



START *SINGING*

How to Form Your Own Spirituality in Nature Group (SING)

The Center for Spirituality in Nature



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The Center for Spirituality in Nature offers relaxed and engaging experiences in nature that draw people inward and open them to a closer relationship with the Divine and with the natural world. We also provide a variety of resources and practices that help individuals and communities regularly explore, and respond compassionately to, our deep theological, spiritual and ecological connections with the earth and all its creatures.

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Why SING?

What's a "SING"? A SING is a Spirituality in Nature Group that meets consistently at a regular time to explore spiritual formation, ecological connection and experience with the Divine, in the group's home ecosystem. A SING provides time and space for mindful attention to the Spirit and to the many aspects of the sacred ground we call home.

For some, a SING will complement other religious communities, while for the others it might be the only spiritual fellowship in which they engage. A SING can be free-standing or sponsored by a particular congregation or organization. While SINGs encourage individual spiritual deepening, they are also designed to foster a more cohesive human community and encourage that community to expand to include the non-human elements as well.

Benefits of Nature

Busy people in our highly urbanized country yearn for space and time for quiet and for rest. We are stressed out, burned out, anxious, overworked, overwrought. We know that we need more space and more time for contemplation, but we can't quite figure out how to get it.

Study after study has demonstrated the benefits of time spent in the natural world. It lowers our blood pressure, lessens anxiety and depression, increases physical health and even assists cognitive development. Nature also provides a place for quiet and reflection, guidance and inspiration. It gives us delight and wonder; it heals and restores us.

Importantly, time spent outdoors encourages compassion for both humans and non-humans alike. It reaffirms our interdependence and interconnectedness with all living things and restores our place in the great ecological web in which we live.

A SING provides these many benefits through a regular time of connection with nature in fellowship with others who desperately want and need it, but perhaps cannot quite get there on their own.

Spirituality in Nature

Every major religious tradition has a deep historical connection with the natural world. It is in our spiritual DNA. In the Bible, nature was the first way in which God made God's self known—through the provision of the earth, through the burning bush, through living waters. Through the ages, people of many faiths have come to understand that nature offers its own wisdom, if we take the time to notice and explore it.

Regardless of the religious tradition, people reflect time and time again that they feel closer to the Divine when they are out in nature. One woman said during a recent walk: “I feel more connected to God when I am in the sanctuary of nature than I do in a church.” There is something about nature that cracks us open to the stirrings of the Spirit, that connects us with something larger than ourselves.

Recent studies by the Pew Research Center found that 27% of all Americans self-identify as “spiritual but not religious,” up eight percentage points from five years ago.¹ Many of these people, from both groups, have expressed that “Nature is my church.” It is that place where they find connection with the earth and with Spirit, however they might define that. It is where they find space and quiet and a sense of peace. By creating a regular, relevant and enriching communal gathering outside of traditional church, SING offers spiritual community to many who are un-churched or underserved by religious institutions, as well as offering spiritual deepening to existing congregations.

As we live increasingly disconnected from the earth and an appreciation of ecological processes, we also run the risk of separating ourselves from a deep, old and essential way of knowing God, of knowing Spirit. By regularly gathering together to experience nature and explore the wisdom nature offers, a SING creates an opportunity to reconnect with the earth and reconnect with Spirit.

Earth Engagement

Recent studies show that time in the natural world encourages compassion and empathy for other humans and for other creatures. Those who spend regular time outdoors are more apt to understand the deep-seated connections with other elements in the web of creation and recognize the human impacts on that web. And they see first-hand the precarious state of many of our fellow creatures.

Through a SING, participants have an opportunity to study and experience their local ecological communities up-close and personally. They can see eroded streambanks, observe the wildflowers blooming earlier and earlier due to climate change, feel the rise in temperature and view the consequences of increasingly dangerous storm events. Together, they can consider the impacts of their individual and communal behavior on their home ecosystems and respond in fellowship with confession, lament and action.

Importantly, too, the SING can reflect on the infusion of Spirit in the earth and how that might influence our sense of responsibility towards the human and non-human elements of the earth, particularly the most vulnerable. The SING, too, can search together in the natural world for signs of hope and resilience, in the face of environmental destruction, as well as garner courage and strength to change behavior, to engage in efforts to protect and steward the earth and push back against forces that might endanger the earth.

1 Michael Lipka And Claire Gecewicz, “More Americans Now Say They Are Spiritual But Not Religious,” *Pew Research Center*, accessed May 1, 2018. www.Pewresearch.Org/Fact-Tank/2017/09/06/More-Americans-Now-Say-Theyre-Spiritual-But-Not-Religious/

Introduction

About the Guide

This guide is a complete manual on how to start and maintain a Spirituality in Nature Group in your home ecosystem. Included is information on logistics and leadership, as well as a year's worth of curriculum. This guide emerged out of our many years of leading spiritual programs in the natural world as well as recent experience with establishing a SING with a church in Alexandria, VA. As such, you will notice that it has a focus towards Eastern ecology and a Christian orientation. That said, the material presented here applies well beyond any particular religious tradition. And, the ecology, spiritual exercises and background materials can be adapted to many different ecosystems and faith traditions.

The Basics

The Basics explains how to get started in developing a SING, including sections on **Getting Started**, which answers common questions about formation, nature of the group, and logistical information; a **Suggested SING Calendar: Year One** which offers a step-by-step approach to beginning your SING; **Tips to Leading a SING** and **Tips to Observing Nature Spirituality**, which include recommendations for how to guide a group spiritually while in nature; **Spiritual Nature Journaling**, which offers a brief how-to on setting up a key observational tool, and **What's Next? SING Continues** which gives some pointers on how to continue the SING after the first launch year.

Curriculum

Curriculum provides a broad range of information on the substance of the SING meetings, including our suggested **Monthly Itinerary** and **Suggested Monthly Themes** as well as a **Sample Itinerary: September** which gives an idea of how the format might be used in a specific month. This section also includes **Backgrounders** around each suggested theme for ten months, as well as suggested activities, questions and readings you might include. Most of the activities suggested in this section come from the companion book to this text—*Inside Out: Practices for Going Deeper in Nature*.

Appendix

The Appendix includes the full citations to all the suggested readings in the **Backgrounders** as well as a reference to a fuller bibliography.



Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth
find reserves of strength that will endure
as long as life lasts. There is something
infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature—
the assurance that dawn comes after night,
and spring after winter.

Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*



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