

Introduction

For some reason, perhaps known only to the archangels, we humans were given the gift of Choice. Free Will. It's hard-wired into us at birth. When we overlook or undervalue our choices, it's easy to imagine we're victims. Our mouths are quick to form questions like "Why me?" "Why this?" "Why now?"

In times of crisis—and planet earth IS in crisis—we look around for something to hang on to. And when we grab for it, we notice other people reaching out to us. We hear voices asking, "How can I help?" "What do you need?"

No time was this more evident than when New York's World Trade Center towers crumpled on September 11, 2001, spewing ash and fear of terrorism around the world. But across the street from the towers, a tiny Episcopal church called St. Paul's Chapel and its 200-year-old cemetery remained unscathed. Some say that this building, which resembles London's St. Martin-in-the-Fields, was spared because a large sycamore tree bore the brunt of the winds. Others claim that homeless people who slept there the night before had left some windows open, inadvertently keeping the little church from exploding. Whatever the reason, that morning's deadly breezes blew through one of Manhattan's oldest buildings, over George Washington's chair, past the handmade door hinges, grazing a painting of the Great Seal of the United States and— whoosh!—out the other side.

Overnight, St. Paul's Chapel became a haven for rescue workers—a place where they could sit, eat a snack, cry, sip some water, and maybe stretch out on a pew. It truly transformed into what a church is meant to be: a sanctuary. For eight months, volunteers came from all over to work twelve-hour shifts, to counsel and care for the firefighters, police, construction workers, and countless others needing to escape the aura of death, if only for a few quiet moments. Volunteer podiatrists set up shop in George Washington's boxed pew to heal bruised and battered feet. Who better to recognize the need to attend to injured feet than the General? Massage therapists, chiropractors, musicians, food servers—they all came to help. These volunteers embodied active prayer. Soon after the attack, the folks running St. Paul's decided to remove its historic pews, except for George Washington's and the pew where New York's first governor sat. As you might imagine, this decision was not without its conflicting viewpoints. But finally the church council agreed to take them out in order to accommodate all the makeshift cots, allowing weary workers to rest more easily. After the crisis was over, they decided to leave the pews out—all but one. Gouged by firefighter's equipment and scuffed by rubber boots, that one lonely pew stands near St. Paul's front doors to remind visitors of the heroes who momentarily rested there. St. Paul's has more flexible seating now, and its doors remain open as gentler winds continue to blow through.

Veriditas

As we learned during our Crayola days, yellow and blue combine to form green. Chemistry class taught us that copper turns green when a thin surface patina of complicated chemistry combines water, oxygen, and carbon dioxide. If you warm iodine crystals, you get a yellow-green fluorescence; green comes from algae in water, hydrogen in ice. Silicates and oxides bonding. Chlorophyll in leaves. Nitrogen in diamonds. Chemists tell us that the formula for emerald green is $\text{Cu}(\text{CHCOO})\text{AsO}_4$.

But most of us don't speak in letters and subscripts, and a small percentage of us (more men than women) have eyes that lack green-sensitive cones. Even if we're not colorblind, we may overlook the color green. As a result, we sometimes miss the iridescence on a hummingbird's wing, the green flash of a dragonfly, the jeweled turquoise in a peacock feather, or the rare flash of green in the setting sun. And we may not be fully aware of how much earth needs us to green up. Right now.

This collection of "grace notes," of "green plainsongs," seeks to value all shades of green. Just as green ripples from yellowy-chartreuse to deep jade, each of us views our planet on a spectrum. For some, earth is still a paradise. For others, it's a garden. A home. A gift. A way station to something better. A test pad or proving ground. And for far too many of us, it's a rich supply of "goodies" to use or to hoard.

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As we “green up” together, we sense many shades of our communal spirituality blowing through. We ponder who the “I” is in Hildegard of Bingen’s words that begin this book. “I am the breeze that nurtures all things green.” It doesn’t matter how we define that “I” or how we describe and hold our individual beliefs. The important thing is that the same breeze wafts over us all. We hear voices in concert, but our spirituality takes many forms; the active prayers within these pages may not always fit your own definition of prayer. In her book *God in All Worlds*, Lucinda Vardey puts it this way: “Spiritual truth requires deep commitment to the divine in ourselves and others and can lead to transcended states of awareness, of consciousness that unites the mind, the heart and the soul. Spirituality is about being open to different realities of existence, about being guided by our intuition, which is nothing less than the truth within us.”

In an attempt to find some of those truths within, we include here 350 bits of devotional wisdom. Three hundred fifty is a planet-saving number. Scientists such as NASA’s Jim Hanson have warned us for a few years that when our atmosphere holds up to 350 parts-per-million of carbon dioxide, our earth has a fever. We know what fevers can lead to. In our planet’s case, polar ice melts faster and faster. Ocean temperatures rise. Coral reefs turn gray. We hovered around the 280 mark for a while, which was high, but not terribly dangerous. But the figure has continued to rise. Now we’re approaching “stroke” time. By burning more and more fossil fuels (coal’s a big contributor—and there may be no such thing as “clean” coal as far as CO₂ is concerned), at the time of this writing we’ve reached 385. This is very bad news, because we’ve already passed earth’s safety threshold, and no one is sure if we can bring her fever down. Soon we will likely reach the point of no return, unless we act with great concerted effort. To do that, governments will have to cooperate.

Bill McKibben, prolific author, professor, activist, and the fellow Vermonter’s voice you’ll often find in this book, once quipped: “You’re going to fix global warming by changing lightbulbs? Try changing your politicians instead. Screw in a new Congressperson.”

As President Obama often points out, government cannot reverse global warming by itself. But it was our government that did not regulate, that let corporations get us into this mess. Paradoxically, it is business, encouraged by our government, that will have to figure out how to reduce carbon footprints through offsets, paybacks, barters, and other innovative measures. Scientists gave us nuclear energy, and it is scientists who now must figure out how to keep us safe. Each of us is also to blame, so each of us now needs to seriously think about how we live here and how much carbon dioxide we’re individually pumping out. Snow machines, for instance, pump out more carbon dioxide than emission-controlled cars. Even though most of us don’t think much about chemistry, carbon dioxide is one chemical term we all need to understand. And 350 is a number that Bill McKibben and many others think should be ingrained onto our collective psyche. Church bells should ring out 350 times to remind people how important three-five-oh is to our very survival.

For those of us who use books like this one as a daily devotional resource, we’ve added sixteen more prayers in the final chapter—one extra for a leap year—for a total of 366 prayers. There are no dates attached. Your green devotional year might begin on Earth Day. Or your birthday. Or on January first. How you use this book is totally up to you.

Arne Næss, the mountain-climbing Norwegian philosopher who gave us the term “deep ecology,” also coined the term *ecosophy*. It melds ecology, the study of relationships, with *sophia*, the Greek word for wisdom. This, then, could be called a little book of *ecosophy*, because it contains a selection of today’s wisdom about earth—secular and sacred, ancient and current. It speaks to numerous topics related to climate change and the care of our planet and everything that lives here. These voices, in concert, were selected and organized to inspire, to enrich, to support, and sometimes to challenge us as we face the future together.

Kermit the Frog told us, “It’s not easy bein’ green.” He’s right, of course. But Hildegard of Bingen, the Rhineland mystic, reminded us that greening may well be the very reason we’re here—*Veriditas*, she called it.

A Green Book of Hours

This collection of voices is a “green book of devotional hours,” reminiscent of the Books of Hours people held in their palms during medieval times. They were called “cathedrals in your hands,” and reminded their readers that they were connected to something broader and wiser than themselves. Those gold calligraphic and lavishly illustrated books were often organized according to the Church’s eight canonical hours, which many monastic communities still use to measure out prayers in, roughly, three-hour increments: Lauds, the dawn praise, followed by Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, Compline, and finally, at darkest midnight, Matins. Some believe that the early monks broke up their days this way because they were influenced by the Vikings, who measured their time by the eight tides: Midnight, Dawn, Morning, Vaporlessness, Noon, Rest, Evening, and Shadow.

This eight-part book is “our planet in your hands.” As the voices began to harmonize together, they called out for their own canonical structure—one bounded by the ancient elements of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water. To these elements we add four less tangible ones: Time, Space, Essence, and as many Books of Hours end, Closing Prayers. These prayers don’t just ready us for sleep; they rejuvenate us and prepare us for another day of passionate action. For the voices within these pages call you not just to prayer, but to action. They form an eight-part polyphonic chorus in support of our green planet. They’re a “shout out,” a call to “step up.”

Open this book anywhere, anytime, and hear what the voices are saying. Choose one of the devotional thoughts to think about—alone or with friends, meditate on it, and act upon it. For when we are devoted to something, we cannot help but fervently live it.

Blessed be the precious and preserving air, by which we are given life.

Blessed be the precious and preserving fire, by which we are warmed.

Blessed be the precious and preserving water, by which we are cleansed.

Blessed be the precious and preserving earth, by which we are sustained.

—Caitlin and John Matthews, *Walkers Between the Worlds*

Chernobyl turned me into a different person. . . . First, Chernobyl became a decisive test for the new policy of glasnost . . . [we] decided on the very first day to publish all the details about the catastrophe as soon as they reached us. . . . Secondly, my belief in the absolute reliability of technology was shattered. For thirty years we had been assured that “the peaceful atom was no more dangerous than a samovar.” . . . Thirdly, my time-scales changed radically. The half-life of Caesium 137, the radioactive isotope most damaging to health that escaped from the “cauldron” of Chernobyl, is thirty years, which means that this element will still be poisoning foodstuffs and affecting the health of populations in the polluted areas for a long time to come. . . . And fourthly, Chernobyl stiffened my resolve to establish new international contacts and demonstrate emphatically that we are a single humanity sharing a single planet. After all, the radioactive cloud had spread around the globe within a few days, and traces of radioactivity had been found thousands of kilometers distant from the location of the catastrophe.

—Mikhail Gorbachev, *Manifesto for the Earth*