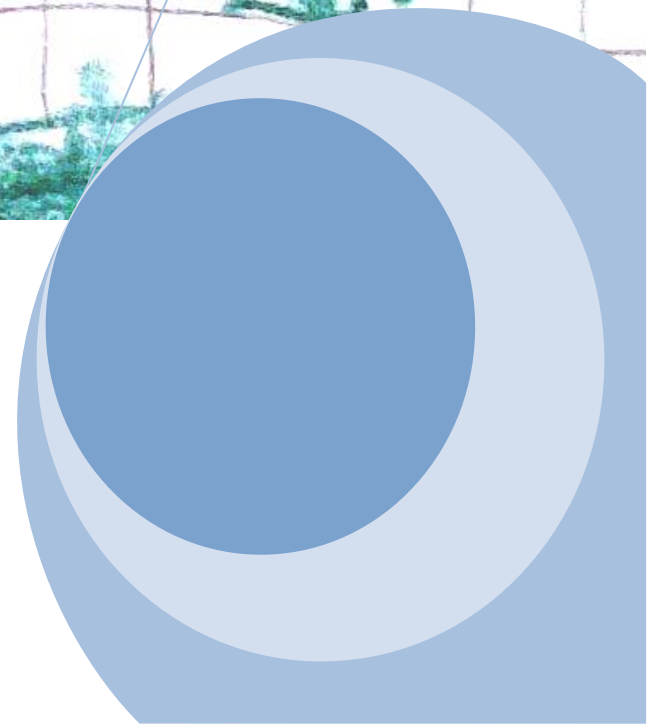


People Inspired for Ecological Spirituality

PIES

A Study - Circle material on the Bahá'í perspective on the natural environment. To inspire, to provoke thought, to learn, to have fun, to grow...

Trial document for collaborative development



PIES: People Inspired for Ecological Spirituality

Welcome to People Inspired for Ecological Spirituality (PIES). This is a study material inspired by the Ruhi Institute, with an eco-twist. The intention is to get Baha'is and their friends thinking, talking, and acting around ecological issues from a spiritual foundation.

There is a significant amount of guidance in the Baha'i Writings that are relevant to current environmental issues facing the world today. This is an invitation for insightful conversation about the relationship between the natural world, spirituality, and humanity from a Baha'i perspective.

An expected outcome of PIES is for Baha'is to have a better understanding of the Baha'i position on the environment and our relationship to it. An outcome of engaging with this workbook is for participants to be inspired to live in a more environmentally conscious manner, willing to take practical steps to create change in their lives.

~ o ~

Kickstarter: Pick a Project

PIES has collated a series of practical projects that may inspire participants to apply environmental precepts in their everyday lives. The projects are:

1. Make a hotbox
2. Build a vertical bottle garden
3. Build an owl box
4. Make stone ground bread
5. Make a solar funnel cooker
6. Make a worm bin
7. Build a fuel efficient clay stove
8. Make fire bricks
9. Recycle 2 litre Coke bottles
10. Make a pyramid vegetable garden

Look at the projects at the end of the workbook. As a group, consult and choose a project to work on for the next ten weeks.

The purpose of these projects is to apply the theoretical concepts you'll be learning in a practical way. Part of the group outcome is to complete the project you have chosen by the close of the sessions.

Session 1: Creating the Context

We must not be content with simply following a certain course because we find our fathers pursued that course. It is the duty of everyone to investigate reality, and investigation of reality by another will not do for us. If all in the world were rich and one man poor, of what use are these riches to that man? If all the world be virtuous and a man steeped in vice, what good results are

forthcoming from him? If all the world be resplendent and a man blind, where are his benefits? If all the world be in plenty and a man hungry, what sustenance does he derive? Therefore every man must be an investigator for himself. Ideas and beliefs left by his fathers and ancestors as a heritage will not suffice, for adherence to these are but imitations and imitations have ever been a cause of disappointment and misguidance. Be investigators of reality, that you may attain the verity of truth and life.

- Abdu'l-Baha, Foundations of World Unity, p. 76

O SON OF SPIRIT!

The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbor. Ponder this in thy heart; how it behooveth thee to be. Verily justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes.

- Baha'u'llah, The Arabic Hidden Words

Discussion:

1. Discuss as a group some of the things you grew up believing were the absolute truth.

2. Based on your own childhood experiences, what are some of the things you have discovered were not the truth? Share stories.

3. Can you give examples of things you take for granted in terms of how you see things and actions you take?

4. Why do you think it is important to investigate the truth on your own?

5. What do you already know about the Baha'i perspective on the environment?

6. What are your current perceptions of Nature and have these been shaped by others in your environment?

We invite you to take this course on as an opportunity to see Nature in a new light.

7. How would you relate the concept of justice to the natural environment?

Group Activity:

1. What are some of the questions you have regarding the significance of the environment? Come up with 3 questions each.

2. Create a common list of questions that the group all feel are relevant and want to investigate further.

Homework:

Select one question from the group to reflect on between this and the next session. You will have a chance to share your reflections with the group when you come back. As you feel inspired, find one quote from any source that supports what you share in your reflection.

Session 2: Creating the Context (continued)

Feedback from Session 1:

1. What thoughts and reflections did the previous session inspire in your life over the past week?

2. Share any inspiring quotes that you found during the week

3. Allow the quote and experiences to guide ensuing group discussion.

Group Discussion

1. What do you understand by the word 'environment'?

2. List reasons why the environment is important to you.

3. Share 3 environmental crises of your lifetime that you know of.

4. What do you think is causing these environmental crises?

5. Choose the environmental crisis you feel the most strongly about, one that you would be willing to take action to make a difference.

6. What types of action do you feel would make a difference?

7. What factors would enable or prevent you from taking action?

Possible examples of environmental crises:

- Food – sustainable production into the future with increasing world populations and decreasing soil fertility, water supply and nutritional density
- Energy – producing enough for unlimited growth economic model
- Water – drastic decrease in fresh water availability, implications for agriculture, sanitation and health
- Climate Change
- Mass and rapid extinction
- Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO) polluting crop biodiversity
- Oil spills & fuel dependency
- Mining and dependence on minerals from the Earth
- Environmental (climate) justice

Session 3: Nature as a Reflection of the Divine (continued)

I am well aware, O my Lord, that I have been so carried away by the clear tokens of Thy loving-kindness, and so completely inebriated with the wine of Thine utterance, that whatever I behold I readily discover that it maketh Thee known unto me, and it remindeth me of Thy signs, and of Thy tokens, and of Thy testimonies. By Thy glory! Every time I lift up mine eyes unto Thy heaven, I call to mind Thy highness and Thy loftiness, and Thine incomparable glory and greatness; and every time I turn my gaze to Thine earth, I am made to recognize the evidences of Thy power and the tokens of Thy bounty. And when I behold the sea, I find that it speaketh to me of Thy majesty, and of the potency of Thy might, and of Thy sovereignty and Thy grandeur. And at whatever time I contemplate the mountains, I am led to discover the ensigns of Thy victory and the standards of Thine omnipotence.

- Baha'u'llah, Prayers and Meditations by Baha'u'llah, p. 271

Clarifying questions:

1. What are the signs, tokens and testimonies that Baha'u'llah is referring to here?

2. How would you have to gaze at the earth to be reminded of God's power and bounty?

2. How can mountains lead to the discovery of God's victory and omnipotence?

3. How does this quotation impact your perception of Nature?

Group reflection:

What natural spaces leave you feeling connected with God?

Blessed is the spot, and the house, and the place, and the city, and the heart, and the mountain, and the refuge, and the cave, and the valley, and the land, and the sea, and the island, and the meadow where mention of God hath been made, and His praise glorified.

- Bahá'u'lláh, Compilations, Baha'i Prayers

Exercise: Select a spot in Nature that inspires you as a group. Go there and pray together. Invite others to join you for a special devotional gathering.

Session 4: Nature as a Reflection of the Divine (continued)

Say: Nature in its essence is the embodiment of My Name, the Maker, the Creator. Its manifestations are diversified by varying causes, and in this diversity there are signs for men of discernment. Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world. It is a dispensation of Providence ordained by the Ordainer, the All-Wise. Were anyone to affirm that it is the Will of God as manifested in the world of being, no one should question this assertion. It is endowed with a power whose reality men of learning fail to grasp. Indeed a man of insight can perceive naught therein save the effulgent splendour of Our Name, the Creator. Say: This is an existence which knoweth no decay, and Nature itself is lost in bewilderment before its revelations, its compelling evidences and its effulgent glory which have encompassed the universe.

- Baha'u'llah, Tablets of Baha'u'llah, p. 141

Clarifying questions:

1. What did that mean? Please share your initial response to this quote with the group.

2. What is God's name? What is Baha'u'llah referring to when he says "My Name"

3. How is Nature the embodiment of God's name?

4. In the history of the Baha'i faith many historic figures received new names & titles from the Central Figures. These include Tahirih, The Pure One; The Central Figures also have titles as names: Abdu'l-Bahá – The Servant of The Glory; Bahá'u'lláh – The Glory of God, The Báb – The Gate...
How is naming something significant?

5. Share stories from your background / life / culture on significant naming processes

Group reflection:

1. What signs are there in Nature’s “diverse manifestations for wo/men of discernment?” Discuss and name a few.

2. Do you agree with these statements about the characteristics of nature? Discuss
 - a. Nature is an embodiment of God’s Name
 - b. Natural disasters are an expression of God’s Will
 - c. Nature is indestructible
 - d. Nature is here to serve people
 - e. Nature is imperfect and needs to be managed
 - f. Nature is a unified system
 - g. Nature cannot thrive without diversity
 - h. Nature is influenced by the laws of motion and change

3. If Nature is a reflection of the Divine, what implications does this have for our relationship to It?

Session 5: Group Activity

Review the previous quote and embark on a collective journey of discovery!

In what way do you feel Nature is a reflection of the Divine? Create a collaborative piece of something to express what you all feel – use any form of creative expression (film it and post it on YouTube)!

Ideas to consider:

- Invent / create a game,
- dance, craft – make a pot,
- street stenciling – clean / mud / moss
- mobile that hangs together, body painting
- T-shirt design / painting, mural
- poetry, photography / fire art
- paper mache, make & fly a kite
- Origami, macramé, candles etc.
- food art, cook and eat a good meal together

- art installation, street art
- flash mob
- make puppets
- glass art, window art
- chalk on sidewalk
- write & record a song
- crochet, knit, painting
- build a sand sculpture
- make impermanent land art
- bead work

Session 6: Society's Station and Responsibility

The materialists hold to the opinion that the world of nature is complete. The divine philosophers declare that the world of nature is incomplete. There is a wide difference between the two. The materialists call attention to the perfection of nature, the sun, moon and stars, the trees in their adornment, the whole earth and the sea -- even unimportant phenomena revealing the most perfect symmetry. The divine philosophers deny this seeming perfection and completeness in nature's kingdom, even though admitting the beauty of its scenes and aspects and acknowledging the irresistible cosmic forces which control the colossal suns and planets. They hold that while nature seems perfect, it is, nevertheless, imperfect because it has need of intelligence and education. In proof of this they say that man, though he be a very god in the realm of material creation, is himself in need of an educator. Man undeveloped by education is savage, animalistic, brutal. Laws and regulations, schools, colleges and universities have for their purpose the training of man and his uplift from the dark borderland of the animal kingdom...

- Abdu'l-Baha, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 329

... Education is of three kinds: material, human and spiritual. Material education is concerned with the progress and development of the body, through gaining its sustenance, its material comfort and ease. This education is common to animals and man.

Human education signifies civilization and progress -- that is to say, government, administration, charitable works, trades, arts and handicrafts, sciences, great inventions and discoveries and elaborate institutions, which are the activities essential to man as distinguished from the animal.

Divine education is that of the Kingdom of God: it consists in acquiring divine perfections, and this is true education; for in this state man becomes the focus of divine blessings, the manifestation of the words, "Let Us make man in Our image, and after Our likeness." [1] This is the goal of the world of humanity.

- Abdu'l-Baha, Some Answered Questions, p. 7

Clarifying questions:

1. What are your initial thoughts on these quotes?

2. What are the different types of education referred to by Abdu'l-Baha?

3. Are we entitled to alter nature for the development of society?

4. Is the prosperity of humans and Nature in direct conflict?

-
-
-
5. Humans have claimed a sense of entitlement to Nature, is that the direction in which we must go, or rather a sense of stewardship?
-
-
-

Group Discussion:

Which of the following activities are justifiable or necessary for human development?

- a) The mining of diamonds for wedding rings
- b) Deforestation of rain forests for meat production
- c) Cutting wood for fire
- d) Continual production of expendable tech-products (cell-phones, plasma screens, i-pads, computers)
- e) Flying to visit family overseas
- f) Trawling for fish to be able to have sea food in restaurants and generally readily available.
- g) Having the latest 3 speed tooth brush
- h) Regular braais with lots of meat so as to spend time with friends
- i) Having cheap and easily readily available food
- j) Using poisons to keep ants, rat, cockroach etc. out of my house
- k) Purchasing new clothes for new occasions

Session 7: Society's Station and Responsibility (continued)

Regarding the eating of animal flesh and abstinence therefrom ... he [man] is not in need of meat, nor is he obliged to eat it. Even without eating meat he would live with the utmost vigour and energy.... Truly, the killing of animals and the eating of their meat is somewhat contrary to pity and compassion, and if one can content oneself with cereals, fruit, oil and nuts, such as pistachios, almonds and so on, it would undoubtedly be better and more pleasing.

- 'Abdu'l-Bahá, from a Tablet translated from the Persian. (The Compilation of Compilations vol. I, p. 89)

Discussion:

1. Why do you think Abdu'l-Baha said this?

2. Are His words still relevant today?

3. Discuss the difference between a social teaching and a spiritual teaching. What would Abdu'l-Baha's discouragement of the killing and consumption of meat fall under? How does this compare to the prohibition of eating pork in the Jewish and Muslim religions.

-
-
-
-
4. Discuss how the world or our relationships with people, animals and Nature would be if we didn't eat meat.

 5. How is your life affected by meat – and how would it be affected if meat was completely removed from your diet?

 6. What are the spiritual impacts of eating or not eating meat? How does our diet impact our capacity for empathy?

 7. What are the impacts of meat production on the environment?

Group Activity:

1. Watch a movie on the processing of food, e.g. *Daily Bread*, *Food Inc*, *Fast Food Nation*.

Homework:

1. Find an interesting recipe that subsidises meat in your diet.
2. Consider learning more on a healthy nutritional vegetarian lifestyle and trial being vegetarian for a period of time (day/week/month/year), or for the remaining period of course. Speak to the group on how you felt over this time.
3. Read up about Meat-Free Mondays in South Africa.
(<http://meatfreemondays.com/>)

this



latent

Session 8: Society's Station and Responsibility (continued again)

'Abdu'l-Bahá indicates that man, "by reason of the ideal and heavenly force and manifest in him", [11] occupies a station that is "higher and nobler" than nature, that "man is ruler over nature's sphere and province"

Discussion:

1. Have a discussion on your sense of responsibility to the environment. Even though we are higher and nobler, how does this manifest in the way we treat the environment, should we be allowed to do what we want to the environment?
2. What does it mean to nobler and higher in this context?

Session 9: Moderation

Whoso cleaveth to justice, can, under no circumstances, transgress the limits of moderation. He discerneth the truth in all things, through the guidance of Him Who is the All-Seeing. The civilization, so often vaunted by the learned exponents of arts and sciences, will, if allowed to overleap the bounds of moderation, bring great evil upon men. Thus warneth you He Who is the All-Knowing. If carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation. Meditate on this, O people, and be not of them that wander distraught in the wilderness of error.

- Baha'u'llah, Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, p. 342

Clarifying Discussion Questions:

1. What is justice?

2. What is moderation?

Group Reflection:

1. Where in your life do you feel you transgress the limits of moderation?

2. What is the impact of your actions on those around you (e.g. people you live with, travel with, work with, community/city/society at large)?

3. In which way have the arts and science been a source of evil or goodness?

Personal Activity:

1. What it is that you would like to limit in your life?

2. Set a measurable goal that you will report back to your group on by the following week.

3. Write down one task for this week.

Session 10: Wrap Up and Way Forward

So that's it. This booklet has come to an end but one hope's it has encouraged us to think about the environment from a spiritual frame of reference and that it will inspire us to continue in our search to find out more about the link between the Baha'i faith and the environment and what we can do to take action now.

Final Activities:

- Host a Holy day activity that illustrates principles of this document
- complete group project selected in session 1.

To help us continue to develop this booklet please take some time in this session to discuss how it can be improved so that we can integrate it into the next edition.

I now assure thee, O servant of God, that, if thy mind become empty and pure from every mention and thought and thy heart attracted wholly to the Kingdom of God, forget all else besides God and come in communion with the Spirit of God, then the Holy Spirit will assist thee with a power which will enable thee to penetrate all things, and a Dazzling Spark which enlightens all sides, a Brilliant Flame in the zenith of the heavens, will teach thee that which thou dost not know of the facts of the universe and of the divine doctrine. Verily, I say unto thee, every soul which ariseth today to guide others to the path of safety and infuse in them the Spirit of Life, the Holy Spirit will inspire that soul with evidences, proofs and facts and the lights will shine upon it from the Kingdom of God. Do not forget what I have conveyed unto thee from the breath of the Spirit. Verily, it is the shining morning and the rosy dawn which will impart unto thee the lights, reveal the mysteries and make thee competent in science, and through it the pictures of the Supreme World will be printed in thy heart and the facts of the secrets of the Kingdom of God will shine before thee.

- 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í World Faith, p. 369