



THE **BTS**
CENTER

thebtscenter.org

leadershipcommons@thebtscenter.org

Earth Hospice Rites: A Resource for Collectively Honoring our Grief for Earth

Created by Trebbe Johnson and Rev. Alison Cornish

Introduction and Inspiration

In 2022, following the death of her husband, Andy Gardner, Trebbe Johnson became intrigued by the similarities between the hospice care Andy had received at the end of his life and the work she had been doing as founder and Executive Director of [Radical Joy for Hard Times](#). As she writes in her book *Fierce Consciousness: Surviving the Sorrows of Earth and Self*, “Hospice is a time of tears, touch, sorrow, gratitude, waiting, weeping, touching, and loving. Especially loving. For the dying person it is the final journey, accepted and, as much as possible, welcomed. For loved ones, it is bearing witness to the great mystery of death.”

In 2021, working with The BTS Center, Alison Cornish co-created a series of online events, [Lament with Earth](#), offering an interactive opportunity (including scripture, rituals, and music) for individuals to share with one another their feelings of anxiety and grief for a climate-changed world. Through these seasonal offerings, The BTS Center has found that offering an invitational, interactive space allows individuals to bring their own sense of loss and sadness about the conditions of our Earth home to a trusting, collective space. And when we lament together, we are strengthened for the work we know awaits us.

From these experiences, Trebbe and Alison joined together to create [Earth Hospice Rites](#) in October 2022 as an online, ongoing, facilitated space to lament, celebrate, share, and offer mindful attention to the places and species we love that are endangered by climate change. These gatherings have taken place every two weeks. The short 20-minute sessions have drawn individuals from around the globe who desire a place to regularly honor their grief for what is being lost even as we also sustain our roles, responsibilities, and actions to address the plight of planet Earth.

This resource, one in a collection of materials provided by The BTS Center, is intended to help others grow in confidence to offer this practice to their own communities

Philosophy

The Earth is in grave danger. Climate change is advancing — and it is already here — thus our language of “a climate-changed world.” Behind the idea of Earth Hospice Rites is this invitation:

Together we take a deep collective breath and say, “Yes, the Earth as I know it is dying.”

The Earth itself is not dying, of course. This planet has remade itself countless times over its four and a half billion-year lifespan and will do so again. But something very dear to us humans is dying, and that is our relationship with the seasons, plants, animals, and waters as we know and love them. Some have called this crisis “the sacred disappearing” as we witness so much of what has been precious and exquisite become extinct. We call it Earth “hospice” because, as we do in hospice for people, we bear witness to the transition from life to death, practice acknowledging what is ending, and celebrate all the richness of the life we have known.

Earth Hospice Rites offers a place to lament, celebrate, share, and offer mindful attention to the places and species we so love that are endangered and being lost — forever.

Each gathering revolves around a particular theme and includes reflections by the hosts and at least one opportunity for participants to join in the conversation, whether by sharing with a partner in a Zoom breakout room, writing their responses to a question in the chat, or joining in a ceremony.

Intentions of Earth Hospice Rites

Each Earth Hospice Rites program is designed to support participants in

- Moving *forward and through* climate change, extinction, loss, and other traumatic changes, rather than *around* these painful realities
- Acknowledging the spiritual and psychological weight of climate change — grief, anxiety, distress, other emotions — while also opening ourselves up to imagination, creativity, and hopefulness
- Determining how we can be the people we choose to be — agents of healing, love, peace, and transformation — in this time
- Offering a place where people can share these thoughts and feelings with like-minded others, even as it is often hard to do so with one’s friends, family, and colleagues
- Honoring the specifics — for example, particular places and species — that are the cause of each person’s own climate anxiety

Our wish is to make room for people to recognize and honor these many difficult feelings in themselves and others. By holding Earth Hospice Rites as an ongoing practice, we recognize that the spiritual and emotional impacts of climate change are many, complex, and ever-changing.

We created Earth Hospice Rites as a 20-minute program as it might be challenging for people to set aside even half an hour for such a program on a busy day. Almost anyone can find 20 minutes for a meaningful gathering with others.

At the end of each program we offer an **In-Between Practice**. This simple practice of observation, ritual, or sharing with others springs from the subject of each gathering, and aims to deepen the practice if people so wish. The In-Between practice is always optional.

Instructions for Facilitating

Role of facilitators

The role of the facilitators is to model the mood of reflection, openness, welcome, and acceptance that we wish our participants to experience in themselves and with others as they respond to the theme of the day. Although we do not engage in conversation with individual participants, we do read the chat comments aloud so as to affirm for people that their voices and feelings have been heard.

Sample Outline — Online format

1. **Gatherings begin in silence**, with a welcome slide displayed.
2. **Facilitators welcome the participants**, describe what Earth Hospice Rites is and why it is helpful in this time of ambiguity and anxiety. (Always presume there are newcomers, so always offer both a welcome and introduction).
3. **Facilitators offer an invitation** to light a candle/hold a stone, or another way to set this time apart.
4. **Facilitators introduce the theme** of the gathering, and offer a 4 - 6 minute reflection about the theme. Specificity of the theme helps people stay grounded in particularity, connecting the theme and information to participants' lived lives. Keeping facts and data to a minimum helps turn attention to feelings. Using photographs as part of the reflection can be very powerful.
5. **Facilitators invite the participation** of group members by offering a meditation, sharing in small groups, responding to a prompt in the chat, ritual or ceremony, or other ways of building connection and interaction.

6. **Facilitators share follow-up information**, including the date of the next gathering, other opportunities to meet and share.
7. **Facilitators suggest an “in-between” practice** participants can engage to continue to explore the theme of the gathering on their own or with others.
8. **Facilitators offer a closing reading**. This is a good opportunity to offer a reading from a wide range of spiritual and poetic voices from across the globe.

Suggestions for facilitating online gatherings:

- Use Zoom or other online meeting technology
- Stay in touch with participants through regular communication: reminders of upcoming meetings, follow-up emails highlighting themes and responses (kept anonymous) from participants and reminders of in-between practices
- Enter the group in silence to encourage a reflective mood
- Light a candle, hold a rock, etc. as a way of entering into sacred space
- Use images, music, sounds of nature
- Use chat and breakout rooms to encourage sharing by participants

Additional considerations and suggestions for in-person gatherings

- Offer the program/ceremony at a place that is affected by climate change, such as a dried-up lake, an eroding coastline, the habitat of an endangered species
- Take time to create a contemplative environment: entering, centering, sharing, departing
- Offer an EHR prior to a worship service, before a nonviolent direct action, or in conjunction with a regular (adult or youth) education course. Earth Hospice Rites could be held on a regular basis as part of a Vespers or other meditative gathering.
- Participants might take a few minutes to be alone in the natural place where the event is held to:
 - discover for themselves what is happening there
 - express to God, the place or species, or the Earth their feelings
 - perhaps bring back to the group some small object they’ve found that reflects their feelings about being there

Sample Themes

Here are a few themes Trebbe and Alison have explored in Earth Hospice Rites. We offer them as examples, knowing each facilitator will be led by their own interests, sadnesses, circumstances, and current events to explore themes that are meaningful and relevant to them.

- The melting Thwaites Glacier in Antarctica
- Consumerism — how it exacerbates climate change and how we ourselves fall prey to it
- Ways we might actually be curious or fascinated with some aspect of climate change (including excitement for ways we might get involved)
- The loss of insects
- The impact of climate change on young people
- Ambiguous loss
- Loss of seasonality, such as the lack of snow in New York City over two winters
- Canadian wildfires, and smoke affecting the U.S.

A Few Quotes from Participants

“Our first spiritual need is the need for loving and belonging.”

“I express my ongoing gratitude for the opportunity to practice in the Earth Hospice Rites community. I always feel nourished [by the program].”

“I'm amazed at what is shared in 20 minutes.”

“I have had much sorrow un-named until I found this group, which gives voice and focus to the losses I see and feel. I appreciate others who reciprocate by sharing their own sorrows and joys by focusing attention towards what might be insignificant to others. This opportunity to share small moments of perception with attentive people is precious and rare in this world.”