



*The world holds more sorrow than a single heart can bear  
Bears more wounds than a single set of hands can mend  
But together we can accomplish  
What none of us could do alone.  
~~ Dennis Rivers ~~*

***Companions in the Storm, Companions in Blessing***  
***Reflections on the role of friendship in the mending of a broken world***

**By Dennis Rivers**

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**<http://www.EarthCitizens.net/library/companions-in-blessing.pdf>**

***Dedicated to Martin Buber, John O'Donohue and Joanna Macy, with deep gratitude.***

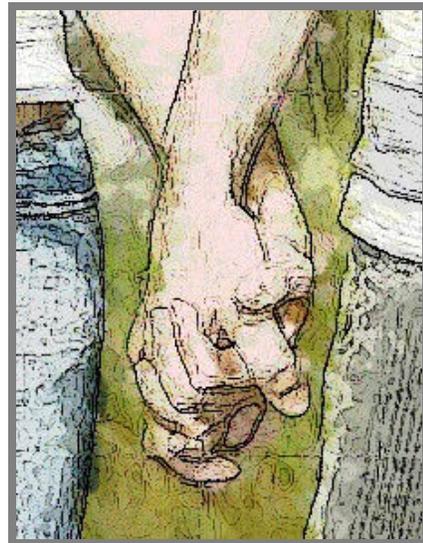
**The storm we live in.** We have always needed one another, but I am convinced that today we need creative and nurturing friendships more than ever before. Global-heat-up is changing the face of the earth as I write these lines. Will the land we are living on be submerged with seawater in the course of our lifetimes? The United States is edging toward bankruptcy, having poured too many lives and too much treasure into too many wars of choice, and having imprisoned too many people (2.2 million). Will our city still have a school system? When I read the news, it looks starkly clear to me that out-of-control capitalism, militarism and industrialism are devouring the human and natural world, and dimming the chances of human survival.

In the middle of this storm of difficulties and crises, we are challenged to make a life that is physically and ecologically sustainable, and also to make a life that is *emotionally* sustainable (that is, a life that feels worth living). The changes required for us to survive and thrive can't be accomplished entirely inside of ourselves as individuals, despite the claims and noble goals of a thousand self-help books. These changes also need to happen through many new and deeper partnerships with other people. Hence my effort in this article to explore twelve forms of mutual support and spiritual friendship, each of which can be a resource for the nurturing of your life and the mending of the world.

**Making a difference.** We don't actually know how large or how small an influence we might have over the coming climate catastrophes and economic meltdowns. Most of the evidence suggests that we will not be able to stop them or avoid them completely. But we might be able to steer them or lessen them, to some degree. Today, we are driving many species extinct, but we could slow down, and injure less. We can also take a variety of actions now to build more sustainable communities, rather than just waiting for the roof to fall in. In such situations of uncertainty (which is to say, most of the time), the people who succeed in making a difference come from among those *who conceive and believe that they might make a difference*. They may not always be correct in their estimates of their situations, but because they believe that they might make a difference, they explore more possibilities, try a lot harder, and succeed more often. Around 1900, the great psychologist William James presented in this idea as an intuition in his essay, "The Will to Believe." Almost a century later, psychologist Martin Seligman confirmed this intuition with a variety of experiments, which he

documented in his book, *Learned Optimism*. In the past few years this theme has been carried forward by Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck. In her book, *Mindset*, she explains that people who look at their lives as a trial-and-error journey of learning-that-takes-effort are much more resilient in the face of failure than those who look at their abilities as a fixed inheritance from fate, nature or family. Nature loves loops and spirals! The degree to which we imagine that we are capable of further development plays a key role in our further development! Evolution favors those willing to bet on (to invest effort in) their own evolution.

**Friendships.** Now I want to apply these ideas directly to the area of friendship. If we imagine that friendships "just sort of happen," then we will not put much effort into either consciously nurturing our friendships or understanding the processes and dimensions of friendship itself. If, on the other hand, we imagine that friendship is like some sort of garden, where what you get out of it is loosely but consistently related to what you put into it, we will then be much more interested in working in the garden of friendship.



The Garden of Relatedness

**Friendships under the arch of the sky.** It is interesting to think about friendships in terms of the location where they occur. We have friendships at school, friendships at work, friendships forged on the battlefield, friendships made in the course of struggles for peace and justice. I think of my eco-spiritual friendships as friendships under the arch of the sky, friendships that grow out of our gradually dawning awareness of how deeply we are **both connected to nature and connected to one**

**another.** This deep connectedness suggests to me that making a life worth living will be something that we do together. Even Tibetan Buddhist monks who meditate alone for years at a stretch, usually come back to their monastery and share the fruits of their contemplation with their brother monks and with the wider world of spiritual aspirants. *My experience of campaigning against nuclear weapons for thirty years strongly suggests to me that deep ecology needs deep friendships to realize its hopes and ideals.*

I've been searching for a new vocabulary of spiritual and ecological friendship, partly because so many spiritual and religious communities in which I have participated are quite hierarchical, and tend to focus people's attention on the preacher in the pulpit (or the guru on the dais) rather than on the persons sitting next to you. And also deeply individualistic in their theologies. Everything important happened between an isolated you and God, or Ultimate Reality. Nothing really important happened between you and the people around you. Love and compassion were always for people safely far away. (It took me years of quiet mulling to realize how deeply this contradicts the central teachings of Jesus about love and the central teachings of Buddhism about mutual co-arising.)

Both Western and Asian societies have been refining the process of specialization and hierarchy (in which the many focus attention on the excellence and power of the few) for many centuries. Thus, we have lots of names for the people who are above us in the spiritual hierarchy, pastor, priest, bishop, monk, guru, rabbi, roshi, rinpoche, ayatollah; and we have names for people who are on the bottom rungs of hierarchy. Novice, postulant, "taking instruction," brahmachari, layperson, and so on. We have a few names for the people who stand shoulder to shoulder with us, but not very many: friend, colleague, coworker, parishioner, satsangi, community member, but these horizontal-relationship names have very little of the drama and majesty of the vertical-relationship ones.

In the realm of spiritual friendship I know of only two shoulder-to-shoulder terms. The first that comes to mind is *Anam Cara*, friend of the soul, a Gaelic term popularized by the late writer and poet John O'Donohue in his book of the same name. The second name that comes to mind is not really a name at all; it is the Christian idea of "the priesthood of all believers." I see this horizontal dimension of spirituality as the great ongoing challenge of both religion and society in the

West. From my observations and study I would say that it is much easier to produce learned pastors than it is to inspire community members to care about one another, and to nurture one another's personal unfolding. And it is much easier to produce sensitive, highly-trained psychotherapists who see their clients one at a time, than it is to knit together the lives of people who live within shouting distance of one another.

A friend recently brought to my attention the Buddhist concept of *kalyana mitra*, spiritual friend, the person who cares about your deeper development. But given that Buddhism has been organized along hierarchical lines for thousands of years, the interpretation of *kalyana mitra*, tends to be that your teacher, your spiritual superior, is your true friend. This may be true much of the time, possibly even all the time, but it is still a turning away from the entire topic of mutual support and how we might nurture one another to become more fully human. I can't say more about this because I have not lived in Buddhist communities, and have not observed the culture of mutual support and the practice of *kalyana mitra* at first hand. I hope it is a rich and vibrant resource from which we can all learn.



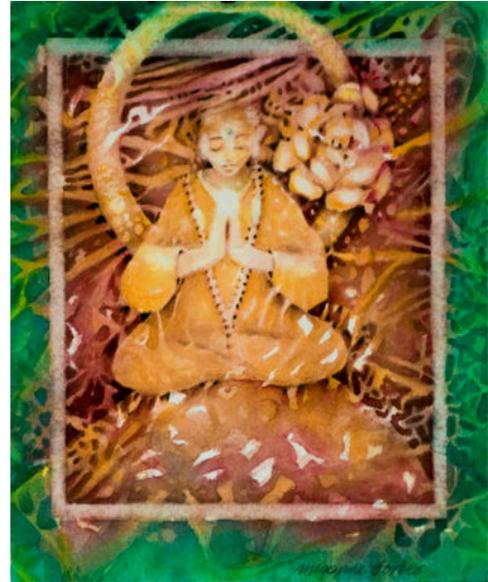
A Community of Creative Co-nurturing  
my title for a painting by Paul Heussenstamm

**Ecology and friendship, ecology of friendship.** Because ecology continually presents us with vivid examples of mutuality, I am convinced that eco-spirituality, to be true to its source, needs to emphasize the horizontal relationships of mutual nurturing, rather than only our traditional hierarchical relationship of layperson to expert. Believe me! I love those ecological experts, most of them professors, and I read their books and articles with great joy. Thomas Berry, Joanna Macy, Donella Meadows, Rachel Carson, Loren Eiseley, Jane

Goodall, and a host of others. I am eternally grateful to them, and all of my work is a pale continuation of theirs. But... But... their work will not fulfill its promise unless we can figure out a way to let it live among us as part of our shoulder-to-shoulder relationships. We face a deep, almost bitter, paradox here. We very much need experts and professionals, people who have spent their entire lives mastering some aspect of human knowledge and experience. But for a variety of reasons, some of them economic, institutions of professionalism tend to lock up knowledge rather than distribute it widely. The goals of professional standards are to cultivate excellence, weed out incompetent practitioners and assure uniformity of practice, not to inform and inspire the creative and cooperative efforts of global multitudes. So in working to protect the web of life from industrial suicide, I feel a pressing need for us to explore new and more cooperative ways of holding ecological knowledge, ways that weave together both inclusiveness and the cultivation of excellence. Eco-spirituality, it seems to me, is like a young plant that has been planted in a small clay pot (workshops and seminars). To flourish and not die, it must break out of the pot and grow in the garden of the world (friendships).

In systems theory terms, the capitalist / industrialist / militarist / incarcerationist “system” is “meta-stable:” that is, it tends to swallow up and digest each new positive development in society, using the new energies to reinforce the old pyramids of power. For example, computers could have made the world a much better place, but instead they simply expanded some of the good and all of the bad in the world, doing very little to change the proportions. The poor of the world are still very poor, governments around the world are still making nuclear weapons, corporations are still devouring entire forests and mountains, and computers have become the engine of a new global speculation mania that is wrecking the world economy. The parallel here is that as eco-spirituality strives for legitimacy with M.A. and Ph.D. programs, and visions of careers based of professional expertise, we run the risk of reinforcing the existing, unsustainable patterns of exclusion and inequality that we hoped to change. Eco-spirituality is supposed to help us embrace our interwovenness and mobilize the healing energies of the world, not simply to provide me with a way of earning \$100 an hour while you earn \$10.

As the late Donella Meadows suggested in her famous paper, “Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System,” to change a large, complex social system, advocates of change need to *offer a different fundamental story about human life*. Unfortunately for the cause of respectful dialogue that never ruffles anyone’s feathers, to offer, propose or explore a such a deep change represents a very significant disturbing of the equilibrium of existing social forms, personal boundaries and life arrangements.



Meditation in Nature by [Meganne Forbes](#)

Mindful of how personal this topic is, I invite you to join me in exploring aspects of the emerging life story of eco-spirituality (which is also, I believe, a “co-spirituality,” something that we do together). That new story envisions or lives as a journey of *awakening to connectedness, compassion and active caring*, lived out in partnership with our brother and sister people and our brother and sister plants and creatures. The Christian name for this attitude is *Agape*. The Buddhist name for it is *Bodhicitta*. The Native American express this as *Aho Mitakuye Oyasin* (All my relations) This theme of nurturing connectedness represents a really different compass and vision for a life well-lived. I invite you to explore it as an alternative to the current hyper-individualistic, and self-fulfilling, stories of most industrialized societies: “Greed is good,” and (for the painful consequences of greed), “You’ve Got Your Troubles, I’ve Got Mine” (a popular song during the Vietnam war, an ode to isolation and insulation).

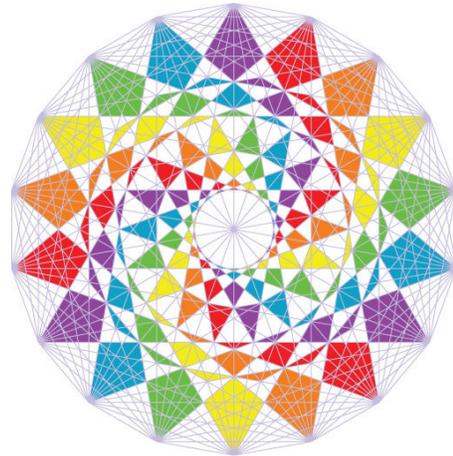
**Twelve forms of spiritual friendship.** Ecology presents us with many wonderful examples of all creatures being in the same boat. The following list explores some of the many possible ways that we could befriend our fellow human rowers in the boat of Life. Please note that the order in which I present the forms of friendship is not intended to indicate their relative importance. They are all important and they all depend upon one another. It is only that writing something down requires that you put some ideas before others. You might think of each of the forms of friendship explored here as a distinct bead in a kaleidoscope. Each person's friendship life is a unique mixture and arrangement of all twelve and more.

**1. Companions-in-meditation.** My life has been deeply influenced over the decades by my participation in several meditation communities. Broadly speaking, one might say that meditation includes everything we do with the intentions of calming down, paying steady attention, and opening to deeper resources of well-being (even infinite well-being). My current meditation community, Companions in Blessing, began as a shared practice of meditation and blessing among a small and widely scattered circle of friends and peace and ecology activists. We are engaged in a kind of mutual ministry of encouragement and resilience, which is continually evolving.

One expression of this mutual support is to join in brief meditations / prayers / blessings at dawn, noon, dusk and midnight, and to invite people to join us, wherever they may be, as often as the Spirit/Universe moves them to do so. No one really knows how many people are participating now. It could be dozens; it could be thousands. It is the circles of deepening friendships and shared intentions that really matter. The simplest form of group coordination is for everybody to do the same thing at the same time. But the deepest is for people to share the same beautiful intention. This article explores some of our deepening intentions toward one another.

Group meditation brings together two very different elements: quieting the mind and feelings in the presence of others. As we sit together in silence, no longer fighting off threatening thoughts or feelings, we silently affirm in relation to one another our strength to grow beyond our fears, our strength to face our lives honestly, courageously and compassionately.

**2. Companions-in-prayer.** Prayer, meditation, blessing, celebration, positive intention and gratefulness, are for me overlapping spheres of the spiritual life, the totality of which can't ever be summed up in a single idea, just as you can't sum up a mountain range or a forest in a single idea. Since nature loves variety, and I am trying to learn from nature, I encourage people to approach faithfulness to the Earth through whatever combination of these processes feels best. I have a deep preference that people cherish the Web of life and one another, but I have no preference among the six reverential processes just mentioned. (For example, all the prayers and meditations on the [www.Companions-in-Blessing.org](http://www.Companions-in-Blessing.org) web site are offered as encouragement for you to write and pray the prayer of your own heart, in the style of your own being.) "It will be enough," to adapt an ancient Jewish idea, if we all turn in the direction of lovingkindness, compassion and gratitude. Then the variety of our expressions will make a beautiful chord.



*Drawing by Adam Apollo Walsh*

Interacting facets:  
in nature, among people, among forms of friendship,  
and among the strengths of a single person

**3. Companions-in-blessing.** We begin our lives in need of food and warmth and care. It is part of the natural turning of the seasons of life that as adults we become more and more givers of food and warmth and care. Similarly, early in our lives we ask for blessings. I am convinced that later in our lives, it is our role to bestow blessings and to enter more fully into the process of blessing others. (There is more about this in my little book, [Prayer Evolving](http://www.prayer-evolving.org), which is available free of charge as a PDF at [www.prayer-evolving.org](http://www.prayer-evolving.org).)

**4. Companions-in-joy-and-sorrow-and-gratitude.** At their best, what friendship, marriage, psychotherapy and religious ministry have in common is an acceptance that life includes both joy and sorrow. Life asks us to learn paradoxical skills: how to grieve and mourn, and also how to rejoice and celebrate. The consistency of life is the consistency of variety, complexity and paradox, not the consistency of logical uniformity. Some of the pain in our lives is of our own making, but much is not. As much as it is possible to generalize about people, my experience has been that most people spend their entire lives growing toward (or fighting off) the realization that life can be deeply beautiful even though it includes the experiences of loss, pain and death. The world is a beautiful place even though it includes murderers, war-profiteers and plague bacteria. Our deepest friends are those who walk beside us on that path of generous acceptance.

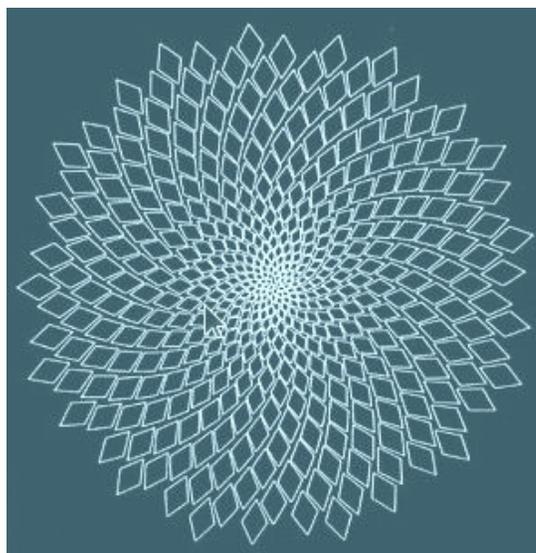
**5. Companions-in-creativity.** I have been blessed in my life to know several deeply creative people, and their lives have encouraged my life in ways that I can hardly put into words. It was not that I followed any one of them in their particular art or craft, but rather that they showed me what a person could do following their own inner direction. That encouraged me to follow my own inner directions. Now, late in my life, I am blessed to have a circle of creative colleagues, and together we dream new dreams.

**6. Companions-in-conscience.** For whatever few noble things I may have done in my life, I take five percent credit. The other ninety-five percent belongs to people with a lot more courage and a lot more conscience than I could imagine. Standing at the gates of nuclear weapon plants, going to jail as a way of bearing witness to the needs of future generations, traveling the back roads of the world to live the love that is yearning to awaken more fully in all of us, they showed me that I could have a bigger heart, they showed me that I could have a bigger life.

**7. Companions-in-truthfulness-and-sanity.** Every society has at least some practices that are profoundly disturbing, perhaps even bordering on the insane. These might include war, oppression, colonial exploitation, child abuse, slavery, the idealization and celebration of cruelty, spending trillions of dollars on unneeded nuclear weapons, the worship of money to the exclusion of all other values, working conditions so bad that workers die on the job, or the demolishing of entire mountains in order to get the coal that lies beneath them.

To win acceptance in whatever society we live in, we are invited and encouraged to actively affirm, convincingly lie about, and/or systematically ignore, the dominant insanities of our society.

The German psychoanalyst, Arno Gruen, explores this at length in his book, *The Insanity of Normality*<sup>1</sup>. However, this invitation to “not see” things that are glaringly painful and irrational is an invitation to become mentally and spiritually blind, to commit a sort of self-lobotomy. Thus many people resist “not seeing,” although resistance is not easy. (“We are not going to go there,” is the currently popular phrase for steering conversations away from uncomfortable topics.) Because human beings are social creatures, resisting your culture’s blind spots in the name of the truth is a heroic task. Your companions-in-truthfulness-and-sanity are those friends who struggle with you to see the truth and tell the truth, no matter how unflattering it may be, and no matter how many people around you may be engaged in deception or self-deception or both.



Sunflower Spiral

**8. Companions-in-transformation.** We know the current way of running the world is not working now and can’t be sustained into the future. The seas are dying. The land is poisoned in many places. The ground underneath central Arkansas has been so fractured by oil and gas drillers that the people in central Arkansas have suffered over 700 earthquakes in less than a year! Things need to change, but I can’t change them by

<sup>1</sup> Disclosure of personal interest: I, Dennis Rivers, the author of this article, am the U.S. publisher of *The Insanity of Normality*, through my small publishing company, Human Development Books.

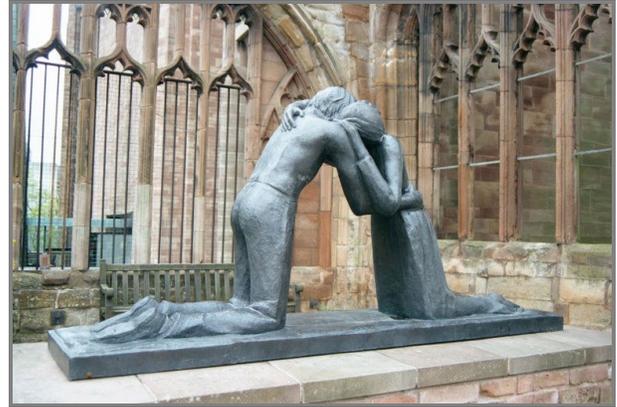
myself, and can hardly bear to think about all the indignities to and violations of the Web of Life (our only life-support system). In your company I can weep and yell and pound the table, and read my bitter poems, and then regain my equilibrium, the equilibrium of the emergency room nurse, who must not faint at the sight of blood. And because we see with different eyes, we each can show the other what the other might have missed, refining in one another's company our best plans and our dreams of a future more in harmony with nature.

**9. Companions-in-understanding.** From the moment babies learn the names of things, sitting in their mothers' laps, our capacity for understanding is woven into the lives of the people around us. There is strong evidence to suggest that thinking itself is the internalization of the early conversations of mother with baby and mother with toddler. Although in the Western world we idealize the powers of the lone individual ("I think, hence I am."), I am persuaded by the literature on early childhood development that conversation is actually the primordial form of human thinking. Most of the great thinkers of humanity have been shaped by the conversations they had with their fellow thinkers and scholars. It is not an accident that what comes down to us over the centuries is something titled, *Plato's Dialogues [with others]*, rather than simply, "*Plato's Conversations with Himself.*"

One of the reasons why dialogue partners are so important is that left to our own devices, we would tend to become enchanted with our own ideas, even when those ideas could use a lot of refining; or glued to one perspective, even when other perspectives could bring us important insights. Our companions-in-understanding may serve us by challenging us to expand our vision, but they often also can serve us by putting our arguments together in new ways that we ourselves had not thought of. They show us new implications of the work we are doing, and along with pointing out weaknesses, they also often suggest sources of support for our ideas, of which we may have been unaware.

**10. Companions-in-peacemaking-and-reconciliation.** Every conflict that we have with another person or another group, we can interpret to be the result of a weakness or failing on the part of that other person or that other group. But a more humble way of looking at conflict with others would, paradoxically, bring us more power. We could look at each conflict as an example of our own momentary lack of skill in *observing,*

*empathizing, negotiating and teambuilding,* rather than as an example of the other person's lack of character. Then, each conflict would become an opportunity for us to develop those four skills, an opportunity to develop *our own* character.



Reconciliation  
St. Michael's Cathedral, Coventry, UK  
Designed by Josefina de Vasconcelos

We ourselves could embark on a journey of becoming more aware, more compassionate, more skillful, and more insightful about the complex novel we are writing with our partners in conflict. Because in conflict the participants do a lot of mirroring of one another's moves and attitudes, your change of attitude from "how could you do this to me?" to "how can we work out a solution that works for everyone?" can be contagious and transformative. (Under less attack from you, your partners in conflict may be more willing to change, but there are no guarantees.) The Dalai Lama has written (I imagine with reference to the Chinese army occupying Tibet), that it is the enemy who can truly teach us to practice the virtues of compassion and tolerance.

In arguing for the transformational possibilities that may be hidden in each conflict, I want to be careful not to ignore or dismiss the very real suffering that people experience, and the very real injuries that people inflict upon one another in a world racked with violence. I am troubled by my friends who believe that every single event of one's life is arranged for one's own benefit by a sort of all-wise cosmic schoolmaster. This attitude raises painful and unanswerable metaphysical questions for me about other people suffering so that I can learn my life lessons. I prefer a much more down-to-earth attitude that explains less and encourages more. Namely, that in every painful situation, I can change the situation to some unknown degree by changing the way I participate in it; that even in the most difficult of conflicts, there are

hidden possibilities of transformation and possibilities for the deepening of my own compassion. And the people in those conflicts, perhaps without realizing it, can become my companions in peacemaking, and my companions in spiritual unfolding as well.

I am inspired about the significance of peacemaking in the spiritual life by the words of Jesus, in the Gospel of Matthew:

5:23 Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee;

5:24 Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.

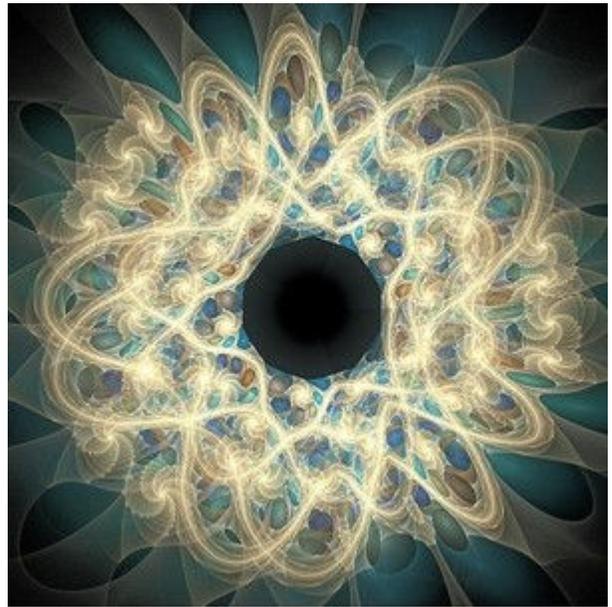
I know that there are various ways of interpreting these verses, but I am convinced that one legitimate interpretation must be, in accordance with the idea that God is love, that the work of reconciliation is in itself a deep form of prayer, and a significant form of “horizontal (shoulder-to-shoulder) spirituality.”

In our time, when governments (especially the United States government) have invested literally trillions of dollars in elaborate weapons of mass destruction (H-bombs) and global reach (missiles and drone bombers), I am convinced that part of the work of reconciliation must necessarily be to help both people and governments overcome their fascination and enchantment with the power to kill and the technology of killing.

**11. Companions-in-personal unfolding.** These last two dimensions of spiritual friendship that I want to explore in this article, to be a companion in personal unfolding, and to be a companion in the nurturing of life, encompass all the others and have about them a kind of in-breath and out-breath polarity. One looks inward toward the qualities of personal being, and one looks outward toward the world, toward children, toward people, toward gardens, toward our extended family in the tree of life. How well do we nurture and support the strengths of personal being in others. These last two dimensions are endlessly interwoven, among qualities and between people, as exemplified by the Mandala illustrations featured in this part of the text.

In the unfolding of our personal powers, and in how we use (or do not use) them, and in how we nurture them in others, there is a crucial role for conversations, because (as I celebrate in my book, [The Geometry of Dialogue](#)) it is in the telling of the story of my life to you my

friend, that I become more aware that I have a life about which a story could be told. It is in listening to others that we receive them into being



The Interwovenness of Human Strengths/Virtues  
my title for a fractal painting by  
Exper Giovanni Rubaltelli (at <http://exper.3drecursions.com/>)

We spend most of our lives trying to accomplish specific goals, and often don't give much thought to the kinds of persons we are becoming. Such concerns are likely to make their appearance in our lives in the aftermath of failure and loss, and also in the aftermath of successes that we imagined would make us happy, but in fact did not. In an earlier article of mine, “Infinity Hidden in a Speck,” I built on the work of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers to develop a list of the most fundamental, interwoven, qualities and powers of the fully developed person. *These qualities emerge often enough in human beings that we can think of the capacity to develop them as our inheritance from the Tree of Life, from God, from Mother Galaxy (however you understand your deep origins).* Here is my newest summary of the list, also informed by recent writings in virtue theory:

**THE MANDALA OF NINETEEN POWERS:  
A SUMMARY OF FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN STRENGTHS**

1. *The power of openness to learn/change/evolve:* Understanding life as a continuous process of developing new awarenesses, understandings, skills, ways of feeling, and ways of being.

2. *The power of compassion:* caring, lovingkindness, respect, empathy, generosity, concern for the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual wellbeing of other people and concern for the well-being of all creatures.

3. *The power of truthfulness:* the various descriptions of which include honestly, sincerity, genuineness, congruence (inner condition matches outer expression), turning away from self-deception and deception of others in all one's relationships.

4. *The power of courage:* Includes what we ordinarily recognize as courage, along with hopefulness, faithfulness to others and to one's deepest ideals when the personal costs are great, a deep sense of self-worth that allows one to face one's mistakes, psychological empowerment or "agency" (a sense that one can influence one's environment in order to meet one's needs, or the needs of one's children, one's community).

5. *The power of focused awareness:* Learning to pay sustained attention, and to include more and more in one's field of attention. Often accomplished through meditation, contemplation, quiet prayer, some forms of martial arts and sports training, and native traditions of hunting and weaving.

6. *The power of creativity:* creatively, play, curiosity, exploration (with openness to new experience), thinking outside the box, willingness to try something new, acceptance of moments of failure as part of the creative process.

7. *The power of commitment/long-term sustained engagement:* Continuity of energetic engagement, patience, perseverance, "Seven Generations" perspective, awareness of the many stages of a journey, promise-keeping, fruit orchard tending, the long view, raising children.

8. *The power of gratitude:* Expressing gratitude, appreciation, wonder, awe, receiving each moment as a gift, lowering one's threshold of delight, sympathetic delight in the happiness of others.

9. *The power of responsibility:* Mindful of cause and effect, aware of the interwovenness of our lives and ecological fates, willing to acknowledge mistakes and make amends and restoration.

10. *The power of forgiveness:* Forgiving oneself and others, willingness to start over, focusing on making a better present and future, rather than punishing others (or self) for the past, focusing on direction of

development rather measuring oneself and others against static images of perfection.

11. *The power of emotional aliveness in joy and celebration.* Opening to experience both joy and sorrow, both frustration and fulfillment, both excitement and stillness. Can you let yourself be happy for a single moment? Troubled families often create a micro-culture of shared and perpetual misery, in which the only way to be a loyal member is to be miserable. The great power of nature as a healer is that nature draws us out of those little worlds and connects us to a much larger world in which we can feel and give thanks for our own aliveness.

12. *The power of emotional aliveness in sorrow and grieving.* Moving away from numbness, "playing dead," as a coping style (which may be a quite understandable first response to loss, but not a helpful long term response). We are designed by nature to heal from our wounds. We see this daily in the healing of cuts. Life also includes inevitable emotional losses, from which we are also designed to recover. This recovery process is called grieving. One continuing challenge in human life is that we can't heal from losses that we won't acknowledge. Similarly, we can't ever completely forgive ourselves for the blunders we are too proud to admit. (Pride goeth before a heavy heart.) So an important part of healing is the acknowledgement and acceptance of one's wounds and losses. A person with a broken leg would never pretend that their leg was not broken. But people are often ashamed of their losses, which can slow down or even stop the recovery process.

13. *The power of both discovering and creating symbolic meanings:* Organizing and expressing our experiences into coherent patterns of words, music, movement, imagery, celebration and ritual, each person according to their temperament. From cathedral windows to country-and-western songs, life is experienced more deeply and completely through symbolic expression.

14. *The transforming power and spiritual dimensions of beauty:* Open to experience beauty (in the Diné (Navajo) sense of cosmic harmony) in nature, in art and in the human personality and in human relationships. In both the Diné (Navajo) and Sufi life visions, the first quality of the Divine Presence is Beauty. Perhaps they understand something about the depths of the human soul that other traditions have lost track of. The

experience of beauty can nurture and transform people in subtle ways. Once open to beauty, we may also become open to experience the ugliness that human beings have created both in nature and human life: war, oppression, exploitation, pollution and extinction. Once touched by great beauty, one may no longer be able to tolerate the ugliness of current social arrangements.

15. *The power to nurture:* Active concern for the personal development of every person one meets/knows, in terms of all the dimensions explored here. Active concern for the unfolding into full personhood of all people on Earth, active concern for the Web of Life. The power to nurture covers a giant spectrum across the human life span, from parent, to gardener, to teacher, to grandparent, to elder storyteller, to minister, to friend.

16. *Awareness of connectedness.* Traditionally, this strength was described as the virtue, humility. When we are aware of all the different ways that the world feeds and supports us, when we are aware of how much our work depends on all the human generations that have gone before us, we are much less likely to become disoriented with delusions of our independent greatness. I am convinced that each of us has something great to contribute to life. But I am also convinced that we will succeed in making that contribution if we have a deep sense of how much has been given to us that we could not possibly earn: sunlight, DNA, human language, the plants and animals that keep us alive, the work of all the human hands and minds that make it possible for us to do our work.

17. *The power of openness to the unknown, of delight in discovery and invention:* The universe is like a giant kaleidoscope: the same beads are there, but each moment casts them into a new configuration. To be deeply alive is to bring a new response to each of these new moments, to see the openings for change, rather than paying attention only to the elements of continuity. All descriptions of oneself and the world are partial and momentary. In a changing and evolving world, even the most accurate, careful, description needs to be continually revised and expanded.

18. *The power of attentive silence,* deep listening. The more deeply one wants to help a particular person, or a particular part of the world, the more deeply one must open oneself to listen to, and to understand, that person or that part of the world which one would hope to help. In attentive silence we allow our many non-verbal intelligences to participate in our encounter with a

person or situation. As wonderful as it might be, our verbal intelligence is only a small part or out total heart-mind. You would not want to go to a symphony in which every member of the orchestra played only an identical instrument.

19. *The power of resilience,* to begin again, to learn from but let go of one's failures. To be defined by faith in the possibilities of the present and future rather than by regret or shame for the past.

~\*~

It is greatly to be hoped that each of us will come to see our lives as spiral journeys of development, in which each of these qualities unfolds in us in cooperation with all the others. I remember the marks on the wall that traced my journey of getting taller as a child. Life invites us not only to get taller, but also to get deeper. It is not so easy to mark on the wall one's progress toward becoming a more fully realized human being. Making a list of our developmental directions, such as I am attempting to do in this article, is a way of expanding our journey of development from being an entirely intuitive yearning to more of a conscious project. Each of our lives is like a novel we are writing, or a movie we are making, more or less consciously. What's your movie about? Journal writing, family and community celebrations, and most centrally, conversations with friends, are the ways that we mark not only the seasons of our lives, but also our progress as persons who unfold in many dimensions. With whom do we have these conversations? How often do we listen? How might our lives be changed if we were to listen more care-fully?

The process of looking at our lives, in the company of supportive friends, is seriously complicated by what is going on in the society around us. To the degree that our society is engaged in violence, deception and exploitation, and to the degree that our society has succeeded in recruiting or implicating us in its doings, to that degree we will probably not want to look at large areas of our lives, even if "not looking" means that we are only half alive. The society we live in may not particularly want us to be honest, morally courageous or kind.

What does it mean for our personal unfolding, when the society in which we live has decided that it must practice torture in order to defend itself, or that it must tolerate the killing of bystanders in the pursuit of terror suspects? These practices injure not only the bodies of the victims, they injure the psyches of the people who

allow them, and of the people who tolerate them (who more and more, must “not see”). In this context, our companions-in-personal-unfolding are the people with whom we can have the forbidden conversations that will keep alive our personness.

## 12. Companions-in-nurturing-and-protecting-life.--

The last form of deep friendship that I want to explore here encompasses all the others, and is at the heart of an ecological awakening-to-connectedness. You might call it the EcoBodhi (awakening to connectedness) vision of deep friendship. I am convinced that “deep ecology” needs deep friendships devoted to nurturing and protecting life.

The archetype of this kind of friendship is to be parents, together with one another, and together with one's children. Because parenting is a complex cooperative process in which there is a lot of learning and development on all sides. (Although I have never had any children of my own, I have come late in life to the conclusion that raising children is the most important, complex and demanding thing that human beings ever do.)

*A spiral shell, a recursive dance:* One way of understanding what it means to be a parent, is that parents are trying to nurture the unfolding in their children of the “Mandala of 19 Human Strengths” just enumerated in the last section. (It's fine with me if you name and count the virtues differently.) One way of understanding what it means to be a fully developing person, is that a fully developing person is trying to cultivate these many strengths and powers in themselves. One way of understanding what it means to be a deep friend, is that a deep friend is someone who encourages your fullest development, something like the unfolding of various strengths in the “Mandala”. One way of understanding what it means to be a deep ecologist, is that a deep ecologist is someone who mobilizes all their personal strengths, such as courage, compassion, truthfulness, and so on, in order to serve and protect the Web of Life, knowing that they are in and of that very same Web of Life. In every one of the twelve forms of spiritual friendship explored here, we bring a different constellation of our various evolving strengths, both to support the other person, and also to evoke the unfolding of those strengths in the other person, and to deepen those strengths in ourselves. When we cook a meal for someone with love, in their presence, we both feed them, encourage them to cook, encourage them to love, encourage them to live, and

encourage ourselves to cook better: a complex chord of meanings and messages.

In a time of ecological crisis, when thousands of animal species are being wiped out by human activities, and when we human beings are producing powerful poisons that will affect the lives of all our descendants, we need to mobilize the deeper reaches of our capacity to nurture. I would go so far as to say that *Mother Universe calls to every human person to become a powerful nurturer and protector of life*. Perhaps there is an element of cosmic evolution in all this. Those planets survive, where life forms learn to care for their own offspring and descendents, and to nurture the local web of life upon which their survival depends. On the planets where life forms don't learn that nurturing, life dies out.

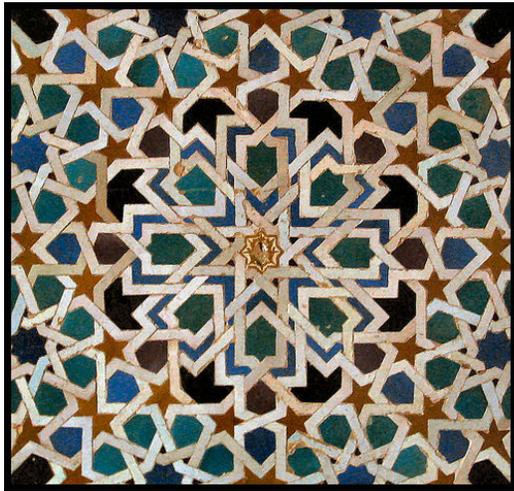


When we work together on issues of sustainability, global heat up, nuclear waste, and so on, it is as though we, together, are rocking all future generations in our arms. Part of awakening to connectedness is awakening to the realization that all species, and all human beings into the far future, are all, in a deep sense, our children today. All are worthy of the tenderest care we can provide. This is the central truth of our time. Human beings have become so powerful that the continuation of the Web of life as we know it depends upon us changing our attitudes and changing our behavior. Whenever I think of the words of Jesus, “whatsoever you do to the least of these, you do to me,” I can't help but think that in our time “the least of these” must include all the life forms we humans are busy obliterating.

Even if we cannot prevent the coming era of global warming, we can still save many species by greatly changing our behavior today. And we can save our own great-grandchildren from having cancer by stopping the

production of nuclear weapons and nuclear power, and minding more carefully the mountains of nuclear waste we have already created. In this particular moment in the history of the earth, I believe that above and beyond raising kids of your own, nurturing and protecting the life of the earth will be the most cosmically significant task of your life, and may well be the context of your deepest spiritual friendships.

**Beyond the first twelve.** I think of the twelve “companion-in-...” relationships I have explored above as the core of a beautiful spiral that has many more rounds. I am sure there are more. One friend who is a grammar school teacher suggested, “companions-in-play,” because play is such an important part of the development not only of people but also of many animal species. And I am also aware of “companion-in-sexual-communion,” which plays an important role in bringing people together, making new life and making life new, and often, but alas not always, inspiring people to nurture one another. I leave these two out of the current list only because I do not feel that I have a gift for writing well about them.



A Meditation on Interwovenness  
A tile from the Alhambra in Spain

As I have participated in the gradual unfolding of eco-spirituality, in terms of my own life story, from Earth Day, 1970, forward, I have become aware of spiritual friendship practices that involve “deep time.” These include both befriending all of one’s ancestors back to the beginning of everything, and befriending all of one’s descendants in the eons to come. To describe these practices would require many more pages, so I am not able to include these topics here. However, the theme

of kinship with both our ancestors and our descendants in deep time has been a central concern of the anti-nuclear activist and eco-philosopher Joanna Macy (who is one of my most revered teachers). I invite you to explore her work and her vision of The Work That Reconnects at [www.joannamacy.net](http://www.joannamacy.net).

I invite you to expand this list of the forms of spiritual friendship, and add to it the special forms and unique experiences that have meant the most to you. In doing so you will be expanding your vision of what might be called “horizontal spirituality,” the hidden dimensions of life that are gradually revealed between and among us.

### **Reciprocal, non-monetary, empowering...**

In closing, there are three aspects of these friendship roles that I would like to bring to your attention.

The first is that these roles are *reciprocal*. If I am your companion in prayer, then you are by virtue of that fact, my companion in prayer. Whereas, if you are my dentist, then I am your patient, not your dentist also. People have been having many of the kinds of friendship that I describe in this article for many centuries, perhaps even back to the ancient Greeks, Chinese and Hindus, and maybe even further back than that. What I feel lacking in my own time is a name for these forms of friendship. In modern times they have fallen into “the shadow of the unthought,” things that seem perfectly obvious when we say them out loud, but somehow were hardly thinkable until we said them.

The second aspect of these friendship roles is that there is usually *no money exchange* involved in sustaining them. (Psychotherapy is the troubling exception. Psychotherapists themselves have commented on the ways in which psychotherapy can represent the purchasing of friendship, not a promising development in my view.) Money is a fantastic human tool, but it does not work equally well in every area of human life. In the realm of friendship, I am convinced that we need a Sabbath from money, a protected space where the pressures of money do not enter. That will be a challenge to arrange in a world full of people so desperate to survive that they are selling their blood, their kidneys, and their wombs, and renting out their brains, to the highest bidder. The pressure to monetize every aspect of human life, including spirituality and friendship, is one of the central features of our crumbling culture. Naming the various aspects of deep friendship described above is partly my way of trying to

defend them from the onslaught of buyers and sellers. At least we can talk about friendships now in a more conscious way.

A third aspect of these friendship roles is that they can be **contagiously empowering**. If you are a dentist and you fill a tooth of mine, I am not empowered thereby to go out and fill someone else's tooth. But if you adopt me as your companion-in-blessing, I am by that very fact closer to the possibility of adopting others as my companions-in-blessing. I find it curious and sad that we do not have a serious word in English for something positive that spreads from person to person. "Contagion" ordinarily implies disease. But we do have a vivid ceremony: it is a frequent practice in large spiritual gatherings I have attended for everyone in the room to hold a candle. Then, a person at the center of the room lights the candles of those standing nearby. Those people in turn light the candles of others standing nearby, and so on, until everyone in the room is holding a lighted candle. Until we have a single word for it, we might call this "peer-empowerment-in-widening-circles" or "light-spiral-ing." (Please email me your suggestions.)

**Conclusion.** In this article I have begun an exploration of two overlapping questions:

*"How might we understand the deeper forms of friendship, in ways that would deepen our own friendships and empower us to be agents of healing in the world around us?"*

and

*"How might we understand the qualities of a fully developed person, in ways that would nurture our own development as persons and help us to nurture the people around us?"*

Our lives unfold inside the circles of these questions, but precisely because we are *inside* of them, it is a challenge to see them clearly.

As the world falls apart, with continuous wars, increasing inequality, global warming and out-of-control industrialization, I feel our lives being pushed in the direction of falling apart as well. *But we do not have to be mere reflections of the chaotic world in which we now live.* Consider that physical disasters often bring out a heroic kindness in people that was not visible in the transactions of everyday life. In a similar way, the falling apart of a civilization based on selfishness challenges each of us to expand and deepen our circle of friendship and caring, and to cultivate in ourselves the beautiful possibilities of human unfolding, even if the world around us has momentarily forgotten them.

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