Winter Solstice at the Moab Slough

By Terry Tempest Williams

It is the shortest day of the year. It is also the darkest. Winter Solstice at the Moab Slough is serene. I am here as an act of faith, believing the sun has completed the southern end of its journey and is now contemplating its return toward light.

A few hundred miles south, the Hopi celebrate Soyalangwul, "the time to establish life anew for all the world."

At dawn, they will take their prayer sticks, pahos, to a shrine on the edge of the mesa and plant them securely in the earth. The pahos, decorated with feathers, will make prayers to the sun, the moon, the fields, and the orchards. These prayer feathers will call forth blessings of health and love and a fullness of life for human beings and animals.

And for four days, the Hopi will return to their shrine and repeat the prayers of their hearts.

My heart finds openings in these wetlands, particularly in winter. It is quiet and cold. The heat of the summer has been absorbed into the core of the red rocks. Most of the 150 species of birds that frequent these marshes have migrated. Snowy egrets and avocets have followed their instincts south.

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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 a troubling time for God’s creation and our human community. Yet throughout history, our ancestors brought light into the darkest of times by celebrating holidays of the harvest, the return of the light, the hope brought by the birth of a child, and the promise of a new year.

At a time when we know we must stand up to fight for creation, peace, and human dignity, self-care is at a premium. We devote this issue of Earth Letter to helping you find meaning during this holiday season and beyond.

Now more than ever it’s too easy to fall victim to the lure of commercialism and over-indulgence and to our own and others’ unreasonable expectations for creating the perfect holiday. Our deepest need is to find intimacy and connection with ourselves, each other, the natural world, and God. We offer these articles as signs pointing the way for all of us to honor these vital connections.

Holding grief and joy, and fear and confidence in our hearts at the same time is challenging. During a busy holiday season in a worrisome political climate, we know we must kindle the flame within as we build strength for the work ahead. May you find peace as well as power in your faith.

Blessings,
Our Shared Beliefs

For the fourth year, the Lummi Nation Totem Pole Journey inspired communities to "warrior up" against fossil fuel projects. On August 25, Earth Ministry/WAIPL welcomed Lummi carvers at St. Mark’s Cathedral in Seattle at the start of the journey.

The focus of the event was Q’al, our shared beliefs, and included blessing of a healing totem pole. Our time together was a joyous celebration of Lummi Nation’s victory against coal export at Xwe’chi’xen (Cherry Point), and continued to strengthen alliances in defense of tribal sacred lands and waters.

As part of the event, Earth Ministry/WAIPL Executive Director LeeAnne Beres and United Church of Christ Pacific Northwest Conference Minister Rev. Mike Denton presented the Lummi and Northwest Native nations a statement of support from the General Minister and President of the national United Church of Christ.

After Seattle, the totem pole continued its momentous 3,839-mile journey, which included a stop at Longview United Methodist Church in SW Washington and joining the Standing Rock Sioux in North Dakota in opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline. The totem pole was gifted to Sagkeeng First Nation in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where it stands uniting us all in our sacred obligation to care for creation.

Shared Waters, Shared Values

In July, Earth Ministry/WAIPL members and friends joined a 600-person march with the Quinault Nation against proposed oil-by-rail terminals in Grays Harbor, Washington.

This outstanding act of solidarity was much appreciated by the tribe and was recognized with a salmon dinner on September 16, at which Earth Ministry/WAIPL’s Jessie Dye was asked to lead the prayer of thanksgiving for the meal, those gathered, the leadership of Quinault Nation, and the good gifts of the Earth.

Local Earth Ministry partners and staff joined community activists, faith leaders, business people, health professionals, and conservationists who oppose these irresponsible oil projects and support the Quinault’s treaty rights to fish in Grays Harbor. The event, entitled Shared Waters, Shared Values, was another great example of strong Native leadership supported by local communities.
GOINGS-ON at Earth Ministry

Fun and Friendship at Earth Ministry
Not only does Earth Ministry/WAIPL work hard, but we play hard too. We enjoyed getting to spend time with you, our members and donors, at a happy hour at Peddler Brewing on September 28. The get together was a casual opportunity for members to meet one another and spend time with the staff and board. Around 50 of our friends gathered at Peddler Brewing Company for an evening of great conversation, laughs, and sustainable local brews. During the short program, board member Reuben Gelblum shared the story of his involvement in Earth Ministry, and Outreach Coordinator Jessica Zimmerle filled in attendees on our recent victories for children’s health.

We can’t emphasize enough how much all of us at Earth Ministry/WAIPL value our relationship with each and every one of you. We are glad to be on this journey with you and are grateful for your continued support of our work.

Shell Oil Victory
In early October, just as the Earth Ministry/WAIPL staff was diligently drafting fact sheets, laying out comment cards, and planning forums in opposition to the Shell Oil rail spur proposal, the news came that Shell pulled its permit request and isn’t following through with the project.

The proposed 6-mile rail spur at the Shell Refinery in Anacortes would have brought hundreds more exploding oil tank cars from the Bakken fracked-oil fields of North Dakota through our neighborhoods. This permit withdrawal came immediately after the release of a not-so-friendly Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) that says that oil leaks, accidents, and explosions would not be mitigatable.

We believe that the unfavorable DEIS, plus our outstanding public opposition, caused Shell to withdraw the proposal, under the ruse of “economic reasons.” Thank you to everyone who helped make this victory possible!

Paisley the pup modeling her new “Dogs for Earth Ministry” bandana for Happy Hour!
Staff Changes at Earth Ministry

Earlier this year, we bid a fond farewell to Operations & Development Manager Chris Olson, and have recently welcomed two new staff into the Earth Ministry fold.

Chris started at Earth Ministry as a year-long Lutheran Volunteer Corps member in 2008, and returned in 2012 to ably manage Earth Ministry’s database and administrative systems. Chris has been an invaluable member of the team, from serving our members and donors with a smile, to keeping the office running smoothly, to being the driving force behind this year’s successful Brunch Bingo fundraiser. We wish him all the best in his new role as Development Associate at the Social Justice Fund!

Replacing Chris as Operations & Development Manager is Diane Bell. Following a successful career in corporate commercial real estate, Diane shifted priorities to focus on her two children for five years. She returned to work as the Community Development Director at the Center for Spiritual Living in Seattle, where she led fundraising and development efforts. In her new role at Earth Ministry, Diane brings her spirit of service, enthusiasm for activism, and strong community focus to our mission of engaging faith-based communities in caring for the Earth.

We also welcome our new United Church of Christ Justice Leadership Program (UCC JLP) intern, Emily Martin. Emily graduated from The Evergreen State College in June 2016 with a focus in environmental justice, and is passionate about the intersections of environmental health with race and income inequality. During college, she worked for Washington State Senator John McCoy, where she learned about tribal issues and the legislative process. Emily attends Bellevue First Congregational and participates in their weekly social justice meetings.

Please join us in thanking Chris for his many contributions and in extending a warm welcome to Diane and Emily!
God’s Glory in Creation Through the Five Senses

By Deanna Matzen

Listen, listen – the thunder is God’s voice; hear the rumbling that comes from God’s mouth! Across the whole heavens it rolls forth, and the lightning extends to the four corners of the earth, followed by the roaring voice of God, a thundering, majestic voice. God sends the unrestrained lightning bolts immediately followed by silence. God’s voice thunders wondrously, and performs great acts we can’t comprehend. When God tells the snow, “Fall from the sky,” or commands the rain to fall in torrents, it makes everyone shut themselves indoors, so that all might know that this is God’s work. Job 37: 2-7, The Inclusive Bible

Christmas — it is the season of God reaching down and entering into this world, speaking truth and hope to all people. Yet it has become one of the busiest and most consumer-driven seasons.

If you’re like me, these verses from Job speak to you in the parched desert of the holiday season. Oh, to hear, see, smell, taste, and feel God’s majesty in such an intense way that it stops you in your labors.

A few verses later, Elihu implores Job to listen, to stop, and to consider God’s wonders asking, “Do you know how God controls the clouds and makes the lightning flash? Do you know how the clouds hang poised, those wonders of God who has perfect knowledge?” (Job 37:15-16)

As a scientist, I know some of the how and why of clouds and lightning forming. But I do not know how God experiences it. It’s easy to be awe-filled by the beauty of God’s creation and feel a piece of closeness to God in that moment. But I long for more: to see creation through God’s experience of it, through God’s understanding.

During the long winter months, I am cut off from nature — sheltered from the elements. As I work to make the holidays all that society tells me they should be, I find myself in need of renewal and true nourishment. I want to be stopped in my labors and I want to know God’s works in a new way. To help me on that path, I’ve written this prayer:

“God, I want to know your creation as you know it. Give me your eyes to see, your ears to hear, your fingers to touch, your nose to smell, and your mouth to taste not just your glory shining through your creation, but how you, God, experience it.”

I invite you to join me in taking time each day to be outside and allowing God to meet you in a different way. Take this prayer with you as you place your hand on the bark of a tree, smell the grass or decaying leaves, taste the rain, focus on a small patch of nature and see it come to life, be still and listen to the sounds of the earth.

Bring all your senses and your full self to the moment, and allow God to bring you new understanding and be renewed as God meets you in this sacred place.

Deanna Matzen is an environmental scientist and a former editor of Earth Letter.
Setting Intentions for the New Year  By Emily Martin

With each new year, we are encouraged to start fresh by picking up new habits or by losing unwanted ones. Many of us have had first-hand experience with unsuccessful New Year’s resolution attempts. In fact, only 8 percent of people who make resolutions are still following them past the three-month mark.

Trying to take on new lifestyles aimed at changing the things we dislike about ourselves never seems to go far. My past resolutions to exercise or give up carbs never last for more than a few weeks. Until now, I hadn’t thought about how maybe the reason it never seems to last is because these kinds of goals come from a negative place of insecurity encouraged by external pressures.

This year I propose that we try something new: let’s view the new year as a time to celebrate our true selves and practice new habits grounded in self-love and spiritual fulfillment. By doing so, we can find new life through enjoyable practices that we can actually look forward to each day instead of dreading.

This year I plan on gaining a deeper understanding of my faith by reading a passage from the Bible each night. I’ve never actually read through all of it, and am looking forward to adding this as a spiritual practice. Feel free to check in with me in March to see how I’m doing!

As you ponder how to live your best life in 2017, here are a few positive and fulfilling ideas you might consider taking on as your New Year’s resolution:

**Start a gratitude journal:** Spend ten minutes each night writing down 3-5 things you’re grateful for. Studies show that doing so reduced participants’ stress levels and gave them a more positive outlook on life.

**Spend time with loved ones:** Set up a weekly time to spend at least 30 minutes with someone you care about. Even if you have to do so by phone or Skype, try to maintain healthy relationships by checking in on those you love.

**Meditate:** It doesn’t have to be with your eyes closed and legs crossed, but take time each day to sit quietly and reflect. Studies show that taking 20 minutes a day to meditate lowers blood pressure, boosts the strength of your immune system, and reduces stress.

**Read:** If you commute by public transportation, use that time to read an inspiring book. Not only will it brighten your day, it’ll help your commute go by faster.

My hope is that together we will move toward a higher percentage of resolutions that last not only the year, but a lifetime. After all, why give something up if you truly enjoy it? In 2017, may we decide to start fresh with goals driven by the desire to grow our spirits, not shrink our waists!

Emily Martin is one of Earth Ministry’s Outreach Coordinators.
In the 1930s, during the depths of the Great Depression, hundreds of young men came to Mount Rainier [National Park in Washington State] – ordinary, unemployed working men, mostly from cities back east. Living in tent camps or barracks, they built many of the marvelous facilities that visitors to the park now take for granted. At a time when the dominant notion is that the government never does anything well, the work of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) at Mount Rainier and many other national parks provides something of a corrective.

The men's work was laborious, performed in snow, sleet, or blazing sun, and their wages barely provided subsistence. Their accommodations were anything but plush, and they had little to entertain them except storytelling and card games. Most could carry all the possessions they owned in a single suitcase. Yet when the author Harry Boyte interviewed veterans of the CCC, he found that many looked back on those days as the best of their lives. They'd forgotten the dirt, the strained muscles, the mosquito bites. But they remembered with deep fondness the camaraderie and the feeling they had that they were “building America,” creating work of true and lasting value that would be enjoyed by generations yet unborn. The sense of pride in their CCC accomplishments was still palpable sixty years later.

What the men of the CCC and the countless other people who give to their communities have in common is the understanding that meaningful activity matters more than money and that, indeed, it is better to give than receive. They've learned that fulfillment comes from such efforts. But in our consumer society they are becoming an exception.

The more Americans fill their lives with things, the more they tell psychiatrists, pastors, friends, and family members that they feel empty inside. The more toys our kids have to play with, the more they complain of boredom. Two thousand years ago, Jesus Christ predicted they would feel that way. “You cannot serve both God and mammon [money],” Christ warned. What profit would it bring a person, he asked his followers (Matthew 16:26), were that person to gain the whole world but lose his soul? In the Age of Affluenza, that question is seldom asked, at least not publicly. It should be.

When Mother Teresa came to the United States to receive an honorary degree, she said, “this is the poorest place I’ve ever been in my life,” recounts Robert Seiple, the former director of World Vision, the Christian charity organization. “She wasn’t talking about economics, mutual funds, Wall Street, the ability to consume,” he adds. “She was talking about poverty of the soul.”

Shortly before he died of a brain tumor, Republican campaign strategist Lee Atwater made a confession. “The ’80s,” he said, “were about acquiring – acquiring wealth, power, prestige. I know. I acquired more wealth, power and prestige than most. But you can acquire all you want and still feel empty.” He warned that there was “a spiritual vacuum at the heart of American society, a tumor of the soul.”

By contrast, Francis, the new Roman Catholic pope, finds such a philosophy of self-centeredness abhorrent. According to the pope, unfettered greed and consumerism of the type advocated by [Russian-born philosopher Ayn] Rand has led people to believe that money is more important than anything else. “Unbridled capitalism has taught the logic
of profit at any cost, of giving in order to receive, of exploitation without looking at the person,” said Francis. “The results of such attitudes can be seen in the crisis we are now living through.” The Dalai Lama recently expressed similar feelings.

Indeed, in all our great religious traditions, human beings are seen as having a purpose in life. Stripped to its essentials, it is to serve God by caring for God’s creation and our fellow human beings. Happy is that man or woman whose work and life energies serve those ends, who finds a ‘calling’ or “right livelihood” that allows his or her talents to serve the common good. In none of those traditions is purpose to be found in simply accumulating things, or power, or pleasure – or in “looking out for number one.”

One seldom hears work described as a calling anymore. Work may be “interesting” and “creative” or dull and boring. It may bring status or indifference – and not in any sense in relation to its real value. Our lives are disrupted far more severely when garbage collectors stop working than when ballplayers do, for example. Work may bring great monetary rewards or bare subsistence. But we almost never ask what it means and what it serves. For most, though certainly not all of us, if it makes money, that’s reason enough. Why do it? Simple. It pays.

The individual who finds no opportunity for self-chosen, meaningful expression of inner resources and personality suffers, said [philosopher Ernest] van den Haag, “an insatiable longing for things to happen. The external world is to supply these events to fill the emptiness. The popular demand for ‘inside’ stories, for vicarious sharing of the private lives of ‘personalities’ rests on the craving for private life – even someone else’s – of those who are dimly aware of having none whatever, or at least no life that holds their interest.”

What the bored person really craves is a meaningful, authentic life. The ads suggest that such a life comes in products or packaged commercial experiences. But religion and the science of psychology say it’s more likely to be found in such things as service to others, relationships with friends and family, connection with nature, and work of intrinsic moral value.

Our technologically advanced culture offers opportunities for much more meaningful and creative lives than most of us lead. Our amazingly productive technologies could allow all of us to spend less time doing repetitive, standardized work, or work whose products bring us little pride, by allowing us to trade increased wages for reduced working hours.

Such choices would allow more time for freely chosen, voluntary, often unpaid work that enhances our relationships and communities and/or allows us to express more fully our talents and creativity. And such choices would allow us more time to find meaning and joy in the beauty and wonders of nature, in the delightful play of children, or in the restoration of our damaged environment. They would give us time to think about what really matters to us, and how we really want to use the remaining years of our lives.

During the holiday season, no matter their faith tradition or family status, most people have high hopes for special gatherings full of meaning, fun, and cheer. In theory, it is a time for families and friends to create fond and lasting memories.

While this can certainly be part of everyone’s holiday experience, at the same time there is always stress involved — stress that, left unmanaged, can quickly spiral into overwhelm and exhaustion. This tension is inherent in “high-stakes” times like holiday and New Year’s celebrations, and everyone needs concrete tools to help manage time, money, relationships, and expectations for the season.

In my private psychotherapy practice, I have led workshops in Seattle for 30 years on Emotional Brain Training and Anti-Perfectionism, focusing on helping people find emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being in their lives. The tools I teach in these classes are especially valuable during intense periods like holidays, family gatherings, and life transitions.

Described below are several exercises that may help you keep your holidays mindful, peaceful, and enjoyable.

Values — What’s Important?
First, reflect back on last year’s holiday season. Think about and make a list noting the people with whom you spent time, the places you went, the food and drink you consumed, the money you spent, and the traditions you enjoyed last year and the ones you went without.

Go back through each item and make two columns. In the first column note what you liked about each item last year, and in the second column record what you didn’t like. In Anti-Perfectionism training we keep in mind that all things have good aspects and not so good (bad) aspects. Observe these different aspects side by side. They don’t cancel each other out, but give you good information about what works for you.

For example, when considering with whom to spend your time, you might notice in the first column the people around whom you felt relaxed, calm, and centered. Who do you feel grateful or happy to see? The second column might have notes about people with whom you felt tense, judged, judgmental, or with whom you negatively compared yourself.

Use your list to help you realize what makes your
holidays most enjoyable, and reflects values that are most meaningful to you. We can’t do it all; a list like this can help you to choose the people, activities, traditions, values and expenses that are your priorities.

**Good Enough Instead of Perfect**

Many of us can benefit from another interesting Anti-Perfectionism tool that can guide us through decision-making about the holidays. Complete the sentence, “In a perfect world, for the holidays I would ____________.” Then finish this alternate sentence, “In the good-enough world that I actually live in, I can ____________.” This exercise helps create some realistic ideas/projects that you actually can do and move away from impossible, perfectionistic expectations of yourself or others.

Try the Anti-Perfectionism tool “The glass is half full and half empty“ (i.e., working with “what is” instead of “what should be”). All real things in life have good or appealing aspects as well as bad, unappealing, or difficult aspects. In stress, our brains can easily go to “all-or-nothing” perfectionistic thinking.

When holiday stress hits you, which it will at one time or another, try taking a small step back and identify the good of the situation, person, or interaction and identify what’s bad, unhelpful, annoying, or unappealing about it. Keep in mind the bad doesn’t cancel out the good. Let both exist simultaneously, and work with it as it is.

**Mindfulness**

Remaining as closely connected to yourself as possible throughout the holidays will always help. This is mindfulness — being aware, without judgment, of what is present. Here are a few ways to bring about mindfulness, which increases your ability to manage stress in the moment, as well as taking in the joy in the moment. All of these can be done alone or with others.

Bring your attention to the sensation of your breathing for five breaths in a row. If it would be more calming for you, bring your attention to the sensation of your feet resting on the ground for 1–2 minutes. When your mind wanders off, which it certainly will do, simply bring it back to the sensation of your breathing or your feet resting on the ground.

Bring your attention to your five senses, one at a time, for about 30 seconds each. This means noticing what you see, hear, smell, taste, and feel (as in touch), each for 30 seconds.

Take a 5–10 minute “sensory walk.” Walk outside and bring your attention to each of your five senses for a minute or two. This is fun to share with others — especially children.

In sum, the goal in making your holidays mindful and merry is to prioritize which tasks, activities, and values are most important for you during this season as well as to keep your expectations reasonable and manageable.

Drawing from past holidays to evaluate what is really most important to you is a good place to start. Then, being non-perfectionistic about the holidays empowers you to create specific situations/traditions and enjoy what actually happens instead of getting stuck in what “should” happen for the holidays.

Last, staying as mindful as possible keeps you tuned into the here-and-now, which always helps bring down the stress and bring up your chance of catching the joy of any holiday moment. One little joyful moment, then another one, and so on adds up to an imperfect, but mindfully merry holiday experience.

Denice Keepin is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor in Seattle who teaches Emotional Brain Training and Anti-Perfectionism Training, and provides therapy for adults, couples, parents, and groups. Look Denice up on LinkedIn or contact her by email at denicekg@msn.com.
The cattails and bulrushes are brittle and brown. Sheets of ice become the windowpanes to another world below. And I find myself being mentored by the land once again, as two great blue herons fly over me. Their wingbeats are slow, so slow they remind me that, all around, energy is being conserved. I too can bring my breath down to dwell in a deeper place where my blood-soul restores to my body what society has drained and dredged away.

Even in winter, these wetlands nourish me. I recall the last time I stood here near the Solstice – June 1991. The Moab Slough was christened the Scott M. Matheson Wetland Preserve. The Nature Conservancy set aside over eight hundred acres in the name of wildness. A community gathered beneath blue skies in celebration of this oasis in the desert, this oxbow of diversity alongside the Colorado River. A yellow and white tent was erected for shade as we listened to our elders.

“A place of renewal...” Mrs. Norma Matheson proclaimed as she honored her husband, our governor of Utah, whose death and life will be remembered here, his name a touchstone for a conservation ethic in the American West.

“A geography of hope...” Wallace Stegner echoed. “That these delicate lands have survived the people who exploited this community is a miracle in itself.” We stood strong and resolute as neighbors, friends, and family witnessed the release of a red-tailed hawk. Wounded, now healed, we caught a glimpse of our own wild nature soaring above willows. The hawk flew west with strong, rapid wingbeats, heartbeats, and I squinted in the afternoon sun, following her with my eyes until she disappeared against the sandstone cliffs.

Later, I found a small striated feather lying on the ground and carried it home, a reminder of who we live among.

D.H. Lawrence writes, “In every living thing there is a desire for love, for the relationship of unison with the rest of things.” I think of my own stream of desires, how cautious I have become with love. It is a vulnerable enterprise to feel deeply and I may not survive my affections. Andre Breton says, “Hardly anyone dares to face with open eyes the great delights of love.”

If I choose not to become attached to nouns – a person, place, or thing – then when I refuse an intimate’s love or hoard my spirit, when a known landscape is bought, sold, and developed, chained, or grazed to a stubble, or a hawk is shot and hung by its feet on a barbed wire fence, my heart cannot be broken because I never risked giving it away.

But what kind of impoverishment is this to withhold emotion, to restrain our passionate nature in the face of a generous life just to appease our fears? A man or woman whose mind reins in the
heart when the body sings desperately for connection can only expect more isolation and greater ecological disease. Our lack of intimacy with each other is in direct proportion to our lack of intimacy with the land. We have taken our love inside and abandoned the wild.

Audre Lorde tells us, "We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves…our deepest cravings. And the fear of our deepest cravings keeps them suspect, keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, and leads us to settle for or accept many facets of our own oppression."

The two herons who flew over me have now landed downstream. I do not believe they are fearful of love. I do not believe their decisions are based on a terror of loss. They are not docile, loyal, or obedient. They are engaged in a rich, biological context, completely present. They are feathered Buddhas casting blue shadows on the snow, fishing on the shortest day of the year.

Pahos. Prayer feathers. Darkness, now light. The Winter Solstice turns in us, turns in me. Let me plant my own prayer stick firmly in the mud of this marsh. Eight hundred acres of wetlands. It is nothing. It is everything. We are a tribe of fractured individuals who can now only celebrate remnants of wildness. One red-tailed hawk. Two great blue herons.

Wildlands’ and wildlives’ oppression lies in our desire to control and our desire to control has robbed us of feeling. Our rib cages have been broken and our hearts cut out. The knives of our priests are bloody. We, the people. Our own hands are bloody.

“Blood knowledge,” says D.H. Lawrence. “Oh, what a catastrophe for man when he cut himself off from the rhythm of the year, from his unison with the sun and the earth. Oh, what a catastrophe, what a maiming of love when it was made a personal, merely personal feeling, taken away from the rising and setting of the sun, and cut off from the magical connection of the solstice and equinox. This is what is wrong with us. We are bleeding at the roots…”

The land is love. Love is what we fear. To disengage from the earth is our own oppression. I stand on the edge of these wetlands, a place of renewal, an oasis in the desert, as an act of faith, believing the sun has completed the southern end of its journey and is now contemplating its return toward light.

From An Unspoken Hunger by Terry Tempest Williams, copyright 1994. Reprinted in Earth Ministry’s Simpler Living, Compassionate Life (Michael Schut, editor), by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

Terry Tempest Williams is the author of numerous classics of environmental literature, including Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place; An Unspoken Hunger: Stories from the Field; and Desert Quartet. Her writing has appeared in The New Yorker, The New York Times, Orion Magazine, and numerous anthologies worldwide as a crucial voice for ecological consciousness and social change.
This means to make the simple but often incredibly difficult decision to meet life's difficulties with self-awareness, acceptance, gratitude, compassion and love. (This is the position developed in my book, *Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, a book which not only answers all of life's important questions, but has a really nice cover!)

So if inescapable Christmas music, endless JUST FOR TODAY GET IT NOW! sales, and long lists of gifts for everyone from your brother-in-law to your daughter’s day-care provider are getting you down, let’s see what these simple, quite traditional, but challenging spiritual virtues have to offer.

To start, let’s ask ourselves what is going on. Through meditation, reflection, self-examination or just plain free associating at the keyboard, what might we find? Perhaps... Disappointment that your family doesn’t match the quirky-but-happy, deeply caring but non-intrusive, rooted in tradition but open to difference ones on the greeting cards or the TV specials? Resentment that as a non-Christian you have to listen endlessly to all this holiday stuff? Bitterness that everyone else has (fill in the blank: a job, a lover, children, healthy children, a nice house)? The religious revulsion that any serious Christian might feel at seeing the birth of the savior turned into consumerism and family get-togethers shaped by an awful lot of drinking?

Realizing the source of your irritability, frustration, or even downright depression, the next spiritual move is acceptance. This is what God, or fate, or your genes, or a crummy economy, or your bad choices, or the current state of American culture/economy/politics have given you. It might be far from what you want or deserve. But it’s what you have.

Perhaps we can settle in with it, examine it with as much detachment as possible, and repeat that simplest of old-time mantras: “Yes.” A yes not of approval or endorsement, but one that allows us to relinquish the exquisite torment of believing that it is up to us to change something which in all probability can’t be changed very much right now. We have and we are what we have and we are, and all the negative feelings won’t help.

So, moving on to gratitude, let’s try something else. Despite the hypnotic attraction of negativity (I mean, what’s sweeter than a pure blue, nasty funk, after all?), can we find something, anything, which not only makes us feel good but for which we are thankful? That we have ears to hear the interminable carols and eyes to see all the decorations? That we have food and drink, and the ability to take it in?

That even if we are stuck in a hospital with a desperately ill child, or in a 12-step group fighting the demons of alcohol or heroin, that we are alive, that some people are trying to help us (a doctor or nurse, a sponsor or the guy who tells you to “hang in there, you can make it.”) That despite everything we’ve done to it, the world still turns, at least some birds still fly and sing, and that we ourselves, no matter how much we’ve lost, still have the chance to make tomorrow a little better than today.

And how will we do that? First, we will extend a little, and then a little more, compassion: to the people who seek to show love through buying stuff, for we remember first that they are
trying to show love, and second that many times we ourselves have been loving in ways that were clumsy, foolish, even destructive.

And if we are not Christian, we can be happy that our neighbors are celebrating a holiday that, at least for some folks, is about peace and good will. There’s little enough celebration of such things and every little bit helps. And in our own family situation, we also try a little compassion: for the intrusive, judgmental mother; the overbearing, foot-stomping father; the alcoholic uncle; even our own spouse who has — just like we ourselves — failed us over and over again. We remember the good times, rare though they might have been, our own less than perfect behavior, and the pain that these men and women have suffered in their own lives.

And don’t forget to try a little compassion on ourselves: for our frailties, addictions, casual cruelties, and refusals to change what we know we should. It’s not easy being human, truly human, and that’s a reason we all deserve compassion for the times we miss the mark.

Finally — and this, by the way, is something that has a basis in physiology — we feel a lot better when we show other people some love. Give some money away to people who need it more than we do — whether that’s 50 cents, $5, or a thousand — and see how rich that makes you feel. Offer a kind word to someone who is down, and you might be a little more up yourself.

Give a little time to a positive campaign — about global warming, human rights, or to raise funds for a local hospital. Listen to your grandfather tell the same old story and pretend you’ve never heard it before. Let your sister brag about her boyfriend or her job.

Smile and realize that we’re all in this together. In these and countless other ways, the world is just waiting for what you, in particular, can do.

This greatest gift of the season — more precious than a 67-inch flat screen or a new iPhone — would be your own practice of these spiritual virtues. They would bring you some honest, long-lasting and genuine pleasure, and make you a lot more fun to be around for everyone else.

And what could more in the spirit of the holidays than that?

I have news for you:
The stag bells, winter snows, summer has gone
Wind high and cold, the sun low, short its course
The sea running high.
Deep red the bracken, its shape is lost.
The wild goose has raised its accustomed cry,
cold has seized the birds’ wings;
season of ice, this is my news.
— Irish poem, ninth century CE