

**SACRED EARTH SACRED SOUL**  
**JOHN PHILIP NEWELL**

(This plan can be adapted for Zoom sessions or small group gatherings. If doing two sessions, read chapters 1-4 for the first, and 5-9 for the second. For three sessions, read three chapters per session. For more sessions, divide accordingly. The guide can also be used by individuals for self-study. The questions are intended to be prompts. Not all questions must be taken up, and participants will have their own compelling questions and observations. Groups might consider having participants reflect on the questions in this guide in advance of each gathering.)

**Welcome to the Holy Wisdom Monastery Community Read of SACRED EARTH SACRED SOUL, in preparation for the visit of John Philip Newell and his presentation on May 20, 2022.**

The following is a suggested outline for your gathering, and can be changed to suit the preferences of your group.

- ❖ Opening Reflection (below)
- ❖ Discussion Questions, based on the chapters to be considered
- ❖ Further sharing of thoughts and questions from each participant
- ❖ Closing Reflection from the end one of the chapters studied
- ❖ Closing Prayer (below)

**Opening Reflection:**

**Blessings**

Blessings on the day born of night.  
Blessings on Earth wedded to heaven.  
Blessings on Creatures adored by angels.  
Blessings on our Bodies, alive with spirit.  
Blessings on our Minds, filled with dreams.  
Blessings on our Hearts, opened by love.  
Blessings, Blessings!

Adapted from Prayer by John Philip Newell in album **Chanting for Peace**)

**Closing Prayer:**

May the angels of light glisten for us this day.  
May the sparks of God's beauty dance in the eyes of those we  
love.  
May the universe be on fire with presence for us this day.  
May the new sun's rising grace us with gratitude.  
Let earth's greenness shine and its waters breathe with Spirit.  
Let heaven's winds stir the soil of our soul and fresh awakenings arise within us.  
May the mighty angels of light glisten in all things this day.  
May they summon us to reverence.

May they call us to life.

Adapted from Prayer by John Philip Newell in album **Chanting for Peace**)

## **Chapter 1 Sacred Soul: Pelagius, pp. 23-43**

1. Pelagius had a five-fold focus in his teachings: sacredness of the human soul, sacredness of nature, sacredness of spiritual practice, sacredness of wisdom and sacredness of compassion (p. 35). Which of these resonates most strongly with you? Which focus provides new insights for you in your spiritual journey?
2. “Pelagius is an icon for us today of reawakening to the sacredness of every human being” (p.42). Pelagius went to Rome about 380 CE and got into “good trouble” (John Lewis) with imperial Christianity which was strengthening patriarchy in the Christian churches. How was Pelagius the bearer of good news? What can we learn from his life story about being the bearer of good news, even where the situation is difficult or there is personal risk?

## **Chapter 2 Sacred Feminine: St. Brigid of Kildare, pp. 45-70**

1. Remarkable Brigid, a 5<sup>th</sup> century Irish woman, models female leadership, is ordained a bishop, inspires poets, musicians and midwives, and “extravagantly embodies compassion and boundless generosity toward the poor and those who seek refuge” (p. 45). Newell explores four liminalities or thresholds through her life:
  - a. First: The doorway between pre-Christian and the Christian, being receptive to the sacred wisdom well beyond the bound of our own religion or culture;
  - b. Second: The way she appears at the doorway between divine and human, as she bears the energies of the sacred, inspiring the flow of energy between divine and human.
  - c. Third: Intimate relationship between earth and humanity. Brigid’s feast day is February 1, or Imbolc in Ireland, feast of earth goddess, and considered the first day of Spring in Ireland.
  - d. Fourth: Liminality between the womb and birth. “What is trying to emerge from the unseen belly of the universe to manifest among us in new ways at this moment in time?” p. 64

What do these liminalities, these thresholds, stir in you? What wisdom from Brigid is waiting to be born in you?

2. How can the sacred feminine strength of Brigid inspire us to be more conscious of the relationship of all creatures and earth, more conscious of the damage that patriarchy afflicts on all creatures and on earth?

*Brigid, Mary of the Gaels, pray for us.*

**Chapter 3      Sacred Flow: John Scotus Eriugena, pp.71-95**

1. Eriugena, a 9th century wandering Irish Monk, follows on a long period of Christianity with mainly Celtic influence, in Scotland. The Celtic practice of worship occurred in the “great cathedral of earth, sea and sky.” p. 83 The Celtic Cross is a combined symbol of Christ and Cosmos, from the same point of origin. “...The Light of the divine is like a subterranean river flowing through the body of the earth and of everything that has being,”(p. 85). God is the flow of life deep in all things. Have you ever considered that the book of Scripture is one piece of revelation, and is complemented by the book of Universe, including the sun, moon, stars, earth, sea and sky and all creatures? What is the result if we only consider one of these books as sacred? What might be the result when we consider these books equally?
2. “Truth is both intimate and immense, personal and vast. Thus, wisdom is always unitive, seeking the oneness and interrelatedness that underlies all things...God is the essence of *all* things,” (p. 93). What sense of “inner authority” inspires you to consider this wisdom of oneness, and invites you to deepen your own “sacred flow,” your own spiritual belief system? How do the Communities of Holy Wisdom Monastery promote these beliefs, and how can they be strengthened in the future?

**Chapter 4      Sacred Song: the *Carmina Gadelica*, pp. 98-121**

1. In the Celtic spiritual tradition, poetry was a powerful influence in the daily prayers that that marked the lives of the residents. Sacred elements of water, fire, earth and air permeate the early poetry/prayer and the life-giving energies of the divine are deeply related to the human. Let us reflect together on some of these ancient songs.

Women often recited:

*When I see the new moon,  
It becomes me to lift mine eye,  
It becomes me to bend my knee,  
It becomes me to bow my head.*

Men greeted the day with these words:

*The eye of the great God,  
The eye of the God of glory...  
Pouring upon us*

*At each time and season,  
Pouring upon us  
Gently and generously.*

*Glory to thee,  
Thou glorious sun.  
Glory to thee, thou sun,  
Face of the God of life.*

What do these words tell us of the faith of these people?

2. Select a favorite poem/prayer or passage from this chapter that tells of the special relationship with the sacred in all of creation, the body and all of nature, and share it with the group. Share your insights, and reflect on how these ancient prayers may influence your prayer life, may strengthen your participation in the communities of Holy Wisdom Monastery, and inspire your work for justice and peace.

### **Chapter 5: Sacred Imagination, Alexander John Scott pp. 123-147**

“In the Celtic world the imagination is a faculty of knowing. It is a way of remembering what we have forgotten, that spirit and matter are interwoven, and that time and eternity are intermingled” (p.123).

1. Alexander John Scott was a minister, educator, and social reformer. He said of the imagination that it was not doctrinal or propositional knowing, but rather belonged “to some deeper part of the human being.”
  - Where/when have you known the truth of your imagination’s deeper knowing?
  - Do you experience any resistance to this idea about imagination?
  - Is the “imaginal” different than the imagination? How so? What makes the imaginal sacred to Scott? to Newell? to you?
2. A belief that spirit and matter are interwoven runs through all the chapters of this book. A refraction of that belief, particular to the life and work of AJS, might be how he saw imagination reflecting “the very nature of the universe, which interweaves countless strands of life into a single fabric of reality.” Golden threads appear in Scott’s description of the relationship between the divine and human within us (“If somehow taken out of us, we would cease to exist,” p. 124) and also in his student’s (George MacDonald) tale, *The Princess and the Goblin* (if ever in danger, feel for the golden thread and follow wherever it leads, p. 136-37). Reread the sections about golden threads.
  - Sit quietly with the image and the story. How does this image come alive for you? What is the golden thread?

3. Scott developed a threefold vision of higher education, an education that would enable people to acquire a greater consciousness of soul, nurture a greater strength of soul, and foster a greater beauty of soul.

- How do you see the imagination or the imaginal life in service of the soul?
- What has ever made you more conscious of soul, stronger in soul, more beautiful in soul? What does a soul education require?

## **Chapter 6      Sacred Earth: John Muir, pp.149-170**

1. For John Muir, the story from Hebrew scriptures of Moses standing in the presence of a burning bush was a central image for seeing the “sacredness shining at the heart of all things.”

- ❖ He was now aware of a glory deep in all things. The earth had become for him “a burning bush”... a bush that was on fire without being consumed. At the heart of the fire was the presence of the divine (p. 154).
- ❖ “Spiritual fire burning in every tree, in every bush, in every stone... Every bush is a burning bush,” (p. 154).
- ❖ The earth, he realized, is not simply “clothed with light, but wholly composed of it.” This was not just a seeing with his eyes; it was an experiencing with his whole body and soul, touching naked God (p. 156).

- Reflect on how Muir came to have this vision. Have you ever experienced something similar? What does the burning bush stir in you?
- Recall a time when you felt like you were seeing something or someone with the eyes of your heart. When have you been seen in this way?
- What keeps us from always seeing in this way?

2. For Muir, opening to the sacred was about opening to the elemental. As he was later to say, “In God’s wildness lies the hope of the world.” Newell considered three implications of this statement:

1. that our source of hope is already present, deep within the wildness of the natural world. We need to let go of our notion that what the earth primarily needs is us ... [we need to] remember that we need the earth and the wildness that is within her.

2. that we need to allow the wildernesses of the natural world to more fully awaken us.

There is hope for the human journey to the extent that we come back into true relationship with the earth's wildness.

3. that we need to get in touch with the wildness of the divine within ourselves. Our hope lies not primarily in human reason and scientific analysis, but in the untamed regions of intuition and human imagination within us.

- Which of these implications resonates most strongly in you? Is there any one that challenges you? Are there threats or risks in really leaning into these implications?
- How are we to think of wildness differently from nature? How do you think Muir would distinguish wildness from wilderness?

(Muir and Thoreau were kindred spirits. Thoreau illuminates Muir's passion for wildness, writing:

*We need the tonic of wildness...At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of Nature. We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and Titanic features, the sea-coast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and its decaying trees, the thunder cloud, and the rain which lasts three weeks and produces freshets. We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander.)*

3. Newell calls Muir a prophet for his resolute denunciation of the wrongs humans were doing to the environment, but also for his invitation back to a love affair with the earth – “announcing what is true and denouncing what is false. He proclaimed the sacredness of the earth and condemned the sacrilege of the earth... He invited his contemporaries to fall in love again and again with nature,” (p. 168).

- Remember a time when you have been in love or had just fallen in love. What is it about the experience of being in love that makes it the response Muir most longs for us to have in our relationship to nature?
- Does “falling in love” capture your feelings for the wildness? What other experiences are resonant with your feelings about wildness?

## **Chapter 7      Sacred Matter: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, pp. 171-192**

1. “At the heart of matter is the heart of God,” said Teilhard. Newell, said, “In other words, the life at the heart of all life is not just energy; it is presence.” This presence spoke to Teilhard, saying, “*ego sum, noli timere*/It is I; do not be afraid,” (Matthew 14:27).

Like many others we've met in this book, Teilhard's proclamations about the sacredness of matter draw on the vocabulary of light, transparency, energy, and love affairs. Perhaps a particular refraction from

Teilhard is that one can not only *love* matter, but that one can experience *being loved* by/in it. We can love the universe, but the universe also loves us.

- Have you ever had the experience of feeling beloved by the universe? What was that experience like for you?
- Why might we need to hear (from the God who is present in all matter), “do not be afraid”?
- What language or practices in our religious traditions encourage a distinction or separation between a love of heaven and a love of earth?

2. For Teilhard, the sacredness of sacrifice – love’s redemptive work – is about allowing the failures of life to be the occasion for seeking forgiveness and reconciliation, by enabling the wrongs committed or experienced to become the seedbed from which arise new beginnings. He said it would be absurd to think that sacrifice is about ceasing to love oneself and pernicious to think it’s about loving oneself less. Rather it is about decentering ourselves or “the radical sacrifice of egoism,” (pp. 184-87).

- What ideas, images, and language are associated with your concept of “sacrifice”? Where did they come from?
- Teilhard’s ideas about sacrifice are based on the premise of the sacredness of all matter. Can you work back to determine what premises your ideas of sacrifice are based on? Do Teilhard’s considerations of the sacredness of matter (or sacred imagination or sacred earth) challenge your ideas? liberate them? confound them?

3. Consider these key aspects of Teilhard de Chardin’s thought according to John Philip Newell:

- ❖ the sacredness of matter
  - ❖ the sacredness of the feminine, the “fragrance” of the feminine, or “the world’s attractive power,” is that dimension deep within us and in matter that invites union
  - ❖ the “amorization” of the universe, the capacity for love in the human soul reuniting us to the sacred deep in all things
  - ❖ the sacredness of sacrifice, and the urgent need to develop a “new” meaning of the cross
- What emerges for you, or in you, as you consider the relationship between the “fragrance of the feminine,” the “amorization of the universe,” and Teilhard’s ideas about sacrifice?

**Chapter 8**      **Sacred Compassion: George MacLeod, pp. 193-219**

1. George MacLeod deepens further our exploration of the conjoining of heaven and earth, the divine and the human, the spirit and matter. Like Teilhard de Chardin, MacLeod saw Christ as pointing toward this conjoining. Christ came in a body, healed bodies, fed bodies, and came to save – body and soul.

Read, in the way of *lectio divina*, MacLeod's prayer based on *The Breastplate Hymn of St. Patrick*, pp. 195-97.

- What words, phrases, or images command the attention of your heart?
- What associations do you have?
- To what prayer does it lead you?

One of MacLeod's challenges to us is to look for the divine in both the suffering and the glory of humanity and earth; to seek the divine in places of beauty and also of agony.

- What are some of the challenges in seeing the divine in suffering and agony? What might be some risks?

2. Central to the idea of sacred compassion is that not only is the spiritual to be found deep in the physical, *but that heaven is to be served in the material needs of humanity and the earth*. Newell wrote, "It is not enough only to *see* compassionately. Nor is it enough even just to *feel* compassionately, as essential as this is. Compassion needs to be embodied, both in the relationships of our lives and communities and in the structures of our societies and nations ... justice is the absolute imperative of sacredness," (p. 218).

- Newell describes MacLeod as "an icon of compassion and justice for us today." In what ways is this true? How might MacLeod be seen differently from other passionate activists of our time? Who is MacLeod-like today in 2022?
- What was your response to the statement, "justice is the absolute imperative of sacredness"? How does an awareness of the sacredness of all things change the goal of justice? How does a justice commitment impact your sense of the sacred?

3. Quite a number of words familiar to many in the Christian tradition (but also perhaps "loaded") have been redefined by Newell or one or another of the Celtic prophets in this book. In this chapter, MacLeod challenges us to think about "holiness" and "salvation" in different ways (pp. 200-201).

- What does "holiness" mean to you? What does it look like, sound like?
- How are MacLeod's ideas about holiness clarified by the reconstruction of the Iona Abbey? by his reflections on the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima in August of 1946?

Bonus prompts from MacLeod himself:

Matter matters.

Do you believe in nonviolence?

Are you a Presbyterian or a Christian?

What are we going to do about all this?

**Chapter 9 Sacred Journey: Kenneth White, pp. 221-249**

1. Kenneth White stretches us to embark on a peregrination, a journey in which our destination is unknown. Perhaps no other chapter, no other Celtic prophet, lays down a challenge with the same sense of the ominous about it – even as it is exhilarating:

*“This will be no pleasure cruise  
rather the wildest of goose chases  
around the rim of the world and farther  
a peregrination in the name of God.”*

- What were your general impressions and reactions to this chapter? Where did you feel exhilaration? Was there ever any sense of threat?
- What bit of poetry spoke to you most deeply? How so?

2. White appears to Newell as a cartographer mapping a “threefold pathway” to launch a peregrination.

**rediscovering the earth**

We are survivors of a great catastrophe, the industrialized world’s separation from nature. The markers of it are a reduction in spirit, the decay of language, and a disappearing earth. It is also seen in the religion of an empire that looks beyond the natural world rather than within it (pp. 225-28).

- How do you experience or perceive this “great catastrophe?”
- What seems required of us to shift from awareness to knowing, and then to letting go? (“go-flow,” p. 231).

**rewording the world**

White wants us learn to speak from within our relationship with the earth, in geo-poetics, or poetry rooted in the earth (p. 232).

*I must enter this birch-world  
and speak from within it*

*I must enter into  
this lighted silence...*

*[and wait] for the words  
to come out of the silence...*

*rooted and branched*

*and running with sap.*

*up at four  
walking along  
a silent shore*

*trying to translate  
into a tongue that's known  
a poem writ  
in the language of stone*

- When do you know that you are speaking from the heart of your being in the heart of another?
- What language, images, music, pieces of art, food expresses what is deepest in you?
- When have you awakened what was deep in another? When have you been so awakened?

### **journeying toward a “new-found land”**

*I was aware of a new land*

*a new world  
but I was loath to name it too soon  
simply content to use my senses  
feeling my way  
step by step into the reality . . .*

*I lived and moved  
as I had never done before . . .  
knew a larger identity*

*the tracks of caribou in the snow  
the flying of wild geese  
the red Autumn of the maple tree  
bitten by frost  
all these became more real to me  
more really me  
than my very name*

*I found myself still saying things like  
“at one with the spirit of the land”  
but there was no “spirit,” none  
that was outworn language*

*and this was a new world  
and my mind was, almost, a new mind  
there was no such thing as “spirit”  
only the blue tracks in the snow  
the flying of the geese  
the frost-bitten leaf*

*religion and philosophy  
what I’d learned in the churches and the schools  
were all too heavy  
for this travelling life  
all that remained to me was poetry  
but a poetry  
as unobtrusive as breathing  
a poetry like the wind  
and the maple leaf  
that I spoke to myself  
moving over the land*

pp. 242-444

- Read this poem along with these bits from Newell and simply respond from your heart: we need resurrection, not simply resuscitation; we are beginning to imagine the new land but are cautioned from naming it too soon or defining it too sharply with terminology from our old; liminal spaces – shorelines, twilight, dawn-talk; we have lifted anchor and sailing out of the harbors of our religious homelands; the diamond country ...

This is not simply a passive drifting into new waters. It can be a faith-filled letting go of what is no longer working in order to travel with an inner assurance toward what we are longing for, our eyes open, skinned for the shoreline of a better country (p. 247).