

Conference Summary for  
Ecology, Spirituality, and Social Justice  
January 26-31, 2014 at Esalen Institute

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Recognition of the dire state of the planet's life systems calls into question not only our technological, economic, and political capabilities, but also our conventional understandings of consciousness. Socio-ecological change demands inner revolution. The common negative states of mind arising from concern for the ecological crisis are familiar: denial, despair, burnout, paralysis, and grief. However, engagement with the ecological crisis cannot stop here. The cultivation of attitudes of gratitude, wonder, and awe, as recommended by many of the world's religious traditions, can arise from contemplative practices and can contribute to greater personal resilience and vitality in the face of ecological change and challenge. Embedded in spiritual worldviews and joined with ethical

perspectives, ecological thinking can extend beyond despair and dismay to embrace expansive views of integrated socio-ecological flourishing.

Under the auspices of the Esalen Center for Theory and Research (CTR), twelve scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, based at universities and institutes around the United States met at the Esalen Institute, Jan. 26-31, 2014, to continue their research into the intersections of ecology, spirituality, and social justice. The research continued a stream of inquiry that nine of these scholars, including eight faculty members and one doctoral student, have been exploring through regular meetings since 2009. Comprised of educators and teachers of environmental studies, this group of scholars seeks to help students engage with questions, attitudes, and states of mind that may help them move away from feeling paralyzed or overwhelmed when they consider the immensity of the ecological and social challenges before us. The universities represented include: American University (Washington, DC), California Institute of Integral Studies (San Francisco, CA), California State University – Fullerton (Fullerton, CA), Harvard Divinity School (Cambridge, MA), Middlebury College (Middlebury, VT), University of Colorado – Boulder (Boulder, CO).

During our week at Esalen, we shared presentations on research projects that have developed and flourished within the supportive container of this group of like-minded scholars and activists.

A talk by Paul Wapner, political scientist at American University, on climate suffering helped extend our understanding of the responses to climate change—typically limited to mitigation (stop emitting greenhouse gases!) and adaptation (adjust to rising seas and hotter temperatures)—to include the potential expansion of the responsive capacities of human soul through compassionate action in the face of widespread suffering.

Dan McKanan, of Harvard Divinity School, discussed the spiritual philosophy of anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner and its past and potential contributions to the environmental movement.

Robert McDermott, president emeritus of the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS), extended our understanding of the contributions of Rudolf Steiner to ecological and pedagogical practice through an elucidation of practices for cultivating compassion and devotion.

Becky Gould, of Middlebury College, employed the work of Henry David Thoreau to discuss the negative social and ecological impacts of the current frenzied and unhealthy relation to time, and to recommend the cultivation of spaciousness in our lives.

Will Keepin and Cynthia Brix, founders of Gender Reconciliation International, shared their approach to bringing about greater understanding and reconciliation between men and women, and led exercises to promote awareness of our gaps in understanding the wounds each gender carries.

Nawang Phuntsog, of California State University – Fullerton, reflected on his early education in the Tibetan children’s school of Dharamsala, following his exile from Tibet, identifying the highly supportive and nurturing aspects of this educational style that led many of his generation to develop fierce commitment to the Tibetan cause while maintaining a sense of freedom and compassion.

Michelle McCauley, a psychologist at Middlebury College, discussed the connections between psychological need fulfillment, and the positive states of awe and wonder that might lead to greater ecological engagement and commitment.

Elizabeth Allison, of CIIS, argued that the attainment of greater levels of environmental justice and economic justice require a deeper epistemic justice that would incorporate into public discourse a wider acceptance of diverse ways of presenting knowledge and developing it.

Each talk was followed by rich discussion and commentary that wove together the various themes of individual research projects, and advanced their theoretical foundations. Interspersed between the talks were contemplative practices, led by group members, and tai chi, led by Elizabeth McAnally, a doctoral candidate at CIIS studying water ethics, who also provided a geographical and historical introduction to the Esalen property through the lens of the creek, hot spring, and ocean waters of Esalen.

On Wednesday evening, the group shared some of its work with the larger Esalen community through a public presentation in Huxley. A mixed media presentation that involved music, chanting, lecture, led the audience deeper into the process and content of “contemplative environmental studies.” Screening the 2012 film “The Fire Inside: Place, Passion, and the Primacy of Nature,” created by Becky Gould, offered examples of the practices that connect spirit and nature.

All group members found the exceptionally beautiful grounds of Esalen, the healing waters of the tubs, the excellent meals, and the spiritual atmosphere of the property to be highly conducive to our deliberations, which are in deep alignment with the worldview that the Esalen Institute supports. We are extremely grateful for the hospitality shown by the Esalen Center for Theory and Research as this week has substantially advanced our work together.

To carry the work forward, several professors are planning a presentation for the Association of Environmental Studies and Sciences conference in June, and others are considering offering workshops to help universities in integrating contemplative practices into environmental studies curricula. We are also discussing writing a book to share our ideas with the broader community of ecologically concerned citizens.