

# Practicing Democracy with the Earth



A democratic approach to the Earth asserts that not only are all humans created equal — as the U. S. Declaration of Independence proclaims — but also that all humans are citizens of the same community, the Earth community, and other species also have rights that should be preserved. The following practices encourage the strengthening of democratic values and virtues in our relationships to the Earth, its current inhabitants, and its future generations.

## 1

### Reconnect with Nature

The spiritual practice of reverence helps us cultivate democratic virtues of equality and justice for all — including Earth and all her inhabitants. In their book *Contentment*, Robert A. Johnson and Jerry Ruhl write about the medieval European custom of showing deep respect for things by naming them as saints. Even the Earth became known as “St. Terre.” From this root comes the word “saunter” — to walk upon the Earth with reverence.

Johnson and Ruhl offer this practice: “Nature does not ask for explanations, only that we witness the fleeting moment that is constant. Go for a walk in nature and receive the blessings of an ancient tree, listen for a message in the cry of a bird, take counsel with a constant and abiding stream. Allow yourself to reconnect to the creative matrix that supports all life.”

You needn’t be able to saunter, though, to savor Earth’s offerings. In *How to Have More Love in Your Life*, Alan Epstein suggests this springtime practice:

“Spend time in a flower garden. Stay there as long as you wish, but make sure your visit is long enough to take in the various charms that the world of blossoms and petals provides. You can sit in a chair or on the grass, lie down looking up at the flowers from below, or walk around. However you choose to spend your time, be aware that you are a guest in someone else’s home — nature’s — so act accordingly.

“If the day is warm and sunny, savor the rays and imagine how the flowers must feel at this very moment. Look closely at the variety of blooms, at the different shapes and colors, at the way the individual blossoms grow out of their leafy sheaths. Now use your sense of smell to take in the stunning array of fragrance, all of which can be divinely overpowering. ...

“Now see if you can transcend your individual senses and feel the presence of the garden inside you. Try to become just another flower, at home in the garden as if you were in your own house or place of worship. Can you let go of your humanness for a time and transform your existence into something else? Can you lose yourself in a place that people have celebrated since time immemorial? What does it feel like to be a flower, to be the object of affection of a bee?”



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## 2

### Hold a Council of All Beings

In a democratic government, representatives of the people meet to dialogue, debate, and make decisions affecting their constituencies. What would happen if other life forms besides humans were included in these discussions? In their book *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World*, Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown describe how the concerns of other beings on the Earth can be acknowledged and acted upon in a Council of All Beings. Each participant in a circle speaks for another life-form — an animal, plant, tree, body of water — expressing that being's concerns. You might talk about threats to the being's habitat or freedom, the effects of pollution, natural disasters, and wars, and more. After all the beings have spoken, talk as humans about your responsibilities to correct some of the environmental and cultural injustices you have identified.

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## 3

### Practice Environmental Stewardship

Many of the core values of American democracy come from the beginning of the U. S. Constitution: "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility ... promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity ... establish this Constitution." These words encourage care not only in today's world but also on behalf of future generations. And key to this commitment is environmental stewardship.

This sort of stewardship involves conservation and sustainable practices. It requires reducing harmful impacts that humans have on the natural world; it also entails using human intelligence and resources like technology to preserve the rights, welfare, and life of all species and all people. Whether we are concerned with air quality, clean water, greenhouse gases, or other environmental issues, the actions of individuals and groups impact each other. In a sense, our citizenship doesn't begin and end with being American. As humans we have many forms of dependency that go beyond our nation's borders and the existence of our own species.

Take our trash. The United States is #1 in the world in trash production; we produce about 262 million tons per year, not including hazardous waste, industrial waste, and construction waste. What happens to all the municipal solid waste we produce? While some of this waste is incinerated, some is composted, and some is recycled, the most recent Environmental Protection Agency reports indicate that 52.5% of U.S. waste goes into landfills, resulting in methane emissions (releasing a greenhouse gas into the atmosphere). Many landfills leach hazardous materials into the soil and groundwater. Much of the waste that goes into landfills is electronic (televisions, computer monitors, batteries, lightbulbs), most of which have a high lead content. U.S. landfills also have other metals, like mercury, that are hazardous to both the environment and to human health.

In the past, a high percentage of U.S. waste was shipped to Asian countries, primarily China. China banned the import of foreign garbage as a threat to its environment and public health. Consequently, much of the waste we think is recycled is incinerated or put in landfills. Some cities, like New York City and San Francisco, have plans to send no waste to landfills and are implementing innovative programs for composting, banning Styrofoam containers and plastic bags, and taking other ecologically sound steps. Most, however, send far more trash to the landfill than is recycled.

- As a responsible citizen concerned about your current community and the world we leave to our posterity, commit yourself to becoming more informed on what happens to your waste. Contact your local municipality to find out who provides waste management services where you live. Ask what percentage of waste is composted, recycled, used in a waste-to-energy facility, and sent to the landfill. Investigate the quality of your local landfill.
- Boost your awareness by choosing an item, like a plastic bottle, a shirt, or a television, and drawing its “life cycle” from the factory to the store, your house, your recycling container, your trash bin, your local landfill, a recycling center, or an incinerator. If you choose an item like a computer, remember to consider its various components, like the battery, circuit board, plastic, hard drive, copper yokes, etc.

## 4

### Recycle: We’re Off to a Good Start

Our Earth citizenship carries with it rights and responsibilities, including the responsibility to protect nature and people for the benefit of the common good. One way Americans strive to meet this responsibility is through recycling. However, only about 34% percent of the trash Americans generate is recycled. Experts indicate that less than 10% of all plastic in the U.S. is recycled. While some of it is burned, and some of it is exported, much of it goes into landfills where it can take hundreds of years to break down. Consequently, millions of tons of U.S. plastic make their way into the ocean every year, in their original form, in the form of tiny beads of plastic from breakdown over many years, or in some condition in between. Most of us have seen the startling pictures of islands of trash, such as the 79,000 plus tons of plastic covering an area about twice the size of Texas called the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. Or the pictures of whales, birds, turtles, seals, and other wildlife killed from ingesting plastic. So, yes, we should absolutely recycle everything we can at home and work.

- Find out from your local recycling center what materials are acceptable. For other items, like used motor oil or used paint, ask your local recycling center for a referral to the nearest recycler or safest method of disposal.
- Some cities offer “commingled” recycling programs that don’t require sorting (also called “single-sort” or “single-stream”); the sorting is done at a separate facility or by the recycler. Even if your city offers commingled recycling, practice “kind-recycling” by separating your recyclables. In other words, put your paper and cardboard together, separate glass by color in paper bags, put your plastics together, put your aluminum and steel recyclables together.
- If recycling services aren’t offered, organize a collection of recyclables in your neighborhood, and take them to the nearest recycling center yourself.

- Don't stop with what your local recycling center accepts. Believe it or not, there are recycling programs for items like crayons, tennis shoes, tennis balls, and oral-care items. An Internet search will help you identify which programs are available nearest you.
- Remember that recycling isn't the only option. Multiple charities can make use of your old electronics, like your cellphone or computer. With electronics, it's best to donate them as soon as you can. Organizations like Charity Watch and Charity Navigator can help you make informed choices about your donations.

## 5

### Reduce Waste

While recycling is a good start, we can do much more. Here are some ideas for running the rest of the race.

- Refuse to buy or use single-use plastic items, like plastic bags, plastic bottles, plastic ware, or plastic straws. Instead, bring your own (BYO) cloth bags, water bottle, thermos, bamboo or camping flatware.
- Eat at home instead of ordering in. If you do order in, don't accept "to go" items that you can do without, like napkins, plastic ware, and cups.
- BYO containers for leftovers.
- BYO shopping bags. Cloth bags can be easily washed and reused for years; sturdy boxes also have a long life.
- Consider the packaging. When you can, choose package-free options. Increasingly, you can choose to buy items, from produce to bath soap, without the packaging. When package-free isn't available, choose items in returnable or recyclable containers.
- Choose biodegradable options, like biodegradable trash bags, toothbrushes, pens, trash cans, dish soap, detergents, and cleaners.
- Consider the impact of packaging and mileage before purchasing items to be shipped or delivered.
- If you haven't already done so, commit to composting food waste, leaves, and grass clippings.
- Raise others' awareness of eco-conscious choices by collecting and posting pictures that demonstrate the impact to wildlife and the earth of various types of trash. Try posting these pictures near collection cans when you notice people aren't recycling, or host a photo exhibit.
- Skip the balloons and ribbons. Balloons and ribbons kill countless animals, like birds and sea turtles who mistake the balloons for food or who get tangled in the ribbons. Even balloons labeled as "biodegradable" can take years to break down. Consider the biodegradability and recyclability of cards and gift wrapping too, not just decorations. Homemade cards and decorations can be even more meaningful than store-bought ones. You can also send your greetings via e-cards.

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## 6

### Turn Trash into Art

Common trash can be turned into amazing art! Imagine sculptures made from coat hangers, discarded mechanical parts, or old toys. A chair made from CDs. Lamps made from a hair dryer. People also create craft projects out of their trash: attractive planters out of coffee cans or storage baskets from boxes.

Some cities, like San Francisco, Philadelphia, and Portland, have programs for artists to “scavenge” from their landfills or recycling centers. You will, of course, need to consider what is safe and what is legal before you start scavenging from someone else’s trash, but you can easily start making art with your own.

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## 7

### Honor Earth’s Provision

The United States has 61 protected areas known as national parks. If you have ever had a chance to visit one, you may find your sense of patriotism swelling from appreciation of their beauty and grandeur. State parks and conservation areas also remind us, in the words of Henry David Thoreau, that “in wilderness is the preservation of the world.” That is true because by observing how Earth provides for us, we find ourselves compelled to protect it. But we must also face our shadow – how humans have degraded the Earth.

In *A Field Guide to Nature as Spiritual Practice*, Christian spirituality teacher Steven Chase offers a spiritual practice based on environmental studies professor Calvin B. DeWitt’s “provisions of creation” given by God and seven “degradations of creation” resulting from human activity.

#### Provisions of Creation:

- “1. Regulation of Earth’s energy exchange with the sun, which keeps Earth’s temperatures at a level supportive of life through the long-standing greenhouse effect, and which protects life from the sun’s lethal ultraviolet radiation by filtering sunlight through the stratospheric ozone layer.
- “2. Biogeochemical cycles and soil-building processes, which cycle oxygen, carbon, water, and other vital materials through living things and their habitats and build life-supporting soils and soil structure.
- “3. Ecosystem energy transfer and materials recycling, which continually energizes life on earth and incessantly allocates life-sustaining materials.
- “4. Water purification systems of the biosphere, which distill, filter, and purify surface waters and the ground water on which all life depends.
- “5. Biological and ecological fruitfulness, which supports and maintains the rich biodiversity of life on Earth by means of responsive and adaptive physiologies and behaviors.
- “6. Global circulations of water and air, which distribute water, oxygen, carbon dioxide, and other vital materials between living systems across the planet.
- “7. The human ability to learn from creation and live in accordance with its laws, which makes it possible for people to live sustainably on Earth and safeguard creation.”

## Degradations of Creation:

- “1. Alteration of Earth’s energy exchange with the sun, which results in accelerated global warming and destruction of the earth’s protective ozone shield.
- “2. Land degradation, which destroys land by erosion, salinization, and desertification, and reduces available land for creatures and crops.
- “3. Deforestation, which annually removes some 100,000 square kilometers of primary forest — an area the size of Iceland – and degrades an equal amount by overuse.
- “4. Species extinction, which witnesses the elimination of more than three species of plants and animals from the Earth each day.
- “5. Water quality degradation, which defiles ground water, lakes, rivers, and oceans.
- “6. Waste generation and global toxification, which result from atmospheric and oceanic circulation of the materials that people inject into the air and water.
- “7. Human and cultural degradation, which threatens and eliminates long-standing communities that have lived sustainably and cooperatively with creation, and also eliminates a multitude of long-standing varieties of food and garden plants.”

As Chase recommends, review DeWitt’s lists of divine provision and human degradation. Then:

- Visit locations for each, especially locations for starting points of degradations.
- Explore scriptural references to the gifts of creation.
- Pray about the degradations and contemplate how to heal them.
- Prayerfully reflect on how your gifts and longings, God’s guidance, and the Earth’s needs call you to respond.

## 8

### Engage in Watershed Restoration

Worldwide, countless communities face water shortages and millions of children under the age of five die each year from diseases contracted from impure drinking water. In the U.S., some water systems are threatened by pollution and increasing numbers of areas are struggling to deal with drought conditions, affecting the water available for residential and agricultural use. For example, the city of El Paso, which in the past primarily relied on the Rio Grande river as its water source, has been irrigating with water reclaimed from sewage treatment. Meanwhile, in 2018 the Environmental Protection Agency proposed plans to reduce the protections of the Clean Water Act.

Learning about your watershed and engaging in its restoration and protection projects gives you a way to enrich your connections with your fellow citizens and your community. A watershed (also known as a catchment or drainage basin) refers to an area of land where precipitation, mainly rainfall and snowmelt, collects in lakes and reservoirs and flows through creeks, streams, and rivers to a common outlet, such as a lake, bay, or the sea. Watersheds vary greatly in size, from a single county to thousands of square miles. For example, the Mississippi River Watershed drains 1.15 million square miles from 31 states. You can find out more about your watershed and see a map of it at [water.usgs.gov/wsc/index.html](https://water.usgs.gov/wsc/index.html).

Here are some ways you can strengthen democracy at the local level through water-focused civic engagement:

- After you've learned about your watershed, spend a few minutes reflecting on the equalizing nature of our common dependence on water. All life depends on water.
- Join a watershed restoration group or Watershed Stewards Academy (WSA) and explore what kinds of political actions it can support.
- Even if you don't join a watershed restoration group or WSA, implement your own water saving measures, like installing rain barrels, recycling waste water, and conserving water use while showering, doing laundry, and dishwashing.
- Organize a clean-up or restoration day at a local waterway.
- Organize a local prayer walk at an area that is important to your watershed.
- Hold worship services outside near a creek, pond, or other body of water.
- Pray for drought-stricken areas.

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## 9

### Consider Conscious Clothes

The U.S. Declaration of Independence asserts that all humans are endowed with certain unalienable rights, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. A democratic approach to Earth stewardship holds that all members of the Earth community have been similarly endowed with certain intrinsic rights, including the right to food, water, and a habitat that is safe and clean. The phenomenon of Fast Fashion poses a danger to a safe and clean environment for many of our Earth community members.

"Fast Fashion" refers to the speed with which the most recent designs are offered by fashion retailers, regardless of the environmental impact. The manufacturing process for new clothes, a major source of greenhouse gases, can involve water pollution, use of toxic chemicals, and textile waste, affecting surrounding habitats. Many garments end up in a landfill or incinerator within a year. A startling quantity of microfibers from washing clothes can't biodegrade; they flow into waterways and the ocean, are consumed, and then make their way up the food chain, affecting fish, land animals, birds, and humans.

Before you buy new clothes, consider the spinning, knitting, weaving, dying, finishing, sewing, and transportation involved. Research the following for both the brand and the retailer before you purchase:

- Are the clothes made of recycled materials? If so, what percentage?
- Does this brand/retailer offer organic fabrics that are not dyed?
- Does this brand/retailer pay those involved in manufacturing a living wage?
- Does it ensure that its factories are free of child labor?
- How does this brand/retailer encourage clothes recycling?



- How long does this brand/retailer keep unsold clothes? What does it do with unsold or returned clothes?
- What specific measures does this brand/retailer use to avoid water pollution, avoid toxic chemicals involved in the fiber growing process as well as the dying process, and reduce the flow of microfibers into the oceans?

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## 10

### Organize a Clothing Exchange

Clothing swaps are a great way to counter the harm of “fast fashion.” Organize a clothing swap at a campus, school, community center, place of worship, or in your neighborhood. Invite participants to bring clothing they no longer use to exchange for clothing they will use.

If the clothes swap doesn’t work for you, donate your gently worn clothes to charities in need, recycle your worn-out clothes, and shop at thrift stores. Don’t forget your shoes and accessories from jewelry to eyeglasses and purses. A quick Internet search will yield multiple results for places to donate or swap your clothes and accessories.

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## 11

### Establish a Repair Café

While national and global protections are certainly important, stewardship of the earth’s provisions may be best achieved at the local level. One such creative local effort is establishing and using repair cafés. Repair cafés are free meeting places which make volunteers and tools available for people to repair household items like clothing, appliances, bicycles, computers, and furniture. Visitors bring their broken items and work together with skilled specialists to repair them. Repair cafés help people use household items longer, reducing the volume of materials and energy to produce new products, the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions associated with manufacturing and recycling, and the amount of trash that goes in landfills.

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## 12

### Imagine Your Transition Town

*Transition U.S.* is a hub for initiatives to help communities transition to non-reliance on fossil fuels. Communities strengthen their ability to withstand severe economic, climate, or energy changes through a variety of methods, such as reducing energy usage, increasing community food production, and matching businesses whose waste can be used by another business. Not only do these initiatives reduce the carbon impact and increase local economies’ independence and sustainability, their emphasis on sustainability and cooperation connect people in circles of compassionate and peaceful civic engagement. Brainstorm with your neighbors how you can adapt these initiatives in your community. For example, one step might be to change a local ordinance to allow people to dry their laundry on clotheslines in their yards.

## Pick up Litter

Earth provides an amazing variety of plants that produce oxygen, prevent soil erosion, filter air pollution, contribute to soil fertility, and recycle water. They don't deserve to be covered with trash. Picking up litter shows that you care and are aware of our reliance on Earth's many provisions. Some sources say that "plogging" (picking up trash while jogging) is currently the hottest fitness trend. Whether you are adopting a highway mile, a nature trail, a bike path, a park, or just going for a walk, picking up trash is a great way to keep America beautiful.

## Notes

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

## DEMOCRATIC VALUES, VIRTUES, AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

America's democracy is founded on powerful ideas: We are all created equal. We have the right to life, freedom, and the opportunity to pursue our own happiness. At the same time, we are people in *united* states, trying to form a more perfect union and promote the welfare of all. American democracy can flourish only when citizens are united, at a deep level that transcends ideology, race, and class, with a shared spiritual and moral vision of what America should be.

Democracy is more than a form of government. It is a way of life that can be strengthened through spiritual practices — both those traditionally considered to be “inner work” and those that encourage active engagement with our neighbors and communities. The Practicing Democracy Guides give you specific ways to practice democracy at home, at work, on the Internet, and in other settings. The chart below is designed to show how the spiritual practices we've suggested, as well as others from your own experience, uphold democratic values and cultivate democratic virtues.

To uphold the democratic values of:				
Common good	Freedom Independence Liberty	<i>E Pluribus Unum</i> , “Out of many — one”	Equality Justice for all Rule of law	Patriotism Popular sovereignty
And to cultivate the democratic virtues of:				
Appreciation Caring Commitment Creativity Empathy Generosity Moderation Pursuit of excellence Service Simplicity Thankfulness	Courage Determination Honesty Humility Nobility Open- mindedness Purposefulness Sacrifice Self-discipline Self-reliance Trustworthiness Truthfulness	Adaptability Cooperation Embracing diversity Integrity Mercy Optimism Peacefulness Searching for transcendence Sincerity	Accountability Awareness Dignity Fairness Honor Initiative Love of learning Perseverance Resilience Respect Steadfastness Strength	Assertiveness Consideration Cultivating wisdom Discernment Idealism Loyalty Responsibility, especially for civic engagement Social conscience
We need spiritual practices of:				
Compassion Gratitude Hope Hospitality Imagination Kindness	Joy Openness Questing Transformation Yearning	Connections Love Peace Teachers Unity	Forgiveness Justice Reverence You Vision	Devotion Faith Listening Meaning Shadow

For more on American democratic values, virtues, and the language of democracy, visit [PracticingDemocracy.net](http://PracticingDemocracy.net).



## Additional Resources

1. For more resources related to the **Practicing Democracy Project**, visit:  
[spiritualityandpractice.com/projects/practicing-democracy-project/overview](https://spiritualityandpractice.com/projects/practicing-democracy-project/overview)
2. To download additional **Practicing Democracy Guides**, visit:  
[spiritualityandpractice.com/projects/practicing-democracy-project](https://spiritualityandpractice.com/projects/practicing-democracy-project)
3. For more on **unity**, visit:  
[spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/33/unity](https://spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/33/unity)
4. For more on **beauty**, visit:  
[spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/4/beauty](https://spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/4/beauty)
5. For more on **connections**, visit:  
[spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/7/connections](https://spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/7/connections)
6. For more on **reverence**, visit:  
[spiritualityandpractice.com/the-reverence-project](https://spiritualityandpractice.com/the-reverence-project)
7. For more on **wonder**, visit:  
[spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/35/wonder](https://spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/35/wonder)



**A collaboration between Spirituality & Practice and the Fetzer Institute, The Practicing Democracy Project** offers resources to strengthen and deepen the way we live out democracy. These spiritual practices help us do the work both in ourselves and in relationship with our neighbors and communities.

Some practices enhance or support the essential civic virtues and qualities of American democracy, such as respect and service. Others help us deal with problems and obstacles that depress democracy, such as anger and rigid thinking.

The Project offers spiritual practices and resources for all of us — from advocacy and civic organizations to congregations and companies.

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**For more information on the Project, visit [PracticingDemocracy.net](https://PracticingDemocracy.net).**

