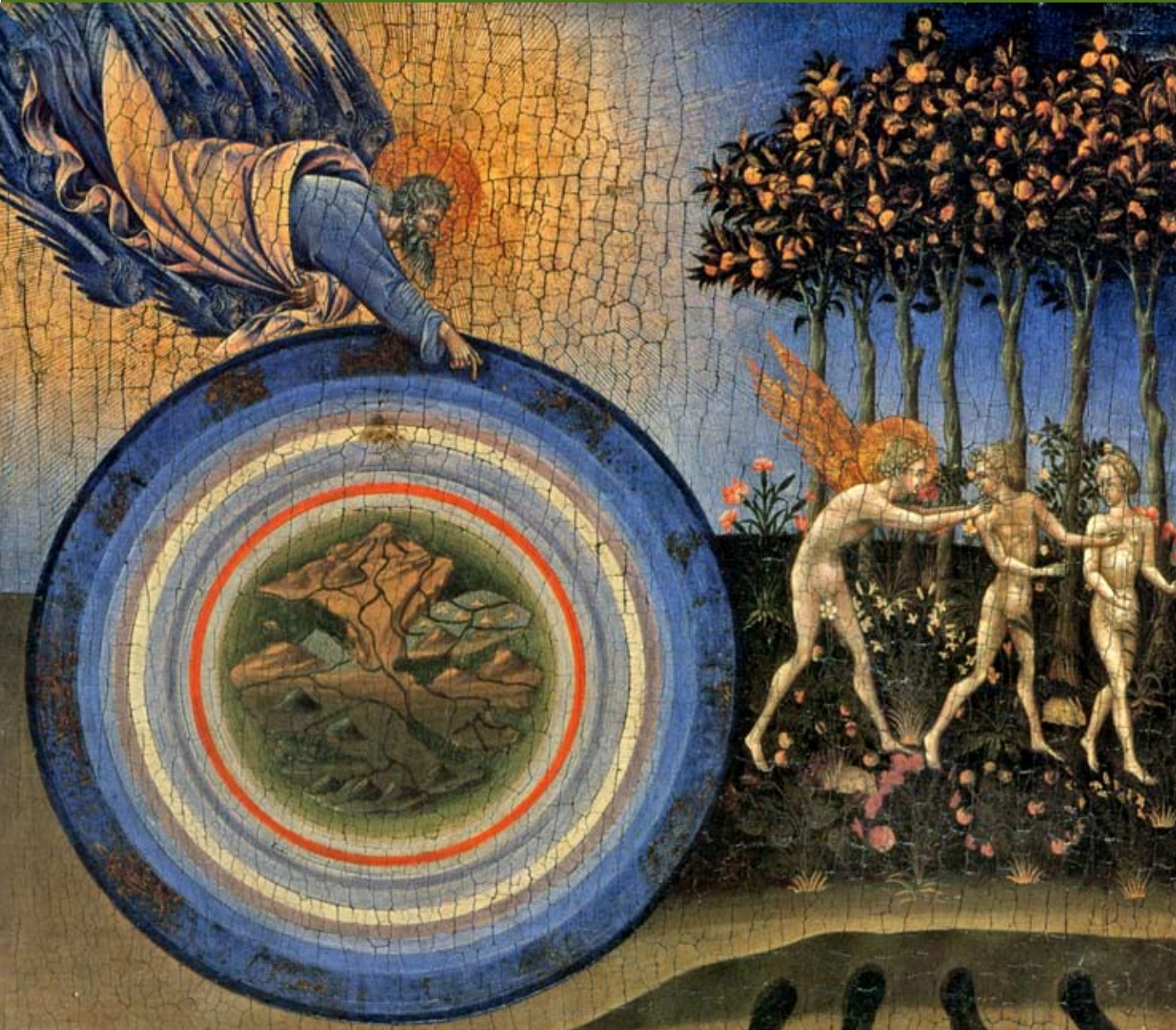


Spring 2007

# Reflections

Y A L E D I V I N I T Y S C H O O L

GOD'S GREEN EARTH  
*Creation, Faith, Crisis*



# How Green Was Our Valley: The Garrison Institute

By Jonathan F. P. Rose

*At its core, the environmental movement is about values. Certainly the environmental movement's earliest thinkers, such as Aldo Leopold, combined science with values.*

However, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1970 placed environmental actions solely in the framework of science and regulation. Over time, the movement has cloaked its core values in science and law in order to have an effective voice.

These regulatory ways of working are certainly important, but they are no longer sufficient to face the enormity of the issues before us. These times call for prophetic voices that can articulate larger frameworks of understanding and move people to action. It is time to reintegrate the language of values, religion, and faith into the environmental dialogue. The formidable power of faith communities to influence public policy concerning global climate change, the protection of species, the conservation of land, and other environmental issues is now becoming widely appreciated.

The Garrison Institute was formed to nurture contemplative practices of all faith traditions and apply contemplative wisdom to global environmental issues. And for the past three years, the Institute has been developing a multi-faith model of collaboration between religious and environmental leaders in the Hudson River Valley. (The Hudson River Valley bioregion is defined here as an expanse reaching from Albany, New York, to Newark, New Jersey, and including urban and rural, rich and poor, historic villages and suburban sprawl, farmer and fisherman, commuter and communer.)

Why here, why now? The Hudson River Valley has long been subject to the twin forces of conservation and exploitation. On one hand, the region is the home of the vast New York City watershed, as well as the magnificent lands preserved first by the great families such as the Rockefellers, Osbourns,

and Harrimans, and more recently by the concentrated efforts of the Wallace Funds. But at the same time, the region has been also subject to extensive industrialization that left a legacy of PCBs, a nuclear power plant, the increasing pressures of sprawl, casino gambling proposals, and continued industrial development. The region is at a crossroads — will its future grow from the base of conservation or of exploitation?

Many consider the Hudson River Valley to be the birthplace of the modern environmental movement, arising from the 1965 effort to save Storm King Mountain, which resulted in a landmark decision that granted citizens groups standing in environmental lawsuits. It is home to dozens of environmental and conservation organizations — among them the Hudson Riverkeeper, Hudson River Sloop Clearwater, Scenic Hudson, the Open Space Institute, and, nearby, the birthplace of The Nature Conservancy. Though environmental initiatives — and successes — are numerous, the region's communities of faith have not generally joined the dialogue about the state of the watershed's health. In 2003, the Garrison Institute set out to create a model of integration of religious and environmental viewpoints and institutions.

Albert Einstein noted that one cannot solve a problem with the state of mind that created the problem. The Garrison Institute uses contemplative practices to give rise to fresh approaches to perennial issues and develop holistic solutions that are often not apparent from a linear thinking process. Housed in a 77,000-square-foot former monastery, the Institute offers a year-round calendar of residential initiatives and retreats that bring

together spiritual leaders, social service providers, policy makers, scientists, and scholars to explore the intersection of contemplative experience and engaged action in the world.

The Institute's environmental work began by hosting a series of twelve monthly dialogues at the Institute. The dialogues featured approximately fifty notable religious and environmental leaders and thinkers from around the region, who spoke both to and with an audience of regional clergy, residents, and environmental activists. Guiding the conversations were the stated objectives of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation's Hudson River Estuary plan.

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### **The dialogues were informed by ecologic science, but the science was framed in a way that touched the heart.**

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The first dialogue, in the early fall of 2005, was quite chaotic — everyone wanted to be heard, but did not speak in a hearable way. The Institute thus began to bring contemplative practices, such as the use of silence and guided meditation, along with music and art, to create the mental and social space for transformative thinking. The dialogues soon incorporated deep listening, a practice that was not only more productive, but more satisfying to the participants.

In the middle of winter 2006, a large snowstorm hit the region just before the evening of the sixth dialogue, and yet the monastery was full. Why did so many people from so far away brave the snow to come? Because, they told the Institute, they hungered for the experience. Like so many people, they feel their deepest spiritual connection in nature, and they are not able to find that experience in either their houses of worship or in community. The Garrison Institute's dialogues were calling forth the union of the inner and the outer, and touching them in the way that they cared for nature.

As the spring approached, the dialogues led to a call for a written statement articulating the views and values emerging from the conversations. A steering committee was formed to complete the assignment, and, with the input of many, a beautiful statement was composed that brought together some core shared environmental values, along with a call to action.

The Statement begins:

We believe the land and waters of the Hudson River Estuary Bioregion are unique, precious and irreplaceable. We are actively committed to preserving, protecting and restoring this region.

As members of the diverse religious and environmental communities of the Hudson River Valley, we are united in our awe of creation and accept that our very survival depends on a new understanding of stewardship, based on our interdependence with the natural world. We recognize that we must change our human behavior or lose our precious earthly home.

This is an urgent call for visionary sustainability from the precipice of potential extinction. Even as we grieve the loss of our fragile environment to human acts of devastation, over-consumption, pollution and global warming, we choose to have a new vision of hope. We believe our destructive human behaviors can be transformed on behalf of our shared humanity, nature and future generations.

Based on a year-long exploration of our shared values, we aspire to reconcile our destructive human existence with the natural systems of the Hudson River Bioregion as set forth in this Statement.

(The entire statement is available at [http://www.garrisoninstitute.org/programs/HRP\\_Statement\\_Action.pdf](http://www.garrisoninstitute.org/programs/HRP_Statement_Action.pdf))

The statement goes on to articulate principles, agreements to undertake specific actions, and practical resources to help implement them.

The process leading to the creation of the statement, and the power of the statement itself, have had a remarkable, transforming effect. The day the statement was completed, the Town of Woodstock, New York, signed it, and soon pledged to become carbon-neutral. A minister in Ridgefield, Connecticut, was inspired to organize a retreat for that community's planning, zoning, and town boards to rethink the environmental principles of the town. Clergy across the region are joining planning and zoning boards, and calling for community-values impact statements as part of environmental impact statements. Clergy are learning to give environmental sermons. Houses of worship are screening *An Inconvenient Truth* and then holding conversations on how to green their own facilities and apply a new conservation ethic personally and communally.

Amid growing faith-based environmental efforts around the country, a distinguishing feature of the Hudson River Project is its multi-faith constituency. Ministers are learning of biblical environmental resources from rabbis, and rabbis are learning how to green their synagogues from ministers. Catholic nuns developed a land ethic for the conservation of their lands along the Hudson both to guide their own land stewardship and share with all.

One of the key lessons of the Garrison Institute's Hudson River program is that the most effective way to bring together religion and environment is to fully engage the power of each. The goal is not to find a middle ground, but rather, through deep spiritual engagement, find a new view that underlies both fields. The Institute's dialogues were informed by ecologic science, but the science was framed in a way that touched the heart.

In a world oversaturated with media and messages, humans are very hungry for silence — and for a contemplative setting in which to settle deeply into their true connection to nature. The contemplative wisdom of our faiths provides a window into a transformative ecology. And that transformed understanding impels change in the world.

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## **ACROSS THE LAWN**

by Paul Willis

The clean white trunk sways upward  
in come-hither fashion, lithe to the eye  
and limbing gently to the air.

When we climbed the bigleaf  
maple in the empty lot next door,  
or the Douglas fir by the driveway,  
it was but practice in embracing  
the human form. Getting to that  
first branch was always the problem,  
but once there, courtesy of a running start  
or a heave of interlocking hands,  
we soon found grip and sap in plenty.

There was something in us  
that wanted to go all the way,  
to take the slender arms of sky —  
but something too that kept us modest  
in our affections, cradle and all.

And who is to say it was not love —  
love in its first and purest form?  
And now this whitening tree that beckons —  
foot to crevice, palm to pitch,  
knees still shaking above the ground.