

Sacred Earth Leadership Forum: Reflections and Reconnections

Date: Wednesday, February 1, 2012

Time: 6:00 - 9:00 p.m.

Venue: Sanders Classroom 212, Spitzer Auditorium

Agenda

- 5:00 - 5:45 p.m. Registration
- 5:45 - 5:55 p.m. Everyone seated inside Auditorium
- 6:00 - 6:05 p.m. Ceremonial Lighting of Lamp
- 6:05 - 6:10 p.m. Welcome Remarks
(Ms. Karen Dipnarine-Saroop, Green Brain Initiative)
- 6:10 - 6:15 p.m. Welcome Remarks
(The Reverend Dr. Samuel Speers, Office of Religious and Spiritual Life)
- 6:15 - 7:45 p.m. Panel Discussion (Reflections)
Moderator: Reverend Gail A. Burger
Ms. Donna Coane
Imam Qari Muhammad Asil Khan
Rabbi Neal Joseph Loevinger
Reverend Jennifer Barrows
Dr. Indu M. Lal
Reverend Dr. Chodrung Kunga Chodron
- 7:45 - 8:00 p.m. Break
- 8:00 - 8:30 p.m. Discussion Groups (Reconnections)
- 8:30 - 9:00 p.m. Plenary Session (Recommendations and Resolutions)

Sacred Earth Leadership Forum

Wednesday, February 1, 2012

Sanders Classroom 212 – Spitzer Auditorium, Vassar College

Opening Remarks – Karen Dipnarine-Saroop

Respected leaders and friends, I extend a heartfelt welcome to each of you, and thank you for joining us on this cold winter evening at our first Sacred Earth Leadership Forum.

When I was young, I was taught a Sanskrit prayer that says:

“I bow to Mother Earth, who has mountains and jungles on her body and whose clothing is made by the ocean. The wife of Lord Vishnu, please pardon me for touching you with my feet.”

Every morning before I place my feet on the ground, I still ask forgiveness of the Earth for touching her with my feet and walking upon her sacred body.

As a young child growing up, my grandmother taught me that the grass and trees would rest when the sun went down. If I ran late with my evening devotions, and I needed to pluck a flower for my worship, I should firstly gently ask the tree for that flower before taking it. Already annoyed that I was going to awaken the tree, my grandmother would add scoldingly, “And don’t shake the tree when you pluck the flower!”

Now, even as an adult, if I must walk upon the grass or pluck a flower after the sun has set, I say, “Sorry,” repeatedly for disturbing their rest.

I grew up in a tradition that has been worshipping the lingam, a stone, as God for thousands of years, a tradition that worships the mighty Ganga as a Goddess.

More than having been taught the traditions, I was involved in the daily practice of the traditions, until they became a part of me. I continue to practice these traditions in my adult life.

Telling our communities that we are facing a monumental environmental crisis makes them aware that a problem exists. Showing them the statistics and the photos certainly play an important role in educating them. I was taught econometrics in college, but I don’t remember a lot of it now because I have not applied that knowledge in years. But engaging or involving our communities in the protection of the Earth will help them to better understand that all things are bound together, that all things interconnect. And gradually, their wakefulness, through the insight into the truth that man, nature and the Divine are inextricably interconnected, will become infused in their consciousness.

How do we as a community with a profound concern for our environment, and a deep sense of duty to and responsibility for our communities in which we live, work and play, get to a position where we can re-vision our future, and begin to execute actions, starting with our children, our families and our communities, to build a resilient and sustainable future for our future generations fuelled by ancient wisdom and enlightened living?

Tonight, we will begin the process by taking a moment to reflect on where we are right now, and the immense repositories of ancient wisdoms, symbols and ritual practices that are available to us, and that can provide a solid foundation for establishing principles for environmental actions – unparalleled repositories that have the potential to play a critical role in leading, inspiring and arousing us to awaken and heed the urgent call of nature in peril.

Then we will meet to explore the principles that should guide our actions, as well as the challenges and innovative opportunities that are open to us in forging links between spirituality and secular environmental ethics and ecological activism.

Finally, we will re-visit and examine the statements and recommendations, that have emerged from these inter-religious dialogues and re-visioning, to establish a sound and sustainable framework to take us forward into developing innovative programs to educate and engage our communities in a broader vision of kinship, interconnection and interdependence of man, nature and the Divine, and ultimately, enlightened living and environmental activism.

Tonight, with these urgent and profound concerns before us, we are grateful to have a panel of esteemed speakers from diverse traditions and disciplines, whose scholarship and insights are compelling and greatly respected by all.

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life, and especially to Rev. Dr. Sam Speers, for his incredible kindness and assistance, and for opening up his home benevolently to co-host tonight's Leadership Forum.

These panelists, along with Rev. Speers, are more than speakers tonight. They have each been an incandescent beacon of light, guiding and encouraging me throughout the journey that has led us here tonight. For that, I thank you from my heart, and I look forward to continuing to build upon the foundations that we are initiating tonight.

Thank you.