Many are describing the spring and early summer of this global pandemic as “The Great Pause.” A number of people have written and spoken eloquently about this pause, and have also begun to wonder how what we are learning now about our cultures, our communities and our interconnections may impact and inform our common future. In his seminal work, *The Dream of the Earth*, Thomas Berry posited planetary well-being as the measure of all human activity. If we bring Berry’s concept into our present, given what we know and have learned since its publication in 1988 (and especially within this time of pandemic), what would we call forth as “A New Dream of Earth”? This is the question that we asked several friends of Prairiewoods to answer in this special newsletter feature (p. 1–4). Our sincere thanks to each of them for dreaming a new Earth with us and for saying yes: Bayo Akomolafe; Jen Kardos and Fred Meyer; Chuck Peters; Kathleen Rude; Lucy Slinger, FSPA; and Carol Tyx.

I, Coronavirus: Mother. Monster. Activist.
by Bayo Akomolafe

The staggering complexity of what is happening rattles our habitual modes of sense-making, our need to trace out logical origin stories and plots and characters. Such are the makings of a world (by way of speaking, of course) that exceeds humans and our claims to exceptionality. When we have fallen to our lowest point, we are probably closer than ever to the middle of a cosmos of other things where the answers to our questions, urgent though they may seem, are no longer helpful in resolving those questions—for there are perhaps only two ways of responding to a question: one, with an answer that offers closure within the same economy of meaning; and, two, with bewilderment, which releases the question from its self-incarceration within its own world …

And yet I am mostly concerned that the apparatus of epidemiological authorities, nation-states and its citizens, and the modern hero narratives that inspire the pathologization of the radical “stranger,” has locked us into predictable modes of responsibility—and is cutting out other senses of the possible. Why is this important? It is important because the way we respond to the crisis is part of the crisis. You see, our responses and the troubles they are directed towards are co-constitutive aspects of each other. They are species of the same assembly of processes, feeding each other in mutually stabilizing loops (which is the reason I sometimes say “hope” can have insidious effects, getting in the way of transformation). We are scared that the world we know, the world that allowed us to extend our power into the “future,” to colonize the next, to marvel at the hieroglyphics of our brilliance inscribed on titanic walls by which we have held at bay the uncertain, the wild dragons, the impossible antics of (what we have, with impunity, called) “nature,” is ending. And so, as creatures of this besieged valley, we will do all in our power to stop this invasion, this pandemic. And that motivation reasserts itself as a will to control, as a declaration of independence, as mutiny against the processes that are the condition of our becoming, as a clearing of wild places to make space for anthropocentric dreams of dominance, and as the insurgency of the invisible. As such, something stranger than a pandemic is afoot, something queerer than the world being in some epic argument against viruses, something not easily named or processed or met by performances of social distancing. Something that wants more than a resolution …

It is a matter of slowing down, where slowing down is not about reducing one’s speed but about lingering in the places we are not used to. Seeking out new questions. Becoming accountable to more than what rests on the surface. Seeking roots. In a time when the air between us is not empty, where every available space is teeming with life, where touch involves making life-death calculations—invoicing images of stealthy critters making evasive manoeuvres to flee predators—slowing down is about taking care of ghosts, hugging monsters, sharing silences, embracing the weird. Making sanctuary.

Bayo Akomolafe is an author, a speaker and the force behind the Emergence Network. He facilitated Prairiewoods’ Spirituality in the 21st Century in 2019. This is an excerpt from his essay I, Coronavirus. Mother. Monster. Activist., which can be found at www.BayoAkomolafe.net.
Earth Mother is Calling Us Back to Her
by Jen Kardos & Fred Meyer

Our Earth Mother is whispering …

Dear Child,

Come snuggle in my lap like a purring cat. I feel grief deep within your bones. Bring it to me and let us sit with it for a while. You have been trying so hard to do enough and be enough in the crazy manmade world. You were exhausting yourself; now there is rest.

It is time to let go of all those “shoulds” and ways of being that always felt incongruent, but the momentum of your mind-constructed world carried forward. You know we cannot “return to normal” because “normal” never worked well for anyone.

We all suffer together. Your monarch and bee friends continue to decline reflecting the worldwide loss of biodiversity that has accelerated for centuries. As naturalist E.O. Wilson suggests, we are entering the Age of Loneliness where deserts of agriculture, concrete and housing are eliminating opportunities to play and interact with your buzzing, scampering and fluttering friends.

There is no way you can survive if I let you go on believing your mind-created structures reflect reality. I am a good mother trying to provide for all the desires of my children, but you are hurting yourself and other beings too much. This cannot go on.

Therefore, I am calling you back to your own health and sanity. Risk and difficulty are allies of the soul. This will be as uncomfortable as any birthing process. There will be a waiting. Your job is to wait in wonder with your family of flora and fauna.

When you feel lost, or when you want peace, come sit with me. Listen to the creek and notice the deep breaths you take instinctually. Watch the wild grasshoppers hop out of the way as your careen down the sidewalk on your bike.

Find joy in your newfound time to observe flowers bud, slowly open and then display their brilliance. Get to know them. Learn their names. Most importantly, just sit with them and get to know their being as you stroke them gently and smell their intoxicating fragrance. This will be good for both of you. Let them be your friends, tell them your stories, cry and laugh with them.

Bring a few flowers inside or harvest vegetables and herbs. Before snipping, sit with the plant first and ask her if you may be so blessed that she provide you this goodness. Harvest her mindfully and with gratitude. Notice the brilliance of the flowers as you pass them and mindfully savor each bite of food. Then ask yourself: is life not supposed to be more like this? You are grieving the loss of your old way of being and you are seeking a new way. This is your new way. Become re-enchanted with our world, feeling, honoring, savoring and nurturing our shared abundance from a heartfelt place of love.

Jen Kardos and Fred Meyer work for Backyard Abundance (a nonprofit that helps people create beautiful, environmentally-beneficial landscapes) and facilitate programs at Prairiewoods on a variety of ecospirituality topics.

Covid-19 as Gift and Opportunity
by Chuck Peters

As David Abram, our speaker next year for Spirituality in the 21st Century, has noted: “Right now, the earthly community of life—the more-than-human collective—is getting a chance to catch its breath without the weight of our incessant industry on its chest” (https://bit.ly/2YFufSU).

Yet a recurring narrative in our community, and with many of our global leaders, is that COVID-19, and the great global pause arising from it, is an enemy to be defeated, so that we can get back to our normal life.

Let’s take a breath and imagine what this time could be opening for us. As Sharon Blackie, this year’s speaker at Spirituality in the 21st Century reminded us, COVID-19 might be playing the role of the trickster, shaking up our habits and calling us to new ways of being.

Charles Eisenstein, last year’s speaker at Spirituality in the 21st Century, in his widely discussed recent essay “The Coronation” (https://bit.ly/2AB8NtV), encouraged us to step into our creativity: “For years, normality has been stretched nearly to its breaking point, a rope pulled tighter and tighter, waiting for a nip of the black swan’s beak to snap it in two. Now that the rope has snapped, do we tie its ends back together, or shall we undo its dangling braids still further, to see what we might weave from them? COVID-19 is showing us that when humanity is united in common cause, phenomenally rapid change is possible. None of the world’s problems are technically difficult to solve; they originate in human disagreement. In coherency, humanity’s creative powers are boundless.”

I have noticed, in the last month, a desire in several global networks to step into the possibilities of more life-affirming narratives in many aspects of our lives. One of the more promising is the GAIA Journey from the Presencing Institute at MIT, with GAIA in this case standing for Global Activation of Intention and Action (https://www.presencing.org/gaia).

GAIA is just one of many initiatives, in many spheres. I have outlined more of them, and how I came to appreciate the power of narratives both for the individual and the community, at https://bit.ly/3aSaDhN.

While this unprecedented global pause, with many of us connected globally virtually, gives us opportunity to explore global narratives, the real work is with each of us in our local communities. Can we do the work individually to bring ourselves into harmony with all of creation? Can we develop authentic inclusive relationships locally, connected globally? Can we move beyond sustainability to regenerative cultures? Can we develop learning environments that maintain the wholeness and agency of the learners?

I think we can. Our Prairiewoods community can be an effective focal point for our community as we do this work opened up by this opportunity.

Chuck Peters is an innovative leader in regenerative development and an emeritus member of the Prairiewoods operating board.
My Take on Dream of Earth 2020
by Kathleen Rude

At the time Thomas Berry penned *Dream of the Earth* in 1988, around 5 billion people lived on the planet. He believed that, in order to avert the destruction of living systems from our obsession with unlimited growth and our disconnect from the natural world, we need to develop a particular sensitivity—“a sensitivity that is something more than romantic attachment to some of the more brilliant manifestations of the natural world, a sensitivity that comprehends the larger patterns of nature, its severe demands as well as its delightful aspects, and is willing to see the human diminish so that other life forms may flourish.”

Take a deep breath before you read this again. “… and is willing to see the human diminish so that other life forms may flourish.” What kind of dream is this, where what we hold most dear—life and the promise of new life—is seen as excessive and harmful? It’s painful, even angering, to read these words, especially because they are true.

Many environmentalists still hold on to the dream that changing our patterns of consumption and making technology more sustainable, renewable, reusable will be sufficient to create a livable world for all beings, without addressing the overpopulation of the human species. They act as though nature’s carrying capacity doesn’t apply to us. Today Earth is home to almost 8 billion people. And the number is climbing.

Thomas Berry knew that our dream for a viable world must have us face the reality of how many people can thrive on the Earth and still have other lifeforms flourish. The number is much smaller than we dare to believe.

Studies show that the planet can sustainably support around 2 billion people, with every person enjoying a European standard of living (which is 60% of the average American consumption).

Take another deep breath. While the issue of human overpopulation is fraught with tough questions, we know that we are living well beyond the means of Earth. We humans use the equivalent of 1.75 planet Earths to provide the renewable resources we use and to absorb our waste. I share Berry’s dream that invites us to have a “willingness” to explore these questions: Are we willing to see our lives as no more important than the lives of other beings with whom we share this planet? Are we willing to change how we live and reproduce so that we can achieve our dream of a world that is sustainable for all life, not just humans?

The role of a dream is to hold the vision, to imagine what is yet to be. The dream doesn’t give us the roadmap on how we get there, but it does create the template for where we are going. I don’t have all the answers for how we equitably address human overpopulation. But I can hold a vision that we figure it out in time. In my Dream of Earth, I see us choosing to maintain a sustainable population size and adopting sustainable lifestyles; I see us accomplishing all this without coercion, catastrophe or corruption. I see humans returning to deep connection with and love for all life. I see Earth, with all her demands and delights, flourishing beyond my wildest imaginings.

Kathleen Rude is a speaker and facilitator of “The Work That Reconnects,” based on Joanna Macy’s work. She is also a retreat facilitator at Prairiewoods and a 2021 Spirituality in the 21st Century facilitator.

(continued on page 4)
A New Dream of Earth
by Lucy Slinger, FSPA, Ph.D.

A “new” Earth of my dreams reflects the foundational goodness that is present in an unfolding universe. A universe that goes through chaotic times, but always selects and builds on “right relationships.” Relationships that are based on selfless, life-giving principles and provide all that is needed to call forth and sustain life in abundance. The only desired creature response is to live in gracious gratitude by not disrupting the primordial sustaining processes. I live on a planet that is unconditional love made manifest in tangible forms and ways that provide all that I and every other being need. It is miraculous!

Assessing Earth’s condition today makes it abundantly apparent that something is amiss. Resources are used in ways that hamper the continual system cycling of matter and energy. Biodiversity is diminished by a monoculture, non-local, chemical food production system, genetic engineering, deforestation, etc., and pollution’s impact on every habitat on Earth. Atmospheric changes, documented to have predominately happened since the industrial revolution, have disrupted the natural flow of energy from our star source. The effects are altered local weather, global climate, and even ocean currents, temperature and acidity.

I don’t need a new planet! I simply yearn for the one species gifted with intellect/rational abilities and free will to: 1. wake up, 2. grow up and 3. assume responsibly for life action choices that challenge living in right relationship with the rest of creation.

What would Earth be like if every human being understood and exhibited behaviors that demonstrated:
1. all is given to us freely as gift?
2. there is an abundance sufficient to meet all creatures’ needs if we truly would share and did not willfully choose to hoard?
3. that everything was made in go(o)dness for go(o)dness?

Thomas Berry eloquently presents this in Evening Thought as, “The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.” Dignity, respect, reverence, sharing and caring are foundational practices that all humans are capable of choosing to “do.” These are the critical ways that need to be re-learned for “right relationship” to be the harmonious, interconnectedness that existed before humans became a part of nature/creation.

Think about it. When did the only rational/thinking creatures that came into being decide they were:
1. above and better than all the rest of the creatures?
2. better or not as good as some of their own species members?
3. put here to use, conquer, manipulate to their advantage and even exploit nature?

When did greed, power, fear, scarcity and egocentrism gain the edge over living in communion with a worldview of love, abundance, caring, consideration, respect, gratitude and, yes, even reverence?

If each member of the one “rational” species learned across time to live in ways that challenge the right relationships found in the universe, then I believe, each can also intentionally make the choice to embrace their gift of rational abilities in new ways that will positively alter Earth systems. It is a step-by-step, one action at a time restoring process that co-creates. Instinct and rational choices can rebuild right relationship governed by unconditional love of:
1. self,
2. the Divine Mystery that sustains and
3. all the rest of creation/nature including and especially other humans.

This defines my perception of the way to bring forth the “new heaven and Earth” that Jesus invites us to co-create. It is the base for a “new common shared home” I yearn for in the marrow of my bones and soul.

Lucy Slinger, FSPA, has devoted her life to Earth care and ecopraactices. She is a member of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration leadership team and a member of Prairiewoods’ operating board.

Dreaming Our Way
by Carol Tyx

Listening to birdsong in the middle of the day.
With no traffic in the streets, the joyful noise of the universe breaks into our homes.
Even as we separate ourselves, we cannot.

A grackle has built a nest in the bush by the window. She is sheltering-in-place, waiting for what will emerge. What is becoming and what has been, two different things even though we don’t know how or what, learning to make room for all this not-knowing a deeper listening to who we might be, who we might become.

Incubating our eggs, whole new beings forming that could open their mouths and receive all they need to grow, all of us perched on this planet spinning so fast we could fall off unless we learn how to preserve our nest, this fragile, woven world, nested inside other worlds, all of us still radiating heat from the fireball that birthed us, all beings bursting out of a common shell, bits of that beginning still here to teach us what we need to learn to sing together. To hear each other’s song.

Carol Tyx is an award-winning poet. Her new book, Remaking Achilles: Slicing into Angola’s History, was published this spring. She is also Prairiewoods’ Artist in Residence.
Dear Friends:

Here at Prairiewoods, like everywhere else on this beautiful Earth we call our common home, we have been struggling to understand and to find ways to move forward in the face of the challenges presented by global pandemic. Like you, we have worried for our loved ones, grieved our many losses and watched as things we thought we understood about our lives and our world have been called into question.

From its founding, Prairiewoods has been concerned at a deep level about the world and the future we are co-creating. This has been evidenced by our care for the Earth and our concern for Earth justice; our partnership with Metro Catholic Outreach addressing food insecurity through the Green Prairie Garden; our ongoing educational focus on permaculture and edible landscapes; the development of retreats and programs that foster deepening relationships with Earth, God, self and others. The COVID-19 pandemic, and the many ways it has called us to a reckoning with what is just and right, as well as to a deeper understanding of the role of compassion and inclusion, has only strengthened our commitment to our mission.

Thomas Berry’s *The Dream of the Earth* was instrumental in the formation of Prairiewoods’ mission. “Our challenge,” wrote Berry, “is to create a new language, even a new sense of what it is to be human. It is to transcend not only national limitations, but even our species isolation, to enter into the larger community of living species. This brings about a completely new sense of reality and value” (Thomas Berry, “The Ecological Age,” in *The Dream of the Earth*, 42). Our challenge remains essentially the same in these times of global upheaval. However, what if the very thing that is causing such pain and travail worldwide is also offering each of us—and all of us—new opportunities to meet this challenge? This is the question animating our response and planning at Prairiewoods. It is the question that led us to invite guest authors for this issue to dream with us what might be newly possible in a world with newly opened eyes.

We are also celebrating five years since the publication of *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis’ encyclical. Francis’ clarion call for an ecological conversion, one which inspires integrating our care for Earth with our care for the poor, with deep commitment to justice, continues to inflame our hearts. Just as COVID-19 encourages us to imagine a different future, and we contemplate a new dream of Earth, *Laudato Si’* reminds us that the world we inhabit is both a gift and a sacred trust. Prairiewoods is gearing up to meet these new challenges as thoughtfully and creatively as we can. We invite you to dream along with us!

“Once we start to think about the kind of world we are leaving to future generations, we look at things differently; we realize that the world is a gift that we have freely received and must share with others. Since the world has been given to us, we can no longer view reality in a purely utilitarian way, in which efficiency and productivity are entirely geared to our individual benefit. Intergenerational solidarity is not optional, but rather a basic question of justice, since the world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us” (*Laudato Si’,* 159).

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.

The Prairiewoods staff collaborates to publish this newsletter bimonthly. Content, except where otherwise noted, is created by our staff in consultation and with care to offer a uniquely Prairiewoods perspective.

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Tuesday’s with Thomas: Book/Article Discussion with Laura Weber & Jennifer Hanson (Tuesdays, July 7–28, 6–7 p.m.)

July 7 and 14, we will discuss Thomas Berry’s influential *The Dream of the Earth*, published in 1988. Berry “suggests that for planetary renewal we must break free of the ‘technological trance’ that drives a misguided dream of progress”—and that it is only in doing so that we can “foster mutually enhancing human-Earth relationships to heal our traumatized global biosystem” (Amazon.com).

July 21 and 28, we will consider two recent articles (to be provided via email) comparing Berry’s vision with evolving thoughts in a COVID-19 world of what our “new dream of Earth” could be. Our hope is to have you join us either in person or via Zoom.

**Fee:** $30 for four-week series, plus cost of book.

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Earth Prayer Group with Mary Kirkpatrick & Blair Frank (Wednesdays, July 15 & Aug. 19, 4–5 p.m.)

Come together to create and send intentions and prayers for healing the Earth elements—earth, air, fire and water. The group will be patterned after the work of Lynne McTaggart who wrote *The Intention Experiment* and *The Power of Eight: Harnessing the Miraculous Energies of a Small Group to Heal Others, Your Life and the World.* We will gather outdoors, so please dress for the weather. Registration is appreciated but not required. If we are unable to meet in person, this will be offered via Zoom.

**Fee:** Free-will offering.

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The Book of Longings Discussion Group with Angie Pierce Jennings (Wednesdays, Aug. 5 & 12, 3–4:30 p.m.)

We will read and discuss Sue Monk Kidd’s new novel, *The Book of Longings.* The story is told through the eyes of the main character, Ana, and is set in first-century Egypt and Palestine during the time of Jesus. Readers have described this book as life changing and find themselves falling in love with Jesus all over again. If we are unable to meet in person, this will be offered via Zoom.

**Fee:** $10 per session, plus cost of book.

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Go Deeper Thursdays with Laura Weber & Ellen Bruckner (Thursdays, July 2–Aug. 27, 4–5 p.m.)

**Prayer Experience Series** with Angie Pierce Jennings (Tuesdays, July 7–Aug. 25, 11:30 a.m.–12 p.m.)

**July Silent Directed Retreat Reimagined** with Rev. Rose Blank; Ann Jackson, PBVM; Kim Seward, BSN, RN; & Lucille Winnike, FSPA (Sunday, July 12, 5 p.m.–Saturday, July 18, 1 p.m.)

**Soul Care: Creative Arts Grief Support Group** with Jamie Siela, LISW, & Julie Wehner, LMSW, M.Div., BCC (Wednesdays, July 15 & Aug. 19, 5:30–7 p.m.)

**Day of Self Renewal Reimagined** with Angie Pierce Jennings (Mondays, July 20 & Aug. 17, 8:30 a.m.–4:30 p.m.)

**Live Abundantly (Sustainably) & Cultivate Paradise Retreat Reimagined** with Debra Landwehr Engle, Jen Kardos, Fred Meyer & August Stolba (Friday, July 24, 6:30 p.m.–Sunday, July 26, 1 p.m.)

**Mindfulness for Families Summer Camp** with Kim Seward, BSN, RN, CMI, & Prairiewoods staff (Monday, July 27, & Tuesday, July 28, 10 a.m.–3 p.m.)

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Forest Bathing with the Seasons with Dr. Suzanne Bartlett Hackenmiller, MD, FACOG, FABOIM (Friday, July 31, 1–4 p.m.)

Spend the afternoon exploring the mindfulness practice of *shinrin yoku,* or forest bathing, with Dr. Suzanne Bartlett Hackenmiller, a practitioner of integrative medicine. Learn about evidence supporting the healing benefits of shinrin yoku and then experience an extended gentle, contemplative, guided walk with the Prairiewoods land. We will use our senses to enhance well-being in the healing embrace of nature. Registration and pre-payment are required. If we are unable to meet in person, this will be offered via Zoom.

**Fee:** $50

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Women in Interfaith Dialogue with Angie Pierce Jennings, Virginia Meilroy, Dr. Paula Sanchini & Mary Beth Siemann (Saturday, Aug. 29, 10 a.m.–3 p.m.)

Come together quarterly with women of various faith traditions for conversations about faith and spirituality. We will discuss the topic of the garden as a spiritual metaphor. How does your garden grow? Are you invited to bring a reading or prayer as well as an object that represents the topic or your spirituality. Registration is required by the previous Wednesday. If we are unable to meet in person, this will be offered via Zoom.

**Fee:** $15 includes lunch.
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As many of you know, our beloved Tara King—our kitchen manager, chef and aficionado of loving life—died suddenly in April, leaving us heartbroken and bewildered. Her culinary crew, Laurie Erlacher, Rochell Potter and also Anne Marie Brunko for large events, were truly a cohesive unit of love and welcome in the Prairiewoods kitchen. Tara was a person who lived for and with others. She was authentic, kind, generous and full of fire. And though she had experienced great heartache in her life and moments of profound darkness, she loved to bring the Light: light-heartedness, light humor and remembering to light a candle. Her smile alone—and that infectious chuckle—could light up the whole room. Most importantly, she knew and practiced the tenets of Resurrection life: faith, hope, love, forgiveness and radical hospitality. She knew that living life fully is all about living our life for and with others, and is in fact our primary vocation. Always up for a hug and shenanigans, she could make us all laugh out loud with humorous anecdotes and her omnipresent love of Snapchat filters. We will never see those videos again without thinking of Tara.

Since Tara had a significant relationship with the Catherine McAuley Center in Cedar Rapids, she regularly offered her signature program there, “Tara Time,” in which she shared her love of the culinary arts with the women of the Center. Now that Tara has journeyed into Light, we think of “Tara Time” differently. It's any time we gather together for a joy-filled occasion, offer help where there is perhaps an unspoken need, or reach out to those who are struggling to find a gentle, hospitable welcome in life's turbulent waters. We will miss her every single day, especially those retreats and Y.O.L.O. lunches when Tara was in her creative, welcoming, fun-loving, happy place, grooving to the music and making everybody smile. You gave of yourself for so many, Tara. Now, it’s Tara Time for us all.
Are you feeling disconnected from people and things that help keep you centered and grounded? Prairiewoods is providing a number of FREE virtual offerings to help you stay connected with each other and with Prairiewoods during this time of social distancing!

• Every day we post a new PanDeepening blog post at www.Prairiewoods.org/blog and at www.Facebook.com/PrairiewoodsFSC. These blog posts from staff and friends of Prairiewoods are aimed at helping you go deeper during this time of pandemic.

• Every Tuesday from 11:30 a.m.–12 p.m. we offer the Prayer Experience Series via Zoom. This is a chance to pray and meditate communally.

• The third Wednesday of each month from 4–5 p.m. we offer the Earth Prayer Group via Zoom. Join us as we pray together for the good of the whole Earth.

• Every Thursday from 4–5 p.m. we offer Go Deeper Thursdays via Zoom. This is a chance for honest conversation to help us go deeper into who we are.

These offerings are all provided free of charge, but free-will donations are appreciated. All are welcome!