

# EarthMatters

*Inspiring people to take responsibility for Earth.*

VOLUME 15, NUMBER 4

SPRING 2009

## NWEI News

### 2009 National Gathering

Join other NWEI community organizers, supporters and volunteers for NWEI's 2009 North American Gathering, which will focus on the theme "We're All In," a reminder of how every sector of society—citizens, business, government, higher education and faith communities—is working together to respond to the call for a shift in consciousness. Highlights of the gathering will include a panel with Portland-based leaders, workshops on grant writing, presentations by local sustainability coordinators, and workshops on outreach to the higher education and business communities.

The North American Gathering promises to be an inspiring, instructive and rejuvenating event with fellow members of the NWEI community. Join us to welcome the summer solstice, and deepen our skills in creating the changes we wish to affect and, together, expand the work of *inspiring people to take responsibility for Earth.*

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## The Moral Equivalent of Wildness

*By Kathleen Dean Moore*

I drifted in my kayak, listening for small splashes and hushed voices behind me: the sounds of my college students launching their boats in the dark. The night was intensely quiet and dark, like a campsite after the fire goes cold, but the moon was preparing to rise over the mountains in the east, and the lake showed a slick of silver.

I began to see the boats on the lake, scattered shadows floating: two kayaks, a canoe, a raft, a dory. One after another they turned east, stirring silver rings in dark water, until each boat pointed to the cleft in the mountains where the moon would emerge. In time, the top of the moon bulged between the black peaks, swelling upward. Then the whole creamy white orb lifted away from the mountains and floated free. When I looked behind me, the lake was dotted with uplifted, moonlit faces.

They were still for a very long time, the young people in their little drifting boats. Finally I heard oars splash, and the dory moved slowly up

the bright pathway toward the moon and disappeared into the mountains' shadow. Then they rowed back again into the moonlight. They rested a moment in the glow of the moon; then back they went into shadow. At first I didn't understand what they were doing. Eventually it dawned on me: Each time they went into the darkness, the moon appeared for them to drop back behind the mountains. And when they returned to the light, the moon rose — setting and rising, setting and rising, this great enlightenment, over and over again.

As the moon sailed higher in the sky and the night grew colder, the boats came in one by one, oars thumping damply, voices whispering good night. Allen would spend the night in a canoe, floating on that skim of moonlight. Jenna would spread a sleeping bag in the meadow. Walking back to my tent, I passed Alicia wrapped in a blanket, ankle-deep in shallow water, looking at the stars. My God, that water must be cold, I thought. By morning there would be frost.

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# MIKE'S MESSAGE

## A NOTE FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

You may recall that we recently shifted our outreach strategy - from focusing solely on "organizing the converted" to placing greater emphasis on "converting the organized". I'd ask that you suspend, through the duration of this column, any assumptions you may have regarding the term "convert".

What "converting the organized" brings up for me is the organizing principle of leverage. To reach more people and to engage them effectively, we need to go where people and social connections already exist. Converting the organized also refers to engaging a more mainstream audience, both ready and necessary to create the cultural change needed for a sustainable future.

This organizing mindset and strategy has led us to work more closely with neighborhood associations, networks of churches, large businesses and some groups at the municipal level. We look forward

to sharing the results of our efforts on these fronts in the near future. Right now, I'd like to share exciting results of our work in the higher education sector.

Last week we received feedback from Trina, who recently participated in a NWEI course supplemented into an existing college class: "Usually in a college course, I take the notes, read the books, do the assignments, and when it is done, I go home and put the notebook on the shelf and continue on with my life. This course is different. I may put the notebook on the shelf, but I will be thinking, acting and changing every day of my life because of the class."

I will be the first to acknowledge that Trina's testimonial does not address the core higher education purpose of career preparation. The essential point she raised, however, is that she will take this experience and tie it to her studies as an engineer, or marketing major, or medical student. Doesn't it seem likely that she, and

others, will be more effective citizens and professionals in carrying out the core of their work while building a more sustainable culture? Her shared experiences with classmates will last far beyond putting the book on the shelf, or even graduating from college.

This integrated and experiential approach to learning is one we are continuing to evolve in partnership with over 30 institutions.

Most colleges have thousands of students just like Trina- enthusiastic learners, ready to tackle the world. NWEI is excited to expand our work with these students, their faculty and other campus support staff, using a variety of new program delivery methods. To have all sectors of society working together to take responsibility for Earth - that is the vision we hold!

For us and the planet,  
Mike Mercer

### Spring Membership Drive: We need to hear from YOU today!

If you are already a Northwest Earth Institute member- Thank You for making a donation to support the important work that we do! To those who are not current members, or may never have made a donation before, **now is the time to make a contribution. As a nonprofit organization, we rely on individual donations.** Our donors make it possible for us to produce our course books, do the outreach to enroll participants (over 100,000 so far!) and continue inspiring people to make impressive changes in their lives which benefit our planet.

We regularly hear from course participants that our courses have touched their lives in profound ways and inspired them to take action. We are asking those of you who have been touched by a course, or who share our vision of a sustainable society to take action today and become a member of the Northwest Earth Institute.

Your support is especially important in these difficult economic times. In order for NWEI to weather this financial storm we need to hear from you. **We are counting on you to do your part to support our shared vision of a sustainable future!** Please use the membership form on the back page of this newsletter (or join online at [www.nwei.org/join](http://www.nwei.org/join)) to show your support for NWEI and our Earth today. You can also join or renew by calling us at (503) 227-2807. Check out our new member benefits at [www.nwei.org](http://www.nwei.org); starting this spring we will hold NWEI Member Raffles. Join or renew today to be eligible for our spring raffle!■

**The Moral Equivalent of Wildness** *cont. from page 1*

It was a long time before the dory came to shore. I lay in my tent and listened to voices murmuring on the lake. "So what is nature?" one voice asked. "And where is it?" the other replied. I smiled.

This was Philosophy 438, Philosophy of Nature. Every year in September, before the semester begins at Oregon State University, I bring this class to the mountains for a week. The students come from all majors: marine biology, political science, geography, forestry, a very few from philosophy. We camp on a little lake in a forest of subalpine fir and white pine, just under the broken talus slopes of a jagged mountain.

The morning after our excursion on the lake, we all sat in sunlight that made us squint, reading Henry David Thoreau. In the meadow where we had convened, frost glittered on each seed head and blade of grass, and mist rose in ribbons from the lake.

A person "needs wildness the way a garden needs its load of muck," Thoreau wrote, and none of us disagreed, there in the meadow with dragonflies clattering past and a great cloud of mayflies rising into the sunlight for one ecstatic day of flight. We tried to imagine what Thoreau's metaphor meant exactly. What is muck? How and when is it best applied to a garden? If plants need muck in heaps at their roots, where they live and grow, what is the significance of

this for those of us who live in cities, far from wildness?

Thoreau went on: "In wildness is the preservation of the world." But, the students noticed, he didn't waste much time defining wildness. He talked instead about what the muck of wildness nourishes in people: energy, strength, courage, independence, alertness, a way of seeing that penetrates ordinary expectations, joyous gratitude that goes beyond mere gratefulness. If the natural world is to be preserved, he implied, it will be because of how wildness transforms us.

My students thought they knew pretty much what Thoreau meant, because for five days they had been gorging on wildness, swallowing it in great gulps, as if they were starved. Each of them had been transformed that week into the sort of person who canoes on a wilderness lake late at night, in the silence, in the presence of the moon. They knew that expansive feeling inside. They knew that gratitude. They knew that connection to the moonlit night, the joy that can't be distinguished from love.

So here is what scared me: the next day, the students would come down from the mountain to the first day of classes on a state-university campus going through fraternity and sorority rush. The cars they'd left in empty parking lots would now be shoulder to shoulder with other vehicles, and the bookstore clerks would be harried and

cross. Voice mails would spill invitations, and parties would thump long into the night. And when they called home to say they were safely out of the woods—yes, it was awesome, yes, yes — what would they be able to tell their parents about the experience, as the cellphone signal went in and out and somebody's car alarm beeped and the line for registration pushed out the door?

The question I now asked my students was: Could we bring the values of wild places with us when we drove back down the mountain? Could we hold on to them in our neighborhoods? This was not an idle question. What if it's true that we need wildness the way a garden

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### **Worm Composting in the NWEI Kitchen**

The NWEI Staff aim to practice what we preach by integrating sustainability into all aspects of our work- from how we arrive at the office each day to where our food scraps end up. Thanks to a generous donation of a worm composting bin we are vermicomposting in our office kitchen. Many thanks to the Garden Supply Company for our Worm Chalet compost bin! ■

## **The New Deep Ecology**

A revised Deep Ecology discussion course is on the way! With 50% new material, a new title (still in the works), and an updated look, NWEI's oldest and most cherished course is being revitalized. The new discussion guide includes six sessions which explore our relationship with Earth from a variety of perspectives, including Deep Ecology, the

Gaia Hypothesis, Wild Nature, Ecopsychology, Ecospirituality and The Universe Story.

We hope that this revised discussion course, scheduled for publication in mid-spring, will bring discussion course participants lots of food for thought, as well as inspiration to take responsibility for Earth.

If you have any questions, or catchy title suggestions, please

contact Meg O'Brien at [meg@nwei.org](mailto:meg@nwei.org).

## **Toward a Sustainable Workplace**

A brand new course, *Toward a Sustainable Workplace*, is currently in the pilot phase. The course will engage employee teams in creating sustainable business practices.

Stay tuned for the launch this summer! ■

**The Moral Equivalent of Wildness** cont. from page 3

needs muck, that the preservation of the natural world depends on wildness? Most people don't, can't live in the wild anymore. What, then, will nourish and preserve us?

William James noted that war, for all its hideous effects, sometimes brings out characteristics that we value: it can make people brave and selfless and gather them together to serve a common purpose. He searched for something that would bring out these characteristics without the necessity of bloodshed: the "moral equivalent of war," he called it. Wildness, too, changes us in ways we value. We return from the wild "restored," by which we mean filled with new stores that will nourish us, new sources of strength and peace, or maybe with new stories of who we are in relation to each other and to the moon. What we need in the cities is the "moral equivalent" of wildness. But what would that be?

When the discussion ended, the students wandered off in small groups to try to answer my question. Carrying notebooks and steaming cups of tea, they hiked down the trail past green

moss heaped in a black-bottomed spring. I watched them talk among themselves, their heads bent together. Between their leaning bodies, light glittered on the lake.

No sooner had the students left than I started to wonder whether I'd given them the right question to ponder. I'd been presupposing that wildness is something we find in the mountains and not in the valley, something we might transport from wilderness to town. But maybe I was wrong. Isn't there night in the city? Doesn't the moon rise over the sororities as surely as it does over the howling hills? Doesn't mist lift from the broad lawns and catch on the eaves of the library, and doesn't that damp air smell of the river and the sea? And when the students are sleeping in various combinations in pizza-box-strewn apartments, isn't the moon still there, in the dark outside the window?

Maybe wildness isn't something we need to bring down from the mountain. It's true that legally designated "wilderness areas" are distant from our daily lives. Cartographers can draw lines around this wilderness. But there are no real boundaries to wildness. In the

warm afternoon, carbon dioxide from the cities creeps up the valleys and lifts into the clouds. In the cool night, the air drifts down again, the smell of pines lingering between the Chevron and the 7-Eleven, whispering through the valves of our hearts. We are wildness: soil, water, oxygen, sunlight. Wildness is all there is.

Maybe I should have asked not how we can bring wildness into our lives, but how we can remember to notice the wildness in every sweating pore, every stewed carrot, every solid step; in the morning air noisy with rain; in the reeling stars. Or maybe this is the question: How can we live always as we do in the wilderness, with that same respect and care for what is beautiful and beyond us? ■

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*"The Moral Equivalent of Wildness"*  
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## NWEI News

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To register or for more information email [contact@nwei.org](mailto:contact@nwei.org). All are welcome to participate. We look forward to seeing you there!

### Finding the Why and How in Climate Change

By Kim Smith

As a sociologist, I often struggle with how to empower people to engage in social change when they are learning about social problems. Without a clear sense of a solution, apathy and cynicism can often set in. Climate change is such an issue. We hear about the dire consequences and feel daunted by the enormity of tasks ahead. That

is, unless we integrate action into the learning process.

That was the intention and result of a new pilot project I developed, which combined the learning aspects of the NWEI discussion course "Global Warming: Changing CO<sub>2</sub>urse" with the service mission of *Hands on Greater Portland's* teamworks model. A team of six community members and I gathered together weekly to learn about the critical topic of climate change and volunteered with local non-profits to promote energy conservation and sustainability. We explored the history and science of global warming, reflected on our personal values and habits, and took action in our community. Discussing the issues made us want to do something. Attending the Fix-It Fair with the Community Energy

Project, organizing building supplies for reuse at the Rebuilding Center, and planting native plants with the Three Rivers Conservancy taught us how.

The Teamworks Climate Change project allowed us to learn about accessible and significant actions we can all take to address climate change. In the process, we discovered our individual and collective power. We clearly need more opportunities like this in our community. I am thrilled to report that this model works and is ready to be replicated. For more information about this project contact Kim Smith at: [kdsmith@pcc.edu](mailto:kdsmith@pcc.edu). ■

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Kim Smith, Ph.D. is a Sociology Instructor at Portland Community College.

# EcoChallenge

By Kerry Brown

When was the last time you made an eco-resolution -- a resolution to reduce your impact on our ecosystems, by doing something new? This Earth Day we are asking you to start thinking about an area in your life where you'd like to take action. Maybe you want to reduce your car trips, or bike to work more often; maybe you'd like to save (and save money on) electricity or water. Perhaps you want to focus your food purchases on local or organic options. We all need a good reason now and again to start new sustainable habits, or reinvigorate an old resolution—and NWEI has a fun event coming up to inspire you to take action!

Based on our successful Sustain-A-Thon pilot in October 2008, our renamed EcoChallenge will be taking place October 1st-15th. Please join us and take on an eco challenge of your own choosing this October! Details will follow on our website, [www.nwei.org](http://www.nwei.org). Everyone is welcome—and we encourage you to take on the EcoChallenge with others in your family or community!

While you are considering what challenge you might wish to take on, consider these insights by Narada Golden, who tried to eliminate plastic purchases during the Sustain-A-Thon last fall.

By Narada Golden

I wanted to use the Sustain-A-Thon to address personal household waste reduction by consuming as little plastic as I could. In some ways I think you are not only what you eat but also what you throw away, and I noticed that unrecyclable and hard to recycle plastics seemed to be a

constant in my garbage bin. My goal for the Sustain-A-Thon was to use and throw away nonrecyclable plastic only when necessary and recycle all other plastics for a month.

My focus on plastic was a response to several waste reduction experiments I had started at the beginning of 2008. In January of 2008 I removed all but one waste basket from my apartment and set a goal of emptying this waste basket only once a month.

By the middle of September I had emptied the basket just three times—far exceeding my goal and noticed that most of the waste I was throwing away was plastic. Since plastic was the majority of my remaining waste stream in 2008 the Sustain-A-Thon provided a great opportunity to see what I could do about reducing my personal consumption of plastic.

I found that I was able to reduce my plastic consumption significantly during my Sustain-A-Thon efforts— but found it very challenging to achieve a true zero waste lifestyle. I was able to reduce my non-recyclable plastic consumption to literally one handful of plastic during the challenge but it is important to note that this month did not include any major holidays, I did not need any major bike or home repairs and I did not make any major purchases.

To view a list of Narada's typical purchases, plastic-free alternatives and notes on the relative success of the substitutions, please visit our website: <http://www.nwei.org/files/Narada.pdf>.

If you would like to participate in the EcoChallenge email [kerry@nwei.org](mailto:kerry@nwei.org).

## New Seasons Market Hosts NWEI Discussion Courses

This fall, in partnership with New Seasons Market, a local grocer here in Portland, NWEI began to offer classes in a new format for our area—an open to the public model. This model, used successfully by our Sister Earth Institutes across North America, allows community members to join together to form a new group that meets in a public place. Starting with *Menu for the Future*, participants met once a week in the New Seasons community room. The success of the first course led to *Voluntary Simplicity* being offered this winter. "I've always wanted to take a class but had a hard time putting together a group," said Douglas Tsoi, a participant. "For people like me an opportunity like this is critical." People who are interested in NWEI discussion courses but who have difficulty organizing their own groups can join the public courses to get involved and connected. The courses were advertised in the store and by NWEI, and drew first-time course participants as well as veterans. Our success in offering courses in partnership with a local business has opened up a new forum for Portland community members to get involved with the work that NWEI is doing locally. ■

To find out where in Portland open to the public courses are currently being held, email [contact@nwei.org](mailto:contact@nwei.org).

## EarthMatters Printing

You may have noticed that EarthMatters is printed on a different paper. Though the color is new, we are still printing on 100% post-consumer recycled paper. (Our new letterhead and envelopes are also 100% post-consumer paper.)

# Knowing Your Place: The Natural State



By Shelley Green

"To those who have not yet learned the secret of true happiness, begin now to study the little things in your own backyard." George Washington Carver, American botanist (1864-1943).

I grew up in Southern California and my memories of nature there include swimming in the Pacific Ocean, seeing the desert cactus in full bloom, smelling jasmine bushes and citrus trees, hiking in Yosemite, and being in awe of the ancient redwood trees. I've always enjoyed discovering the riches of other places so when I moved to Arkansas in 2006, I was anxious to discover its unique landscape, flora and fauna.

Arkansas is called "The Natural State". It is a land of mountains and valleys, thick forests and fertile plains with an abundance of water, and biological diversity. The great upheavals of the state's beginning - receding of ocean waters, volcanic building, plate shifting and earthquake adjustments - built ancient mountain ranges, unique geological features and rich mineral

deposits throughout the state. The complexities of the land provide this mostly rural state with a distinct character and unique sense of place.

In this new environment, I quickly became intrigued by the insects, the weather changes, the variety of birds, and the different types of oak trees I was observing - all in my own backyard. My golden retriever and I regularly enjoy the trails at Pinnacle Mountain State Park, just five miles from my house. The most significant feature of the park is Pinnacle Mountain, a unique sandstone formation which was first referenced by the renowned naturalist Thomas Nuttall, in 1811.

I live in Little Rock, the state's largest metropolitan area, which is located where three ecoregions meet, at the center of the state. The mountainous regions (the Highlands) of the Ouachita Mountains run to the west and north of my house. If I drive to the southeast, I will be in the lowlands of the Mississippi Alluvial Plain and the Upper West Gulf Coastal Plain, also referred to as the Delta and The Grand Prairie.

Although Arkansas is virtually land-locked with no ocean coastline, water is one of the state's outstanding features.

Arkansas contains over 600,000 acres of lakes (most human-made) and 9,700 miles of streams and rivers and vast underground streams and aquifers. Major rivers include the Mississippi, Arkansas, Ouachita, Red, White and Buffalo National River. The Arkansas River is the longest stream to flow into the Mississippi-Missouri river system. Its total length is 1,450 miles. The Buffalo River is one of the few remaining unpolluted, free-flowing rivers in the lower 48 states. There are no less than forty-seven hot springs flowing from the southwestern slope of Hot Springs Mountain, at an average

temperature of 143F. Lake Chicot is the largest Oxbow lake in the U.S, and Bayou Batholomew is designated as the longest bayou in the world. The Big Woods wetlands (near the town of Brinkley in southeast Arkansas) are where the ivory-billed woodpecker—the largest U.S. woodpecker species and thought to be extinct—was spotted in 2004.

I look forward to trips in the coming months and years to explore the diversity of these regions in my new home, The Natural State. ■

Shelley Green founded the Arkansas Earth Institute in 2006 and serves as director and board chair. She is a partner of Our Natural State ([www.ournaturalstate.com](http://www.ournaturalstate.com)), a Master Naturalist and member of Arkansas Environmental Educators Association.

Snow falls on the mountain  
that melts into rivers  
that sustain our farms,  
forest and fish.

Fresh air flows  
across our ocean beaches  
and turns the windmills  
that light our homes and cities.

Children pedal on bike paths  
that lead to parks  
where neighborhoods meet nature

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# Network News

## Eastern Heartland Earth Institute: A Farmer's Market and More

After Worthington, Ohio's only independent grocer closed its doors, Eastern Heartland Earth Institute volunteers, together with a local group, Sustainable Worthington, pondered ways to help the local citizens regain access to fresh foods. Opening a new store was out of the question, so conversation moved to how to start a winter farmers' market. A number of farmers from the very active summer market had expressed an interest in selling their goods year-round. Once the farmers were on board, it was time to find an indoor location so that the market could operate during the Ohio winter. A senior center offered to host the market, and volunteers were recruited to help with everything from advertising to clean-up. A "Chef in the

Market" class offered market shoppers a chance to sample fresh foods and find recipes for the available ingredients.

The popularity of the market and of the cooking class inspired the volunteers to start recruiting participants for a *Menu for the Future* class too. Those who had taken the course helped introduce the idea to the farmers' market shoppers, and someone else volunteered to host the course. Nine market shoppers signed up for *Menu for the Future*, and the course began in February. The farmer's market, "Chef in the Market" class and the *Menu* course that started as a result of the market are all examples of individuals taking action in their community and working toward a sustainable food system.

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To find out how to use your farmers' market to start a *Menu* course, contact Ben Redman [ben@simplyliving.org](mailto:ben@simplyliving.org).

## Be The Change Action Guide

Be The Change Earth Alliance (BTCEA), an NWEI Sister Earth Institute in Vancouver, Canada, has created an Action Guide with over 300 actions to use in tandem with NWEI courses. Participants can use the guide as a personal tool to inform and track their lifestyle changes, while receiving valuable peer accountability and support during the 'Action Report' discussions. Group leaders will compile each group's actions and submit them to BTCEA to be posted on its website. This will allow everyone to see and be encouraged by the combined results of individual efforts. The Action Guide will be piloted with courses running in Port Townsend, Washington this spring. ■

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For more information email [admin@bethechange.org](mailto:admin@bethechange.org) with "NWEI Coordinator" in the subject line

# THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT!

Many thanks to all of our donors and members who contributed to NWEI this winter!

The following donors contributed at the Earth Steward (\$100) level or higher:

Fran & Ted Ames  
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- Changing CO<sub>2</sub> course
- Healthy Children – Healthy Planet
- Exploring Deep Ecology
- Voluntary Simplicity
- Discovering a Sense of Place
- Menu for the Future
- Choices for Sustainable Living

The Northwest Earth Institute is a 501 (c) (3) organization dedicated to *inspiring people to take responsibility for Earth.*

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