An autobiography of your relationship with the Earth

To start a journey into environmental ethics, begin with what you know. One of the best ways to become aware of what you already know about environmental ethics is to write an autobiography of your relationship with the earth. Ethics is a matter of connecting head and heart. But too often ethical reasoning becomes detached from our experience, emotions, feelings, and deepest if unacknowledged commitments. By telling the story of the history of your relationship with the earth, you can better reflect on why we value the natural world as we do. Many people describe their relationship with the Earth in spiritual or religious terms. Why might that be? Some people understand their relationship with the Earth as a source of meaning in their lives, and this might be spiritual, or it might not be. By reflecting on these deeper commitments of the heart, you can better refine our ethical reasoning about the environment.

**Step One:**

The great American environmentalist Aldo Leopold said in Sand County Almanac that "we can be ethical only in relation to something that we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in." In light of Leopold's comment, we invite you in the course of writing this autobiography to think of the earth in imaginative, personified terms. Has your relationship with the earth been a relationship with a friend or stranger? Or sometime friend and sometime stranger? Using Leopold's terminology, ask yourself the following questions. How do you "see" the earth? Is it beautiful or ugly or somewhere in between? What do you "feel" about the natural world? Do you feel joy or sorrow, pain or pleasure about animals or sunsets or white-capped waves? Do you "understand" the natural world and how its components are related? Or are its ways foreign? Do you "love" the earth - or do you feel alien from it? Do you care for its well-being, feel for its suffering, want to heal its wounds? Or does thinking about the earth in such terms seem inaccurate and far-fetched? And, to use the last of Leopold's terms, do you have "faith" in the earth? Perhaps this is a religious faith? Or perhaps this is faith in the sense that you count on the earth to provide well for your life? Or perhaps the earth is faithless, a fickle friend at best? The first step in writing the autobiography of your relationship with the earth is to jot down responses to these questions.

**Step Two:**

The next step is an exercise in gathering additional information out of which to shape your autobiography. In this step, you should jot down responses to the following questions: What is your most significant experience of nature? An experience undertaken in the course of work or recreation or other? Are there one or two experiences of an encounter with the natural world that stand out in memory? Close your eyes and remember the sights, smells, and feelings of being in a place where you felt intimate with nature, and then write up notes that explain why that place on that day allowed you to relate to the Earth in a special way.
How has your relationship with the earth been affected by your family history? By the experience of your parents, grandparents, and forebears? By how they came to own and to use property? Did your family go on camping trips? Or did your family hunt? Did your family teach you to care for the Earth and its creatures? Was your family vegetarian and, if so, why? Has an environmental crisis ever affected you or your family?

Has there been a book, movie, song, or course you have taken that has affected deeply how you think about the earth? Has religion played a role - positive or negative - in how you experience your relationship with the earth? Do you think of your relationship with the Earth in religious or spiritual terms? Why or why not? What have been some of the most significant economic, social, cultural, or political developments that have affected how you experience the earth?

**Step Three:**

With Steps One and Two complete, you now have the raw materials from which create the autobiography of your relationship with the earth. Think over the notes that you have jotted down. Reflect on what is most significant, on patterns, on what most moves you. Take special note of the question of motive: Why, more than anything else, have you come to value the earth as you do? There is no right answer to this question. You may value the earth a lot or not much at all. And how you value the earth may well change in the future. But the goal now is simply to tell your own story, whatever that is, of why you have come to value the earth as you do. If you have a lot of material from your experience, consider providing a couple of selections, snapshots, that illustrate the key features of your relationship with the Earth.

**Step Four:**

After finishing your autobiography, write an essay that addresses some (not all) of the following questions:

- What have you learned about how you have come to place a value on the natural world? Did anything surprise you in your story?
- What, more than anything else, is the basis for the value you put on the natural world? And what is the basis for how you view environmental issues?
- Do you think of your relationship with the Earth in religious or spiritual terms? Why or why not?
- Are you satisfied with the story of your relationship with the natural world? Are there aspects of your thinking that you would like to work on?
- Please read aloud to a friend or classmates a key passage from your autobiography.

The rubric I will use for grading these papers is found on the next page.
A grading rubric for reflection papers
Keith Douglass Warner OFM

An excellent paper will...
1. provide a concise summary and insightful analysis of some key issues that emerge from the readings, paying special especially the intersection between readings
2. articulate the implications of these issues as they pertain to your life, including your beliefs, desires, practice, vocation
3. drawing from your experience in critical analysis, describe your response to these issues, and their implications for your beliefs
4. present these in a coherent essay in which the flow of your description and argument is persuasive.
5. use clear, vivid and grammatically correct language.

A very good paper will
1. demonstrate engagement with the readings and provide analysis of the key issues that emerge from them
2. describe how these issues pertain to some aspect of your life and beliefs
3. describe your response to these issues and their implications for your beliefs
4. present these in an essay that has flow and is persuasive
5. use language that is clear and grammatically correct

A good paper will
1. describe at least one key idea from the readings
2. demonstrate the intersection of this/these idea(s) and your own beliefs
3. describe the possible responses to this idea/these ideas
4. present these in an essay that uses grammatically correct language

An acceptable paper will
1. describe an idea from the readings and your response to this in terms of your beliefs
2. present these in an essay that uses grammatically correct language

Without the elements described under “acceptable,” a paper will be unacceptable.