It is amazing how much food is wasted each day while millions around the globe are starving.

There is also a Sunnah of Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon him) that while eating, take the food out from the side and not the middle. Eat from the food which is closest to you. While this Sunnah is about serving oneself food, I thought, could it also mean to buy local?

April 22 is Earth Day. As Muslims, how will we protect the planet, not just on this one day, but every day? Ibrahim Abdul-Matin, author of the book, Green Deen: What Islam Teaches about Protecting the Planet, has launched a nationwide movement for Muslims called “Green Ramadan.” This movement is about three things:

- Getting Muslims and mosques across the country to adopt green principles for the holy month of Ramadan;
- Showing the power of the Muslim community and how great our contribution to the environmental movement can be; and
- Inspiring Muslims to look to their Deen for guidance on how to be stewards of the earth.

It’s time for Muslims to build a movement for everyone, every day, not just on Earth Day.

Reprinted with permission from The Eco Muslim, www.theecomuslim.com.

Fatima Ashraf is a member of Muslim Green Team, a project of the Service Corps department of the Muslim American Society in the San Francisco Bay Area.
Buddhism: Cut down the forest of desire, not the forest of trees.

Baha’i Faith: Know thou that every created thing is a sign of the revelation of God.

Judaism: When God created the first human beings, God led them around all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said: “See my works how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! Think of this, and do not corrupt or destroy My world.”

There are many more such examples.

In his book *Hell and High Water*, Scottish author and Quaker activist Alastair McIntosh reaches clear back to Plato’s *Republic* for an ancient Greek example of the sustainable lifestyle. One could think of this as Socrates’ version of the Green Rule. Socrates and a fellow named Glaucon are debating about the ideal city-state. Socrates lays out a model of a modest place where people eat a vegetarian diet, practice arts and crafts, and spend their spare time singing hymns to the gods. Glaucon wants a city-state based on luxury: the finest of everything, lots of servants.

Socrates points out that to sustain such a lifestyle would take many more resources than the local land can provide; therefore this city-state will need to take resources from its neighboring city-states. They will not relinquish them willingly, which means the city-state must arm for war, support an army, build fortifications, and learn to treat others as enemies. The consequences of not living sustainably are a militarized, fearful, warring society.

At Prospect United Church of Christ, where I serve as pastor, we incorporated earth care into our Ash Wednesday service as a Lenten spiritual discipline. The period of 40 days leading up to Easter is traditionally a time of reflection, study, prayer, and repentance in preparation for the resurrection and new life that we celebrate at Easter. On Ash Wednesday, it is customary to make the sign of the cross in ashes on one’s forehead or hand and to repeat God’s words to Adam from Genesis 3:19: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

This year, we reflected on the Hebrew meaning of *adam*, which comes from the word *adamah*, for earth. “Adam” means “earthling,” and “Eve” is related to words for living or breath or spirit. So the union of Adam and Eve as the first couple is the union of earth and spirit. And as our Ash Wednesday service reached the point of imposing ashes, we could choose to say, “From the earth you are, and to the earth you shall return.”

Lent is typically a time to work on spiritual disciplines that bring one closer to God. So on Ash Wednesday, in keeping with our focus on being earthlings, we
planted some seeds. As we nurture these seeds and watch them grow, we are reminded to nurture our spiritual connections with God, with the earth, and with all living things. In other words, practicing the Green Rule has become our spiritual discipline.

The Green Rule can inform every aspect of how we live: how we eat, what we wear, how we shop, how we get around. I try to live lightly, although my carbon footprint is still nowhere near as low as I would like. But let me tell you about my apple tree.

Last year I had the opportunity to move back into a house that I had rented out while attending seminary. Saplings that I had planted over a decade ago are now full-sized fruit trees. On one apple tree in particular, which had some “issues,” I decided to try a new way of nurturing the crop.

In the spring, I tied over 100 paper bags on nascent apples as a pesticide-free approach to keeping insects away from the fruit. I also thinned apple clusters and removed any apples in which moths had already laid eggs. All summer I watered the tree and watched the fruit fill out the paper bags. In the fall, when the crows and squirrels started knocking ripe apples to the ground, I gathered my harvest.

An unblemished apple is such a simple thing, something we take for granted in the store. But from this apple tree, which had only ever given small, wormy apples, I now had dozens of full-sized apples with red and yellow skins and crisp white flesh. Oh, I felt rich indeed! I ate apples, gave them to friends and neighbors, dried apples, and made applesauce. No store-bought apple has ever made my heart sing like this, because I had a relationship with these apples. This apple tree and I have some history.

We will not fight for what we do not love. Earth Day calls us to love our planet, to care for it, and to fight for it. Cynics may see Earth Day as some Kumbaya moment where we’re all supposed to go hug a tree. I say, Yep. Hug a tree, plant a tree, prune a tree, climb a tree, water a tree, wrap tree fruit in tiny paper bags. Nurture that tree the way you would like to be nurtured. Because that’s a first step to realizing that Earth Day is bigger than tree-hugging.

Sit by a window and watch who comes to the tree—crows, hummingbirds, squirrels, bees, chickadees, juncoes, raccoons, ladybugs. Now we’re seeing the tree as one part of a larger ecosystem. Sit under the tree and meditate. Now we are bringing spiritual health into the picture. Feed people from your tree. Now we’re building community. Stand up for clean water and clean air for that tree. Now we’re into advocacy.

If we don’t have a healthy planet that can sustain us beyond the next few decades, then life as we know it ends. The reality is that simple and that stark. That is the message of Earth Day, and it is profoundly spiritual. Religion teaches us what it means to be alive, to be part of something larger than ourselves, to live in healthy relationship with the rest of creation by following the Green Rule.

And if you want to discuss this further with me, come find me in my garden, where I will be tending to the trees.

Rev. Meighan Pritchard is Pastor of Prospect United Church of Christ in Seattle, and is Editor of Earth Letter.
When Senator Gaylord Nelson, chair of the first Earth Day, encouraged me to drop out of graduate school at Harvard in the fall of 1969 to become Earth Day’s national coordinator, I viewed the world this way: America was growing wealthier, but the quality of life was getting worse. There was little connection between the way economists measured progress and the things people really cared about. There was a growing gap between what statisticians counted and what really counts…

The message of that first Earth Day, April 22, 1970, was broadly inclusive. Without compromising any core values, Earth Day organizers consciously set out to pull together all kinds of people. Earth Day organizers in different cities variously protested against air pollution, oil spills, vanishing wilderness, eight-lane freeways cutting through their neighborhoods, DDT and lead poisoning in America’s ghettos, and dozens of other specific blights. But Earth Day was not just a collection of piecemeal protests. Earth Day was in effect a huge town meeting, asserting that there is more to the American Dream than ever-increasing consumption…

For most Americans, the Earth Day message smacked of simple common sense. Earth Day staff members put a huge amount of effort into enlisting schools, colleges, churches, garden clubs, civic organizations, businesses, and laborers. A broad cross-section of America came together around a common set of values, prompted perhaps by the most basic biological drive—the drive for survival.

Aided by stunning NASA photographs of the Earth from space, Earth Day’s organizers argued that we needed to pay more attention to the web of life and our role in it. Human well-being, we said, is linked more closely than most people realize to the great marine and terrestrial ecosystems. Carbon emissions must not exceed nature’s capacity to withdraw carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and fix the carbon. Logging cannot exceed the rate of tree growth, and must be sensitive to the needs of complex forest ecosystems. Fish catches cannot exceed sustainable yields, and spawning habitats must be protected. Soil erosion must not be faster than soil formation. Water must not be pumped out of aquifers faster than they recharge. This is all common-sense stuff!

Earth Day launched the modern environmental movement. From 1970 to 1974, the United States passed a wave of environmental legislation, comparable in some ways to the New Deal in its sweep and impact on the way America does business: the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act, the Federal Coastal Zone Management Act, and so forth. Environmentalists also put muscle behind the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency and helped pass the Occupational Health and Safety Act as an effort to eliminate in-plant pollution.

Environmentalists are sometimes incorrectly caricatured as doomsayers. Much environmental literature does focus upon disasters that may come if we don’t mend our ways. Silent Spring, the first influential modern environmental book, described an unbearably bleak future — in the hope of stirring up changes that were needed to keep it from coming to pass.

In truth, environmentalism is probably the most hopeful movement to develop during the twentieth century. If there were no hope, we wouldn’t bother. As the history of Earth Day shows, environmentalists can successfully overcome formidable odds with hard work, creativity, good science, and smart politics.

Now it’s your turn to grab the baton.

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Denis Hayes was the principal national organizer of the first Earth Day in 1970 and is currently President of the Bullitt Foundation in Seattle.
Whidbey Island is spectacular. The island is a place where one can easily commune with the Divine, from hiking in lush forests to whale watching along the shores of Puget Sound. Even more inspiring are the passionate members of the island’s faith communities, working together to protect their beautiful home and all of creation.

In the last few years, an ecumenical group has created a powerful network called the Greening Congregations Collaborative. The group formed as different houses of worship completed Earth Ministry’s Greening Congregations Program and realized that their efforts would be compounded if they combined forces. Elizabeth Guss from St. Hubert Catholic Church explains that when her parish “began to participate with other congregations’ projects connected to care for the earth, it led us to realize how much we enjoy the process of interfaith collaboration.”

One project of the Greening Congregations Collaborative is Whidbey Island’s Earth and Ocean Month. Religious communities partner with local organizations to provide activities such as education forums at churches, habitat restoration work parties, community potlucks, “science while sipping” conversations, and a culminating festival with networking opportunities.

Gary Piazzon of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Whidbey Island says that Earth and Ocean Month is a time to enjoy “the wonder-filled world we inhabit and draw attention to the urgent issues contributing to the degradation of our life support system, as well as share what some passionate, dedicated people are doing about it.”

This celebration exhibits the inherent joy of Earth Day as an interfaith and interdisciplinary holiday. Ted Brookes from St. Augustine’s in the Woods Episcopal Church shares that the event brings together “many organizations, including non-profits, businesses, the faith community, and local, state, and federal agencies to tell one basic story, i.e., the need for everyone to be part of the solution to protect and preserve the environment in both small and large ways.”

Elizabeth believes that such a display of interfaith collaboration gives the larger community a chance to “look at creation care through a lens of morality and ethics. It’s a more fundamental viewpoint than economics or personal benefit. It is changing the conversation – just a little and for the good.”

Unlike most Earth Day celebrations, this one lasts for a month and includes the ocean. Gary notes, “Necessity demanded we lengthen it, and reality required we include the watery part.” Ted adds, “One day leaves little time to engage the community in conversation about what measures we can take to improve the situation.” Expanding Earth Day to a month reflects the core role that creation care plays in shaping both the lifestyle and the faith of these congregations.

Gary calls Whidbey Island’s celebration a creative re-envisioning of Earth Day that invites participants “to begin to create a new framework for being in right relationship with creation.” Earth and Ocean Month responds to the call for “a paradigm shift that every day and every action be guided by stewardship in humility and appreciation for the planet we inhabit.”

How are you celebrating Earth Day this year?