



About Prairiewoods

Prairiewoods Franciscan Spirituality Center is an ecospirituality retreat and conference center in the Franciscan tradition. It is located on 72 acres of woods and prairie on the outskirts of Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Prairiewoods offers a variety of programs and retreats, as well as conference space to rent. Please join us for an enriching experience in this relaxing, nurturing environment!



Prairiewoods is sponsored by Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration.



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Experience our 15-billion-year evolutionary history by taking a Cosmic Walk through the woods.

PRAIRIEWOODS
A Place of Peace and Transformation



Prairiewoods Cosmic Walk

A walk in the woods can become a walk through time. Prairiewoods offers a Cosmic Walk, a symbolic journey representing the Story of the Universe and its emergence through 15 billion years of evolutionary history. Beginning with the Great Flaring Forth—sometimes called The Big Bang—this journey to the emergence of Planet Earth and all life as we know it is mysterious and intriguing. The Cosmic Walk will help you to reflect on your place in this journey.

The walk begins under the oak tree behind the Prairiewoods Center. There you will find the first of 13 markers, each signifying a “moment of grace” in our cosmological journey. The trail through the woods has been measured so that the distance between two “moments of grace” is proportionate to the time that elapsed between these two events. (Eighty feet on the trail represents approximately one billion years.)

Enjoy your walk and the enlightenment that is sure to come from it!

Reflection Questions

- Where do you find yourself born into this story of the universe?
- What makes your heart dance with gratitude as you hear this story of creation?
- How might knowing this One Story impact your image of God?
- How might knowing this One Story shift your prayer life?

The 13 Stations on the Cosmic Walk

1 *The Great Flaring Forth*
This is the beginning of everything in existence, the emergence of the universe. Some time between 13 and 15 billion years ago, in a great burst of stupendous energy, the Universe billowed out in every direction, creating its own space in which to exist. All of creation unfolded from this originating event. All the protons that would ever be were created in this moment. The Universe was born.

2 *The Galaxies*
The original fireball spread out and cooled, the first atoms were formed—hydrogen first and helium second. About a billion years after the Great Flaring Forth, the first stars appeared. They expanded and then collapsed, forming carbon, oxygen, sulfur and iron, some of the elements necessary for life. This process continued for billions of years, creating a trillion galaxies, each with billions of stars. We know now that stars are *still* being born in these heavenly cauldrons.

3 *The Milky Way*
Among the countless galaxies in this vast universe, our own Milky Way Galaxy was formed. It is a spiral galaxy, 100,000 light years across and 16,000 light years thick. Our mother star was just one star in one arm of this gigantic galaxy.



4 *Our Sun & Planetary System*
About five billion years ago, our mother star in the Milky Way was coming to the end of her life. She expanded and swelled and then burst, exploding her stardust into space and birthing all the new elements such as calcium, nitrogen and oxygen. These elements would later appear on Earth as parts of our bodies. As the exploding stardust began to slow down and cool, it formed into our sun and our solar system.

5 *Earth*
A little more than four billion years ago, our own planet Earth formed ... It was just the right size and distance from the sun for life to develop. Torrential downpours washed the land for millions of years, carrying minerals into slowly forming seas, rich with minerals and possibilities. An atmosphere and land masses gradually formed.

6 *Life on Earth*
Four billion years ago, over time, more complex arrangements began to take shape within the oceans. Gradually, amino acids formed, and finally, proteins. These were the first simple cells, and in, by and through them, Earth awakened into life. These first simple cells learned how to catch the rays of the sun for food and how to reproduce by dividing. These ancient creatures prepared the way for every complex form of life that followed.

7 *Multi-Cellular Species*
About one billion years ago, life was mysteriously drawn toward union, and the first simple-celled organisms began to reproduce sexually. Different strands of genetic memory were combined in the new offspring. Seven hundred million years ago, the first multi-cellular life emerged within the sea. Five hundred million years ago the first fish with back bones developed, encasing Earth's first nervous system and developing sensory organs.

8 *Life Goes on Land & Vertebrate Animals*
Four hundred million years ago, the first life forms left the oceans, having learned to develop a membrane within which they could carry their own water and through which they could withstand the pull of gravity. Vertebrates left their ocean home and went ashore. Amphibians were descendants of fish who had developed lungs. They made their way into the world of swamps and forests, reaching sizes of twenty feet in length. The land filled with reptiles and dinosaurs ... a great, green, slow-moving Earth.

9 *Dinosaurs, Flowers & First Mammals*
For about one hundred million years dinosaurs were the most prevalent vertebrate form. Birds are their direct descendants. The coming of the flowers, about two hundred thirty million years ago, provided a truly concentrated food source, which made possible the development of mammals. With flowers came the greatest increase of new species the planet had seen. Flowers brought not only nourishment to Earth but also decked it with beauty, color and fragrance. The first placental mammals developed about one hundred ten million years ago. By forty million years ago, the various orders of mammals were complete and inhabited the continents of Earth's body.

10 *Ice Age & First Humans*
A little more than three million years ago, the current ice ages of Earth began, shaping the mountains, valleys, rivers, lakes and streams that form our present bio-regions. About two and a half million years ago, the earliest humanoid types evolved. These creatures, with brains and nervous systems, were complex enough that in and through them Earth awakened into self-conscious awareness of her existence.

11 *Modern Homo Sapiens*
Forty thousand years ago, modern Homo Sapiens arrived, occupying Africa and Australia. These new creatures looked about and marveled at all they saw. They learned the secrets in every leaf and rock and tree, and moved with the animals and seasons across the land. They fashioned language, tools, art, and cultures rich in ritual and celebration. Ages passed and humans changed, settling down to live in villages and then in cities. Empires and kingdoms grew and spread, characterized by monarchy and hierarchy, conquest and colonization. Into this period, just over two thousand years ago, Jesus Christ was born.

12 *Our Species Today*
The human species, driven by myths of progress, power and security, is bringing to a close the Cenozoic Age, the last sixty-five-million-year geological era of Earth's greatest variety and abundance of life. Yet, even as we humans recognize the effects of our dangerous and destructive behavior, we are also gradually discovering the great Mystery contained in the story of the Universe. We are learning more about our expanding and unified Universe, seeing how we are part of a common origin story and participants in its continuing emergence. We are seeing ourselves as members in single Earth community in a single sacred Universe.

13 *Consciousness Changing*
The challenge facing humans at this time is to awaken to the realization that each of us is a participant in this moment of Earth's evolution. Like all other creatures, we carry within ourselves the wisdom and powers of the Universe. Unlike other creatures we must awaken our consciousness to the powers within us and choose how we will live.

This Cosmic Walk information is based on the work of Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme.