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# Faith and Environmentalism: A personal reflection

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## *Faith and Environmentalism: A personal reflection*

*Jessica Tyler Davis, Western Washington University*

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### **Abstract**

*This paper was presented as a culminating capstone project at North Cascades Institute as required by Western Washington University's M.Ed. program in Environmental Education. Guided by seven themes, this paper seeks to demonstrate the connection between Faith and the environment. The seven connections explored include the following: prayer and meditation, peace, food consumption, seasons, material consumption, taking care, and fellowship. While environmentally responsible decisions may not necessarily be a top priority for all people of Faith, religious beliefs and Spirituality may influence some to develop a deeper connection to the environment. Although this paper is a personal reflection, focused on Christianity, readers with different beliefs and experiences may be able to find similarities that relate to their own lives.*

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**Keywords:** *religious studies, environmental studies, Christianity, environmental education*

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### **Introduction**

My name is Tyler Davis for those of you who might not know me. Over the next hour or so, I am going to give you all seven reasons why Faith, specifically referring to my Faith, which is Christianity, can lead to a strong connection to the natural world. I would like to start with the very first reason out here. After a short prompt, we will come back together and I will give you all more of a background on the focus of my presentation and follow with the remaining six points, but I thought it important that we start outside and take a few minutes to become really present.

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### **1. Prayer and Meditation**

My first reason for connecting Faith and Environment focuses on prayer and meditation. For me, meditation is not about emptying your mind, but about filling it with thoughts about a particular subject. Prayer and meditation do not need to look a certain way. This is something you can do in the morning when you wake up, or when you are on your way to work, or on a walk through the woods. Often, I find myself praying and meditating on the word of the Lord when I am spending time alone outdoors. There is something about the quietness,



peace, and beauty of the natural world that focuses the meditations of my heart and stills my busy mind.

Psalm 1:2-3 says, “They delight in the law of the Lord, meditating on it day and night. They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season. Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do.” When I think of this verse, I think of water as being the source for life. It is what sustains us and we need it. This scripture refers to trees planted along the riverbank because it is alluding to the point that the Lord is like our water source. It goes on to say the leaves never wither, and I think that means that we never have to go without that “water”.

I would like to take the next 5 minutes to practice our own prayer or meditation – and this can look different for everyone. I understand that we do not all share the same beliefs and Faith practices, so I want everyone to spend this time doing whatever it is that is going to help them feel present, aware, and connected. Since a big part of this is connecting with this place, I would like you all to go off, wherever you feel led, and actually touch the ground or the moss or a tree. Find a place where you feel a sense of peace and grounding and practice your prayer or meditation. Everyone take a few minutes to do this, and we will meet back up for the remainder of the presentation.

Thank you all for participating in that activity. I hope you are feeling refreshed and ready for the rest of the day. Before we go any further, I would like to speak some gratitude, because there is so much for which I have to be thankful. I will start with all of you; thank you so much for being here today and for hearing me, I know it is a busy week so it means a lot that you are all here. I would also like to say thank you to all of the people who were in this place before us. Thank you to the land we are on, the mountains around us, and the wildlife that call this place home. Thank you to North Cascades Institute and Western Washington University for giving me the opportunity to be in this program and to have some amazing experiences that I will always remember. I would especially like to say thank you to Nick and Lindsey and Joshua for doing the crazy amount of work you all do to make this program happen, and to my wonderful cohort for enduring the crazy amount of work we had to do. You all have become close friends and I appreciate that, and I really feel like I am going to have a lot of places to visit and friends to stay with after all this. I would also like to give a huge thank you to my family for supporting me, for coming to visit, and for putting up with my being so far from home for the past couple years. I love you all and am so glad you are here! Lastly, I would like to thank my Heavenly Father for allowing me to be here and to have this experience, for being my strength and peace and joy, and for always loving me and showing me immense amounts of grace and forgiveness.

I know we jumped right into the content of my presentation when we were outside, but I would like to give you all some context before we tackle the remaining points.

At Western, we had an assignment that was a literature review; I chose to write mine on motivators of pro-environmental behavior. This assignment gave me the opportunity to research factors that influence behavior and decision-making regarding the

environment. Through my research, I found existing literature focuses on five potential motivators, including: individualism, attitude, sense of place, action, and values. While I think each of these are important, I am especially drawn to the connection between values and the environment because, for me, my values make up who I am. For instance, my Faith influences the way I think, the things I feel, and it has shaped my identity.

One of the studies that I came across called for a balance of cognitive and value-based education, arguing that environmentally responsible behavior is most likely to result from this balance (Ballantyne and Packer, 1996). For this presentation, I am going to focus on my deepest value, which is Faith, and break down some ways Spiritual values can help us connect with our environment.

While at NCI I went through a devotion called “The 7 Experiment” by Jen Hatmaker (2012) - some of my cohort members may remember me talking about it. The author guides her readers through a process of ridding themselves of excess through fasting. There are seven “things” the reader fasts from, each lasting seven days. These include the following: clothes, spending, waste, food, possessions, media, and stress. That is not to say I went without clothes for seven days! Keeping with the seven theme, I only wore seven articles of clothing throughout that week. The point of the fasting was not to completely do away with each of these categories, but to be more mindful of how much I actually need. This experience was one that was very memorable to me because through this process, I did feel a deeper awareness of the Lord’s presence in my life and all around me. Since this process was a memorable part of my experience at NCI, despite the fact that it was a very personal experience, I have decided to follow the seven theme for this presentation.

I think this topic is especially important because there seems to be a lack of acknowledgement between the connection of Faith or Spirituality and environmentalism. During my research, I tried to find literature focused on Faith, and although I did find literature on values (which Faith is), I did not find much work on the relationship between Faith, specifically, and environmental behavior. That is not to say it does not exist, because it may, and I might have just been looking in the wrong places. I am hoping that this presentation serves, in a small way, to add to that voice.

Although my points are specific to my Faith, which is Christianity, I do understand that we do not all share the same beliefs, and I hope that you all find ways that this relates to your own values and lives.

I would like to say, thank you, once again, for hearing me, but I would also like to acknowledge that some of you may have strong disagreements with what I believe and you may even feel a little uncomfortable because of that. Please know that if there is an activity or something that you do not feel comfortable with, there is no obligation to participate. I do encourage you to try to embrace the awkwardness, as Nick would say. If any of this is unfamiliar or slightly uncomfortable for you, maybe just try it, knowing that you can step out at any time. Please know that I am incredibly grateful that you all

are here and I appreciate your unique perspectives and ways of participating, in whatever way that takes form.

I will now discuss each of the remaining seven points. Do you all remember the first point? (Prayer and meditation). After the remaining points, we will wrap it up and we will have some time for questions at the end.

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## **2. Peace**

Now, I would like to move on to point two. We were not created as worried, stress-filled beings. Matthew 6: 28-30 says “And why worry about your clothing? Look at the lilies of the field and how they grow. They don’t work or make their clothing, yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. And if God cares so wonderfully for wildflowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, he will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith?” Unfortunately, I think our society perpetuates this idea that stress is normal. In fact, I think there is this idea that you have to be stressed and work to the point of exhaustion, if you want to have success; however, this is in direct conflict with how we were made.

I will be honest, stress was one of the things I fasted from during the seven devotion; it was by far the most difficult week out of the seven, and I would not claim that I was able to totally wipe out stress and worry from my mind. Now, it may have had something to do with the fact that this was during our winter field intensive, not to be mistaken for a vacation, and I do not have a particularly good relationship with snow, or even mildly cold weather, for that matter. To top things off, Adam gave me a concussion and Joshua made me sleep outside in the snow, but those are stories for another time! Honestly, stress and worry has become so ingrained in me, that I often do not even realize it is there. Spending time outside and experiencing connections to the environment is one way that we can remove stress from our lives. Quality time outside, away from technology and assignments and sometimes other people, can bring us a sense of grounding and peace and it often reminds us of what really matters.

During this week in the devotion, I practiced seven pauses throughout each day, each pause having its own focus; for instance, early each morning, my psalm was “Satisfy us in the morning with Your faithful love so that we may shout with joy and be glad all our days (Ps. 90:17).” With each of these “breathing spells for the soul”, as they are described, I would go outside, cite the Psalm, say a prayer, and spend time focusing on my breathing. Now, I would like you all to think of a phrase that you might say to yourselves in the mornings as a way to start your day off in peace. This can be something you make up or something you have heard before. I am going to give you all a few minutes to think of your message. Once you come up with your “breathing spell for the soul”, you can close your eyes, if you want to, and spend some time reflecting on it, while taking deep, slow breaths. If you would like to step outside of the classroom for this activity, I encourage you to do so, just be back in the room in 5 minutes.

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### **3. Food consumption**

My first two points were focused on prayer and meditation and peace. My next point focuses on the choices we make regarding the foods we eat. This may seem a little off topic, but the food systems we support can have a huge impact on our environment. Better understanding our food and where it comes from can help us develop a stronger connection to personal, community, and planetary health. The book of Daniel tells a story about Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These four people were chosen as trainees for service in Nebuchadnezzar's royal palace. They were to go through three rigorous years of mental and physical training to become prepared to serve the king. Nebuchadnezzar gave them food and wine from his own kitchen, but Daniel told the chief of staff that he could not eat these foods. The chief of staff was hesitant to give Daniel and his friends the foods they asked for in fear that they would become weak, but he decided to allow it on a trial basis. Daniel 1:15-16 says, "At the end of 10 days they looked better and healthier than all the young men who were eating the king's food. So the guard continued to remove their food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables." You may know that I love bread, cheese, wine, cake and butter. I think those things are okay to eat, too; however, I do recognize that it is important to be mindful of how much of those things we are consuming compared to wholesome, natural foods.

Something we have practiced at times during our graduate program is mindful eating, which, as many of you know, is a process of eating slowly with intention and mindfulness. There are many different ways this can be practiced; for example, you might focus on just one of your senses or you might focus on where the food came from and how it was produced. You can find prompts for this online and in books. I encourage you all to apply this concept and try this over a longer period of time when you go home. You could even do this for a whole meal, if you wanted to.

Often, I do not put much thought into what I am feeding my body, and consequently, I do not think about the impact the production of that food has. I have learned, however, that taking just a few moments to be mindful can bring about an awareness of our relationship with Earth and with others.

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### **4. Seasons**

All of this brings me to my next point, which is that there is a season for everything. Ecclesiastes 3: 1 and 2 say, "For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to harvest." I love this verse because it is such a beautiful reminder to be grateful for what we have, and to enjoy it while we have it; well, except if it is cold, or raining, or both. I'm kidding, of course!

I think of this for seasons in the traditional sense, Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter, and in a figurative sense, as in, seasons associated with feelings or life events. During our time

at NCI, we created a seasonal wheel that connected Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter to personal seasons. For instance, one might associate winter with a season of deep contemplation or summer with a season of celebration. I would like you to take a minute to turn to someone next to you and discuss one season that you are currently experiencing, which can be related to the physical season we are in or it might be more personal. Each person take about one minute to share with your partner and I will fade the music when it is time to come back together.

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### **5. Material consumption**

My next point is that life's purpose is not about hoarding material goods. In fact, Luke 12:15 says, "Beware! Guard against every kind of greed. Life is not measured by how much you own." While I do not think these things are inherently bad, I also believe that "wherever you treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be (Matthew 6:21)". It is easy, at least for me, to get wrapped up in acquiring more and more, and it becomes this cycle that I do not even realize I am in. When I spend time outside, I start to forget about all of the material things of which I have become fixated.

Not only can this mindset be harmful to our spiritual and emotional wellbeing; it has a major impact on the health of Earth, too. When I was at the ELC, it felt natural for me to think less about wanting more stuff because that is not what I was not my focus, and I was not surrounded by messages saying that is what I need. I recognize that spending a year living, basically, in a National Park is not something most people get to experience; however, there are ways to shift our focus to things that bring us a sense of fulfillment and wellbeing. I would like you all to think about what it is that brings you lasting peace and joy. What matters most in life to you and what helps you to focus on that? I will give you about one minute to think silently, write it down, or talk quietly with a friend.

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### **6. To take care**

My last five points have focused on prayer and meditation, peace, food, seasons, and material consumption. All of these topics bring me to my next point, which focuses on taking care. I believe that God created Earth and every living thing on it, so I see Him all around me. Genesis says that He saw his creation and said that it was very good (Genesis 1:31)! When I notice the natural beauty all around me, I am reminded of that. That reminder of God's greatness and His goodness inspires awe and wonder in me. It also inspires me to want to take care. Specifically, I want to take care not to destroy His incredible creation; I want to take care to notice beauty all around me; and I want to take care by being aware of my relationship to both human and non-human communities.

It is likely that we have all experienced places where we have felt awe, places that have inspired us to want to take care. In order to help us reconnect with that feeling, we

are going to do another quick activity. If you can stand up for this, that would be great. Feel free to spread out throughout the room. This is something Nick has guided our cohort through, so for those who have done this or something similar before, feel free to try to think of some place new or reflect back on your thoughts from the first time we did this.

This might feel goofy and a little uncomfortable for some of you, which is why I am going to have everyone close their eyes now. I want you to visualize a place that you have been where you felt a strong sense of wonder. Imagine a place where you have felt a deep connection; maybe it is a place where you felt immediately at home even though it was your first time there. Maybe it is a place you have known as long as you can remember. Think about one specific moment in that place. Visualize it as if someone had taken a photograph of you in that moment, in that place. Do you have the picture in your mind?

Now, I want you to become the person in that photograph. Take on the pose you held in that moment. Were you sitting? Standing? Swimming? What were you feeling? Were you laughing or in deep thought? Think about your surroundings and imagine that is where you are now. You can all relax and return to the classroom. You can open your eyes, thank you for doing that. Please go ahead and return to your seats.

If you are like me, thinking about those places where you feel a sense of awe can inspire that desire to want to take care. If you find yourself feeling disconnected or possibly even a little apathetic, I encourage you to visualize yourself back in that place, and maybe even take on your pose if you feel comfortable with that!

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## **7. Fellowship**

So far, I have primarily focused on our connections with the earth, but I think it is also important to note our relationships with other people. I mentioned in my last point that I see God all around me; I see him in all of His creation, including in people. He encourages us to build fellowship and love for one another. Isaiah 58: 6 through 7 says, "Free those who are wrongly imprisoned; lighten the burden of those who work for you. Let the oppressed go free, and remove the chains that bind people. Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help." I think part of caring for other people is making sure that we take care with regard to the planet we all call home.

This can take various forms, but one way of moving it forward is through building fellowship and connections with each other. This helps us develop deeper understanding and compassion. In my experience, before the message begins in Church, someone often says, "Take a moment to turn around and shake someone's hand". This gives us all a chance to talk with friends and family, and it allows us to meet people we have not met, yet. I am doing this a little late, but I would like everyone to take a moment to turn around



and shake someone's hand. Feel free to get up, and possibly talk with someone you have not met before. We will reconvene in a few minutes, so listen for the music to fade.

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**Conclusion**

I would like to thank you all once again for being here, for hearing me, and for your participation. Before we end for questions, I would like to dismiss us in prayer. If you would, please bow your head.

Dear Lord, thank you so much for allowing us all to be together in this beautiful place. Help us recognize the many gifts you have given us and protect us as we go forth. Thank you for giving me the strength to do this presentation, and I pray that you give my fellow cohort members the peace and confidence they need. Thank you for your unwavering love and grace. It is in your name I pray. Amen.

I will now open it up for questions if there are any.

A handwritten logo consisting of the letters 'S2SS' in a stylized, cursive font, positioned in the bottom right corner of the page.

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