



leadershipcommons@thebtscenter.org
thebtscenter.org

An Epistolary Practice of Play for the Seventh Generation

Created by Ophelia Hu Kinney

Introduction

Welcome, friends! This resource is an invitation into an epistolary group practice. The time needed for this engagement is a minimum of 1.5 hour per week for four weeks, but you are most welcome to let the activity take up as much time as the participants agree to give.

"An Epistolary Practice of Play for the Seventh Generation" is based on a notion commonly attributed to the people of The Haudenosanee Confederacy and popularized by Oren Lyons, Chief of the Onondaga Nation.

Law 28 of the Haudenosanee Confederacy states:

We now do crown you with the sacred emblem of the deer's antlers, the emblem of your Lordship. You shall now become a mentor of the people of the Five Nations. The thickness of your skin shall be seven spans — which is to say that you shall be proof against anger, offensive actions, and criticism. [...] Look and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the present but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground — the unborn of the future Nation.

Oren Lyons (Seneca), Chief of the Onondaga Nation, later made the concept of the seventh generation more concrete, saying:

We are looking ahead, as is one of the first mandates given us as chiefs, to make sure and to make every decision that we make relate to the welfare and well-being of the seventh generation to come. [...] What about the seventh generation? Where are you taking them? What will they have?

It is in the spirit of these questions that this epistolary practice invites you to consider with soul and body the spiritual and social dimensions of these four ecological phenomena:

- 1. Climate change effects and resilience**
- 2. Long-term species migration and extinction**

3. **Prophetic responses to ecological crisis**
4. **Spiritual transition to eco-consciousness**

Undoubtedly, these phenomena have crossed the path of your soul, provoking a complex emotional landscape that includes depths of despair and heights of hope.

In response to each of these phenomena, participants will be asked to take in about 1-2 hours of publicly available content every week prior to meeting as a group. During each group gathering, participants will create an intentional and welcoming space to write a public letter to descendants who belong to the seventh generation from the participants' own. In other words, participants will answer these questions:

1. What would you like to relay to your descendants seven generations from your own about the topic of the week?
2. What dreams or griefs will have materialized seven generations on?
3. What instruction or kindness do you wish to pass on?
4. Where do your honesty and imagination take you?
5. What legacy has your generation left?

This is not an exhaustive list; rather, it is meant to spur the creative process of the participants. The activity is meant to provoke brave, authentic reactions to the content and topics.

The letter-writing will be followed by letter-reading, or rather, letter-performance. Participants will gather in pairs or in groups of three to perform their letters, treating other group members as though they were recipients: descendants of that seventh generation.

This practice is meant to be a soul-and-body practice. Sometimes, our spiritual practices place these components of self in opposition to each other. However, there is value in the healing work of play and in building a communal somatic experience. Playfulness provokes empathy, and empathy in turn produces further playfulness. By participating as listeners and readers, group members will bear witness to one another's letters and also experience an audience for their own letters.

It is our hope that this practice helps participants to materialize amorphous anxieties and unutterable hopes about the spiritual-ecological present and future in a space that is productive with empathy.

Instructions for group members:

1. Please consume the recommended content before coming to each session. Each week should contain about 1-2 hours worth of preparatory materials.
2. Each week of group time is a recommended 1.5 hour-long practice.
3. The time allotment is merely a friendly suggestion. Your group facilitator will change these time allotments as the group needs.

15 min.	Group check-ins
5 min.	Invocation and tone-setting prayer or meditation
10 min.	A group member recaps the resource(s) for that week
15-20 min.	Writing letters
15 min.	Reading and performing the letters (5 min. per letter)
5 min.	Partner/group thank-yous
10 min.	Sharing from your piece in the larger group
5 min.	Wrap-up

Instructions for group facilitator:

1. Communicate to the group that group members need to have committed to consuming the recommended content before coming to the session. Each week should contain about 1-2 hours' worth of "homework."
2. Group leader should arrange for the provision of all the resources needed. **Links to the preparatory resources for each week can be found at the end of this guide.**
3. Other things that might be nice to have but aren't necessary include:
 - a. A prayer or meditation for each week
 - b. Stopwatch
 - c. Candle to mark the start and stop of the time together
 - d. A means of making a pleasant sound to mark transitions (a phone, a singing bowl, or chimes, a playlist of instrumental music)

The time allotment is merely a friendly suggestion. Take the time your group requires so long as it is communicated ahead of time.

15 min. Begin each week with **15 min.** of check-ins. Ask your group members to stick to short responses – about 2 min. each. If you have a large group, ask people to check in with their neighbors in groups of 2-3 people.

Possible check-in questions include: *How are your soul-bodies? What are you curious about for today? What worries or excitement do you bring into this space?*

5 min. Continue with an invocation and tone-setting prayer or meditation.

10 min. Ask a willing group member or two to recap the resource for that week.

15-20 min. Ask participants to find a comfortable and/or solitary place to sit and write their letter for the week.

15 min. At the end of letter-writing time, ask participants to stretch their bodies, perhaps to shake out any pent up energy in their limbs, and to move for a minute in ways that nourish their bodies.

Ask participants to find 1-2 participants with whom to form a group (each group should have 2-3 people).

During the first session, ask participants to imagine that they are reading to members of

the seventh generation. Listeners should be completely attentive; their attention is their gift. Each letter should take about 5 minutes to deliver, taking about 10-15 minutes in total.

- 5 min. Encourage partners/group members to thank one another with specifics and earnestness.
- 10 min. Reconvene the group. Ask participants to share particularly meaningful pieces from their letters or from the experience of sharing their letters aloud.
- 5 min. Wrap up your time together with any parting words or final announcements.

Session Resources

Session One: Climate change effects and resilience

- [Kyle Whyte on the Colonial Genesis of Climate Change \(podcast\)](#)
- [The Environment Is in You: Photography and Original Illustration Contest by The Oneness Project](#)

Session Two: Long-term species migration and extinction

- [They Carry Us With Them: The Great Tree Migration by Chelsea Steinauer-Scudder and Jeremy Seifert \(interactive article\)](#)
- [A Matter of Timing: Can Birds Keep Up With Earlier and Earlier Springs? By Scott Weidensaul \(article\)](#)
- [Migrations in Motion: a map by The Nature Conservancy](#)

Session Three: Prophetic responses to ecological crisis

- [A Town Renewed \(article\)](#)
- [We must burn the West to save it: How an ancient American Indian practice can reduce the risk of massive wildfires \(article\)](#)
- [Urban Nature Based Solutions: Cities Leading the Way \(report\)](#)

Session Four: Spiritual transition to eco-consciousness

- [On Being with Krista Tippett: Joanna Macy – A Wild Love for the World \(podcast\)](#)
- [“Toward a Contemplative Ecology: A Conversation with Douglas Christie and Andrew Zolli” \(article\)](#)