A CATHOLIC, FRANCISCAN ECOSPIRITUALITY RETREAT AND CONFERENCE CENTER

Going Deeper

Prairiewoods has been inviting everyone to go deeper during this time of strife for our global family. What follows is a joint reflection from Jenifer Hanson and Laura Weber, our director and associate director, as they engage the topic of spiritual deepening in these troubling times. We invite your own reflections on spiritual deepening by posting comments on our blog (#PanDeepening) or joining our dialogue Go Deeper Thursdays each Thursday at 4 p.m.

Jenifer: Thursday, March 26, we held our first Go Deeper Thursday dialogue session via Zoom. Since we didn’t seek registrations beforehand, we didn’t know whether anyone would show, but we were truly pleased when 43 individuals joined us! What struck me about that conversation was the almost universal sense that this unprecedented world-wide phenomenon, scary as it is, may be offering us something. Each person present on that call seemed to be exploring exactly what that might be or mean for their own lives, hearts, spirit—AND also what it might mean for the whole community of creation. No one suggested that it will be an easy process to discern what is on offer, but there was a willingness to try that I found truly life-affirming.

Laura: As a spiritual companion, I have often accompanied folks who long to go deeper. They are often, as theologian James Allison would put it, “undergoing God,” experiencing a profound shift in their awareness and world-view, opening to Mystery. When first we meet, and maybe 2–3 times or more after that, some intricate circumlocutionary musings might offer a “getting to know you” period until the person really gets down to it. S/he goes deeper. It may be at a time of crisis, some profound loss or discernment of life commitment, a shifting of vocational horizons, but usually, if we wait long enough, these kinds of questions will erupt out of the depths: “Who am I in the midst of all this? What am I supposed to be/do?” Or, especially crucial to the process, there arise declarations of innermost fears, uncertainties and disillusionment: “I’m just afraid that … I don’t know any more if … What if I’m wrong about … How do I know if … Where is God in all this?” When we get down to these kinds of questions, we can really begin. And it begins with deep stillness. Awareness of breath. Active listening. Vulnerability. Confusion can’t lift, fog can’t dissipate without deep stillness. “Stillness. One of the doors into the temple,” as poetess Mary Oliver would say.

Jenifer: You are so right about the questions that come, Laura. Stillness is very difficult to appreciate until we are ready. In fact, I think many of us avoid stillness precisely because we know that it is only in stillness that we can—and will—hear what is deeply within ourselves. For many of us, there is fear in that. What if that which arises from within not only poses questions, but calls for change? Asks me to take some action outside my current comfort zone or carefully calendared days? What if I discover something within that shakes the foundations of this construction I call “self”?

(continued on p. 3)
There are times when you need the extremity of rock, the hardness of an old, cold place against which you can measure yourself. There are times when you need to retreat to the wilderness. But there are times when you need the subtle flow of a river, the song of a waterfall and the deep, slow presence of trees. Times when you need to Return. There are times for holding on, and times for letting go.

—Sharon Blackie, *If Women Rose Rooted: A Journey to Authenticity and Belonging*

Beloved friends:

As I write these words, in late March, I am keenly aware that by the time you receive them in mid-April, things in our world may have changed even more dramatically than they have as of today. All I know is that our world, and each of us, is in the midst of a profound shared experience. It remains to be seen in what ways this shared experience will be transformational, whether constructive or destructive. The only guarantee is that not one of us will come through it untouched.

At Prairiewoods, we have been using the term *PanDeepening* as a way of shifting perspective from the fear and isolation of pandemic. In Greek, *pan* means all, and *demos* means people/population. What if we view this pandemic, which affects us all in ways great and small, as an opportunity for deepening? What would that mean in terms of what we hold on to and what we let go of? Each of us will answer these questions in our own hearts and lives.

Speaking for Prairiewoods, I’d like to share a few things we are holding on to. Our mission calls us to nurture relationships with self, others, Earth and the Source of All Being. We affirm the importance of these relationships and will continue to offer opportunities for their further exploration and care. We reverence the Divine Presence in all of creation and will continue to model Earth care and love of all our human and creature kin; we still seek ways to follow Pope Francis’ call to an integral ecology. We are committed to offering sanctuary, rest, and holistic care—the woods and prairies on our 70 acres offer space and the healing presence of nature to those who can be here physically. To those who cannot, we invite participation in our online presence and programming.

While we must let go of some specific offerings, we remain together while separated. Our vision (below) is one of community. Each one of you is a precious part of our community. We hold you in our hearts and in our prayers.

**The vision of Prairiewoods is of people everywhere, awakened in consciousness and energized by the loving, creative Spirit of the Universe into a community, moving together into wisdom, compassion and the fullness of life.**

Peace and all good,

Jenifer Hanson, Director

Prairiewoods is a Catholic ecospirituality retreat and conference center in the Franciscan tradition. It is a nonprofit ministry sponsored by Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration of La Crosse, Wisconsin.

**Mission:** Prairiewoods Franciscan Spirituality Center is a sacred space where people of all faiths and cultures are invited to explore and nurture their relationships with the Source of All Being, Earth, Self and Others with an increasing awareness of the story of the Universe.
And yet, our world has called us to a shared time of stillness as we have learned to practice social distancing, isolation and quarantine. This feels like an invitation to a profound transformation both individually and collectively. How do we make the most of this (perhaps unlooked for; unasked for) stillness?

Laura: Yes, we might tend to resist that sometimes terrifying word questioning, and that other bothersome word, change. Very challenging. I think of Pope Francis in Laudato Si’ calling all of us to an “ecological conversion,” to place the focus of our attention on the whole of creation, and the good of the whole of creation, and to change our view that we are at the center or above all creation. Shifting our egocentric focus, reevaluating our deeply held and perhaps unreflected assumptions, asking primordial questions all over again, admitting we don’t really know and are questioning and changing and perhaps growing … It hurts. It calls from us a deeper trust, a willingness to let go of certitude and exclusive circles, to let the power of love eclipse our fear of losing power. We must “ask the beasts,” as theologian Liz Johnson says. Our creature-kin practice cooperation and interdependence with fluidity and poise, like starlings or gazelles suddenly shifting direction in a balletic flow. We must learn from the trees how to trust the deeper relationships beneath the surface, says forest ecologist Suzanne Simard. They know how to trust the network of tensile roots for surviving and thriving. It is in our shared vulnerability and connection that we are strong. But first, we have to go deeper.

Jenifer: Ok, Laura, I was with you all the way until your last sentence, “But first, we have to go deeper.” How do we do that? Solitude can open us up, offer us a pathway in. But if, as Henri Nouwen says, “Solitude is the place where we can connect with profound bonds that are deeper than the emergency bonds of fear and anger,” what are the bonds that are deeper than fear and anger? And how do we explore, embrace and strengthen them? How do we get deep enough for the ecological conversion Francis calls us to and which you so eloquently describe? Put another way, how do we get to the point in McCombs’ poem where we are ready and able to “let the love consume whatever is left of you”?

Laura: Good questions, Jen! What goes deeper than fear and anger? Love. If we want to go deeper, we can open to love. How do we do that? Practice opening. Embody it. Imitate creation in springtime. Work on softening the edges of the defensive ego. Breathe into the pain of betrayal and loss. Anger, fear and deep mistrust cause blockages. It’s our openness to love that offers an energetic aperture for transformation, healing and real union. It requires complete mutuality and trust. If one is above and another is below in a hierarchical relationship, mutuality is not possible. And this call to mutual openness isn’t the cheap, phony facade of well-rehearsed platitudes, of feigning appearances of benevolence for whatever we deem less. It’s the humility of seeking genuine forgiveness and reconciliation. It’s sometimes admitting abject failure in relationship, or just acknowledging the crippling emptiness of superficiality and indifference. Shared suffering can create an opening for dialogue. This is the gritty, authentic agony of struggling through the mire to mutual vulnerability. It’s an honest, laid-bare approach that breaks through to something new, something that is trying to emerge from the compost of what has decayed. Such a transformative process has the capacity to ground us in something deeper, the rudimentary taproot from which all life springs: Love. If we can connect through our vulnerability and openness, we can go deeper. Then we can “let the love consume whatever is left of us.”

Jenifer: As I read your description, I couldn’t help thinking of Parker Palmer writing that “The alchemy that can transform suffering into new life is at the heart of every religious tradition.” This process begins with the heart being broken, not into a thousand shards but into openness, “into largeness of life, into greater capacity to hold one’s own and the world’s pain and joy.” The transformative process you describe so beautifully is taking place, must take place, in each of our hearts. But it is not merely an individual process, not only healing our own hurt and brokenness. In this time of global uncertainty and instability what we are experiencing is also shared and can become a communal transformation. The wellspring of love we find when we go deeper in the ways you describe has an outward impetus, flowing from our hearts toward the suffering world around us, into all of creation. In the end, isn’t this the alchemy we seek? The promise that makes the effort and energy investment of deepening worth it?

We would like to hear from YOU, our Prairiewoods family! How are you deepening spiritually in this time of crisis? Join us Thursdays at 4 p.m. online for Go Deeper Thursdays (https://zoom.us/j/943001589?pwd=_fTU3ZYxOtQ), or check out our #PanDeepening blog (http://prairiewoods.org/blog/) and post your comments. We are diving deeper together!
Spirituality in the 21st Century

Courting the World Soul

with

Sharon Blackie  
and 
Sara Thomsen

May 1–2

Friday, May 1 (7–9 p.m.), & Saturday, May 2 (9 a.m.–3 p.m.)

This event will be held entirely online via Zoom video conferencing!

The old mythologies and philosophies of the West are rich and complex and beautiful. They offer up a world in which everything is not only alive, but has purpose and intentionality of its own. A world to which each incarnated soul chooses to come, for a reason, and to offer up a unique gift which can only be expressed through relationship with and participation in this beautiful animate Earth. During this weekend, we’ll explore what it might be to court the anima mundi: the “world soul” of ancient tradition, and to uncover our own part in its unfolding.

Because of the far-reaching effects of COVID-19, Spirituality in the 21st Century will convene online via Zoom video conferencing. Sharon Blackie will appear pre-recorded on Friday evening and live on Saturday. Sara Thomsen will appear live throughout the event. Those who have registered will receive instructions for how to use Zoom, a secure link and a chance to test the technology in advance. This event is so important to Prairiewoods and our guests that we are working diligently to co-create an online experience that will reflect and embody as much as possible the experiential wisdom that arises around the topic Courting the World Soul.

The cost of the two-day event is $75. Friday only is $25, and Saturday only is $60. Please join us as we explore the intersection of story, spirituality and ecology!

Dr. Sharon Blackie is an award-winning writer, teacher and speaker and is recognized internationally for her work on cultivating the mythic imagination. As well as writing four books of fiction and nonfiction, Sharon has had her work published in magazines and newspapers around the world, and she has been interviewed by major broadcasters and radio stations. She is a mythologist with a specialization in Celtic Studies and a psychologist who has specialized both in neuroscience and narrative.

Sara Thomsen is an artist of the melody whose music touches the soul and invites us to respond for the good of the global community. Sara’s gentle, soulful and uplifting acoustical renderings celebrate the beauty of the cosmos and call us into fuller communion with the global family.

www.SarahBlackie.net

www.SaraThomsen.com
Prairiewoods holds the deepest hope to offer the following programs and retreats in May and June, if gathering in groups and overnight stays are possible at that time due to COVID-19 concerns. In the meantime, if you are interested in any of these offerings, please mark your calendar and visit www.Prairiewoods.org for further information as it becomes available. We can’t wait to see you all again!

**Healing Conversations with Plants**

with Carolyn Herbst Lewis (Wednesdays, May 6 & June 3, 6–7:30 p.m.)

By tending plants, we tend the planet, fostering healing and growth for ourselves and the world. Each month, this conversation and hands-on learning series showcases the healing potential of a medicinal plant. In May, we’ll study thyme and in June St. John’s wort. We will explore its historic and current use and learn how to incorporate it into our own self-care regimen.

**Fee:** $15 per session

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**Nature Photography & the Soul’s Slow Ripening**

with Angie Pierce Jennings (Tuesdays, May 19, May 26 & June 16, 1–2:30 p.m.)

We will read and contemplate The Soul’s Slow Ripening: 12 Celtic Practices for Seeking the Sacred by Christine Valent Painter and engage in photography explorations suggested in the book. Bring your camera or phone and enjoy noticing “moments that shimmer” while walking through Prairiewoods’ beautiful 70 acres. All experience levels, including beginners, are welcome.

**Fee:** $10 per session

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**Community Singing**

with Carol Tyx (Tuesday, June 2, 6–8 p.m.)

Come together with people of all ages and lift our voices with purpose, passion and joy! We will sing simple layer songs, rounds, spirituals and various songs taught in the oral tradition, with many of the songs written by members of the Community Sing movement. In addition to learning new songs, we’ll also learn how singing can create community in various situations, such as moments of transition and celebration.

**Fee:** Free-will offering

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**Prayer Experience Series**

with Angie Pierce Jennings, Emelia Sautter (Tuesdays, May 5, May 19, May 26, June 2, June 16, June 23 & June 30, 11:30 a.m.–12 p.m.)

**Day of Self Renewal** with Angie Pierce Jennings (Mondays, May 11 & June 15, 8:30 a.m.–4:30 p.m.)

**Singing Bowl Prayer** with Kathy Broghammer (Mondays, May 11 & June 15, 12:45–1:30 p.m.)

**Outward Ecospiritual Experience** with Emelia Sautter (Mondays, May 11 & June 15, 2:30–3:30 p.m.)

**Tower Garden: Big Food, Little Space** with Mark Woldruff (Wednesday, May 13, 4–5 p.m.)

**Y.O.L.O. (Your Other Lunch Option)** with Laurie Erlacher & Rochell Potter (Wednesdays, May 20 & June 17, 11:30 a.m.–1:30 p.m.)

**Soul Care: Creative Arts Grief Support Group** with Jamie Siela, LISW; and Julie Wehner, LMSW, M.Div, BCC (Wednesdays, May 20 & June 17, 5:30–7 p.m.)

**Sweat Lodge (Inipi) Ceremony** with Kerry Batteau (Saturdays, May 23 & June 20, 6–9:30 p.m.)

**Women in Interfaith Dialogue** with Angie Pierce Jennings, Virginia Melroy, Dr. Paula Sanchini & Mary Beth Siemann (Saturday, May 30, 10 a.m.–3 p.m.)

**Shooting Star Rock Painting** with Andi Lewis (Friday, June 19, 6–8 p.m.)

**Mindfulness for Families Summer Camp** with Kim Seward BSN, RN, CMI, & Prairiewoods staff (Wednesday, July 8, 12 p.m.–Friday, July 10, 12 p.m.)

**Holistic Healing for Educators & Classrooms** with Kim Seward, RN, BSN, CMI, & Ann Jackson, PBVM (Monday, June 29, 8 a.m.–Wednesday, July 1, 5 p.m.)

A better world (and classroom) starts with the best version of us; caring for ourselves is a radical act of love that increases our capacity for impact. A central focus of holistic mindfulness and self-compassion practices provides educators with specific experience and reflection as a model for transforming self, students and classroom. Highly participative and reflective, this course offers educators opportunity to learn concepts of neuroscience, build personal plans for positive well-being and develop professional toolkits to incorporate inner compassion and mindfulness strategies.

**Fee:** Costs begin at $50, and CEUs are available

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**Mother’s Day Mother/Daughter Retreat** with Adina Joy Levitt & Helene Hirmes (Sunday, May 10, 1–5 p.m.)

This will be a fun afternoon of exploration and sacredness for mothers and their adult daughters to engage with each other in an intentional, meaningful and creative way. Each hour we will have a different focus: Art (Zentangle), Honoring our Ancestors, Dance/Movement and Gratitude. No art or dance experience is necessary.

**Fee:** $40 per person

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**Earth Prayer Group** with Mary Kirkpatrick & Blair Frank (Wednesdays, May 20 & June 17, 4–5 p.m.)

Come together to create and send intentions and prayers for healing the Earth elements—earth, air, fire and water. We will focus our prayers and intentions on one element each month (May–August). The group will be patterned after the work of Lynne McTaggart who wrote The Intention Experiment and The Power of Eight. Join us in creating sacred space and nurturing our relationships with Source, Earth, Self and Others.

**Fee:** Free-will offering

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A Note to Our Generous Supporters

As a sacred space to explore and nurture our relationships with the Source of All Being, Earth, self and others, Prairiewoods commits itself to the radical hospitality and holistic care of all our guests. In light of COVID-19, Prairiewoods has already had to cancel more than a month of programming. Because Prairiewoods is a not-for-profit organization, we rely on income from our programs, retreats and hosted groups as essential to sustaining our operations. During what will likely be a lengthy journey back to health and wholeness from this pandemic, we are hopeful that our patrons will support us with their characteristic generosity and magnanimity of spirit. If you would like to make a donation to help Prairiewoods move forward, please call us at 319-395-6700 or mail a check to Prairiewoods, 120 East Boyson Road, Hiawatha, IA 52233. Thank you as always for sharing the heart of our mission. Prairiewoods thrives because of you!
We appreciate all of the generous people who donate their time, money and other gifts to Prairiewoods!
For a complete, up-to-date list between Newsletters, visit www.Prairiewoods.org/Donate.

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Thank you!
The Prairiewoods Garden Party is our annual fundraising event that helps support programming at Prairiewoods throughout the year. We are currently re-envisioning the 2020 Garden Party in light of COVID-19. Please stay tuned to learn what fun is in store for this year’s event!