



Hartford International
UNIVERSITY FOR RELIGION & PEACE

Eco-Spirituality (WS-600)

A Hybrid Synchronous Course

Fall Semester 2026

SYLLABUS

HIU Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that the land where we learn, teach, dialogue, and pray, and where some of us are blessed to live, is sacred. We pay respect to the traditional custodians of the land where the city of Hartford is situated. We honor their memory and hope for their future. We aspire to uphold our responsibilities on this land and to work for peace in this world, in accordance with their example.

Instructor:

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Office Hours: By appointment (in person or Zoom)

Classroom: 77 Sherman Street, Room TBD, AND Zoom (link will be provided)

Meeting Dates and Times: Thursdays, 5:00-7:00pm

Course Format: Hybrid Synchronous and one hour each week Asynchronous

Course Description:

This course invites students into experiential immersion in the sacred wild as a central dimension of human spiritual and/or religious life. Focusing on themes of beauty, biophilia (and biophobia), and love, the course encompasses eco-philosophy, science, and a range of religious and non-religious spiritual voices relating to love of Earth and one's local place, along with weekly outdoor practices inviting students into practices of encounter and deepening relationship with creatures, places, and the divine. At the heart of this course is the relation between human environmental- and generational-justice questions and the destruction of beauty in late capitalism – along with examples and resources for sustaining hope, action, and the renewal of the beauty that sustains all that is.

Every child should have mud pies, grasshoppers, water bugs, tadpoles, frogs, mud turtles, elderberries, wild strawberries, acorns, chestnuts, trees to climb. Brooks to wade, water lilies, woodchucks, bats, bees, butterflies, various animals to pet, hayfields, pine-cones, rocks to roll, sand, snakes, huckleberries and hornets; and any child who has been deprived of these have been deprived of the best part of education.

— Luther Burbank

Course Objectives (*correlating assignment numbers noted after each*):

- Growing in awareness of one's own physical/biological, emotional, and spiritual connection to the natural world, from within one's religious and/or spiritual framework (#2, #3);
- Deepening empathic capacity for attunement to creature/s and elements of the world, as forms or revelations of divine presence (#2, #4);
- Contributing to the learning community and one another's insights (#1);
- Grounding in key texts and themes of eco-spirituality (#3).

Required Texts (*available through DTL – I hope*):

Abram, David. *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*. NY: Vintage Books, 2010.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, 2013.

Berry, Thomas. *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century*. NY: Columbia University Press, 2009.



Image: Doug Van Houten

Assignments and Means of Assessment:

- 1) Attendance and Participation in class throughout the semester. Presence in class and substantive engagement with readings, discussions, in-class exercises, and one another. **20% of grade.**
- 2) Weekly Practices. We will have a contemplative practice each week, in addition to (and in conversation with) the weekly readings. Because our synchronous time together comprises only two of our three weekly hours of class time, you will have **an hour of asynchronous class time each week in the form of a weekly spiritual practice to engage**. Some weeks this will consist of more or less daily engagement with a short practice, while in other weeks you will more likely spend the whole hour doing the practice just once (though of course you are welcome to repeat it again, if you enjoy it!). **You will be including your reflection on these practices in class and in the regular Discussion Boards.**

- 3) Discussion Boards (Initial Post + One Response): Please complete five of the seven weekly posts (800-1000 words each; D.Min. 1200 words), due on Tuesdays by 11:59pm in the weeks they are assigned (see calendar), plus a response to one classmate, due by Wednesday 11:59pm. Reflect on what stirs in you from the readings, including *at least one quote from each*, in relation to your context and in conversation with the week's practice. You may also include engagement/perspectives of the creature or other being to whom you are apprenticing yourself this semester (see below). In your response to a classmate, please honor their experience *and* use one new quote from one of the readings to take the reflection further. Rubric will be provided.
- You can choose the weeks you want to skip this assignment*; you are still expected to complete the readings and to participate in the practice for the week you skip blogging.
 - These entries will be assessed not on the *content* of any spiritual experience described (or its absence) but on your capacity to articulate your experience with the practices and your encounters with readings and classmates. Thoughtful, well-written entries showing honest engagement with your limits, shadows, and gifts as well as openness to growth and insight are my hope.
 - Each blog is worth 8% of the final grade (x 5 blogs) = **40% of grade**.

4) Apprenticeship: Invitation, Tracking, Inhabiting, Embodying (40% of grade)

- Discerning a Thou:** Listen for a creature or element or body of water or other non-human wild "Thou" inviting you into a relationship of the heart this semester. In most cases this will be someone living in or very close to your place. You might also be drawn to a creature extinct now, or one once important but now extirpated from your region. Throughout the course of the semester, you will be drawing close to this Thou and its perspectives. As you are discerning, ask the creature or element itself for permission to move into this relationship: would it welcome this connection, and you? Please schedule a conversation with the professor to take place by Week 5 of the semester to help focus and/or confirm your Thou. **5% of course grade**.
- Research:** This process entails two streams: cognitive and embodied/imaginative.

Embodied/Imaginative: Begin the process of becoming – on a heart level – this creature or element or body of water. Spend time with it: five minutes every morning, say, or deeper /longer immersions when possible. Track its movements and patterns, as you are able, or breathe in its photosynthesizing, or swim in it. See how deeply into the experience of this Thou your shared presence and imaginative empathy can take you. How does it feel to inhabit this being and its place in the world? What do you notice from this being's perspective? With what faculties does it/s/he perceive the world and engage with it? For what is it grateful? What aspects of the world become visible, audible, tangible, smellable, tastable through its senses and perceptive capacities?

Cognitive: Learn all you can about your creature, element, waterway, or other local wild Thou. What are its patterns and ways? Where and in what conditions does it most happily live and reproduce, feel safe or feel vulnerable? What does it eat, in which seasons, and what eats it (if relevant)? Where do its waters originate, or how do its mycorrhizae interact with those of other nearby trees? To what forms of harm or depletion or degradation is it subject in your location? How did or do the people indigenous to your region engage with it – what was its name, what medicinal or symbolic properties did it have, what ritual roles or mythic legends does it feature in? Conduct research using scholarly and non-scholarly sources to learn all you can and to guide your wise and respectful approach to the creature or element in real time. Create a bibliography (rubric

will be provided) of eight or more high-quality sources, at least four of them scholarly, at least two of them imaginative/soul-centered (D.Min: ten or more sources, at least five scholarly), **due in Week 10 of the semester: 10% of course grade.**

- c. **Council of All Beings:** Participate fully in the Council of All Beings ritual in Week 12 of the semester, drawing from your imaginative and scholarly research, as well as your mask-making and any other elements of puppetry, costume, gesture/dance, poetry or other related arts you have created through the semester. Let your soul-voice come to expression! 😊 **10% of course grade.**
- d. **Class Presentation:** Create a 20-minute presentation to be given in class in Week 13 or 14 of the semester. This presentation will show us what you learned in both streams of your research (ideally also inviting us to experience something of the experience or perspective of the being to whom you are apprenticing yourself). Rubric will be provided. See how creatively or interactively you can present what you have learned. Please submit your PowerPoint or Prezi via Canvas by the beginning of the class session at which you are presenting. **15% of course grade.**



Image: Doug Van Houten



CALENDAR

WEEK	TOPIC	READINGS OR DUE DATES (non-textbook readings are found in Canvas)
Week 1: September 3, 2026	Introduction to Course, Topic, and One Another	<i>No reading due in advance</i>
Week 2: September 10, 2026	Ecological and Religious Contexts <i>Maya Ward, Guest Presenter</i> <i>Practice for This Week:</i> Terra Divina OR Contemplative Drawing	<u>Readings for Week 2:</u> • Lane, "Introduction: Wilderness and Soul Work" • Abram, "Introduction" • Kimmerer, "An Offering" • Loorz, "Terra Divina"
Week 3: September 17, 2026	Sacredness of Earth <i>Practice for This Week:</i> Contemplative Writing	Blog 1 Due <u>Readings for Week 3:</u> • Schrei, "Animism Is Normative Consciousness" • Kimmerer, "Skywoman Falling" • Berry, "The Spirituality of the Earth"
Week 4: September 24, 2026	Dissolution: Extinctions, Tipping Points, and Lament <i>Practice for This Week:</i> Lament	Blog 2 Due <u>Readings for Week 4:</u> • Macy, "The Greening of the Self" • Berry, "Religion in the Ecozoic Era" • Kimmerer, "Windigo Footprints"

Week 5: October 1, 2026	Kin 1: Place and Its Creatures <i>Practice for This Week:</i> Forest Bathing 1: Mindful Walking	<u>Readings for Week 5:</u> • “Mindful Walking” handout • Kimmerer, “The Council of Pecans” • Berry, “An Ecologically Sensitive Spirituality,” and [part of] “The Sacred Universe” (pp. 152-59 <i>only</i>)
Week 6: October 8, 2026	Kin 2: Becoming Animal <i>Practice for This Week:</i> Forest Bathing 2: Gift Giving (to your Thou) and Receiving	Blog 3 Due <u>Readings for Week 6:</u> • Abram, “Wood and Stone” • Plotkin, “Introduction,” <i>Journey of Soul Initiation</i> • Kimmerer, “The Gift of Strawberries”
Week 7: October 15, 2026	Kin 3: Entanglement and Justice <i>Practice for This Week:</i> Forest Bathing 3: Land Acknowledgement	Blog 4 Due <u>Readings for Week 7:</u> • Kimmerer, “The Sacred and the Superfund” • Abram, “The Speech of Things”
Week 8: October 22, 2026	Mindful Eating <i>Practice for This Week:</i> Mindful Eating	Blog 5 Due <u>Readings for Week 8:</u> • Kimmerer, “The Honorable Harvest” (or this video) • Dahill, “Holy Shit”
Week 9: October 29, 2026	Kin 4: All Our Relations <i>Practice for This Week:</i> Forest Bathing 4	Blog 6 Due <u>Readings for Week 9:</u> • Abram, “Sleight of Hand,” 201-202, 206-207, 214-218, 221-27; • Abram, “The Real and Its Wonder” <i>or</i> Conclusion

Week 10: November 5, 2026	Eco-Arts <i>Practice for This Week:</i> Sabbath	Bibliography DUE <u>Readings for Week 10:</u> On Eco-Sabbath, TBD
Week 11: November 12, 2026	Sabbath <i>Practice for This Week:</i> Mask-Making and other forms of imaginative arts, channeling your creature or element	Blog 7 Due <u>Readings for Week 11:</u> - Kimmerer, “Allegiance to Gratitude” - Optional: Kimmerer, “Returning the Gift”
Week 12: November 19, 2026	Council of All Beings <i>Instructions for Preparation Will Be Provided</i>	
THANKSGIVING WEEK	<i>Practice for the Weeks of Break:</i> Gratitude	
Week 13: December 3, 2026	Presentations 1	<i>Class Presentations due this week or next!</i>
Week 14: December 10, 2026	Presentations 2	



COURSE POLICIES

On Communication:

I prefer e-mail communication over campus phone/voice mail, which I do not check regularly. I generally return e-mails within two business days, usually quicker; I may or may not be on-line on weekends, however. ***Please do not use email to discuss grades.***

On Attendance:

Your presence truly matters *every class session* to me and your classmates. This is a class that includes substantial experiential material in class. You can't easily make up a missed session, which is why class participation is a key part of the course assessment.

Details: One class may be missed for any reason (no excuse needed). Beginning with the second, the attendance/participation portion of your final grade will drop for each absence. I generally include Participation together with attendance. That is, everyone who shows up in person or with your camera on via Zoom will usually get full participation credit. Camera off in Zoom means I can't track your presence visually and will grade you for participation based on your actual engagement in the session. As is standard at HIU, "3 or more absences without a serious reason may result in automatic failure 'without explanation or permission'."

On Timely Completion of Assignments:

The blog assignment is geared around timely completion so that I can use your reflections to guide my preparation for the class session engaging a given set of readings. The blog grade drops a full letter grade for late submission – however, I am generally happy to give you an extension *without penalty* if you request it in advance of the weekly deadline.

The grades for the in-class presentations at the end of the semester are similarly tied to actually presenting on the date you agree to – but if something arises, we can almost always find ways to be flexible with no drop in grade. As per the Student Handbook, other assignments will be marked down 1/3 of a grade for every two days they are late.

On ChatGPT and Other Forms of Artificial Intelligence Software:

For purposes of your (and my) exploring this technology to see how it might work, I am open to conversation about any desire to use ChatGPT or some other form of generative artificial intelligence software this semester. These software programs can be useful research or editing tools if wisely used. HIU has not established a school-wide policy on AI use, as we weigh potential positive uses. However, AI use can also short-circuit the kinds of learning that come from reading texts and creating pieces of writing that express one's own spiritual/religious/theological voice.

Unless the class agrees collectively otherwise, I expect you to **refrain from using generative AI to allow you to avoid doing the readings**, and I expect that **the written work you turn in to blog posts, responses to classmates, and in your final presentation is fully your own voice**. *If the class agrees to allow limited use of AI software to (say) create a rough draft of a submission, you will be required to note that fact clearly, along with documenting the prompt/s you used to generate it.* You will not be penalized for doing so in that case. You are responsible for the selection of the quotes you are choosing from the readings and for the truthfulness and accuracy of submitted work, including all AI-generated assertions. It's still your work, for which you are being credited as (co-?) author – *and*, unless you document your AI use clearly, you are taking credit for work that is not your own.

HIU Plagiarism Policy:

Plagiarism, the failure to give proper credit for the words and ideas of another person, whether published or unpublished, is strictly prohibited. All written material submitted by students must be their own original work; where the words and ideas of others are used they must be acknowledged. Additionally, if students receive editorial help with their writing they should also acknowledge it appropriately.

Credit will not be given for work containing plagiarism, and plagiarism can lead to failure of a course. Faculty will report all instances of plagiarism to the Academic Dean. The Academic Dean will then collect documented details of the case and advance any recommendations for further action to the Academic Policy Committee. Through this process the situation will be reviewed and any additional penalties that may be warranted (up to and including expulsion from the school) will be determined.

For clarity as to what constitutes plagiarism, the following description is provided:

1. Word for word plagiarism:
 - a. the submission of another person's work as one's own;
 - b. the submission of a commercially prepared paper;
 - c. the submission of work from a source which is not acknowledged by a footnote or other specific reference in the paper itself;
 - d. the submission of any part of another person's work without proper use of quotation marks.
2. Plagiarism by paraphrase:
 - a. mere re-arrangement of another person's works and phrases does not make them your own and also constitutes plagiarism;
 - b. paraphrasing another person's words, ideas, and information without acknowledging the original source from which you took them is also plagiarism.
3. See Part II of Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses and Dissertations* (7th Edition, University of Chicago Press, 2007), for an explanation of the proper ways to acknowledge the work of others and to avoid plagiarism.
4. Reuse of your own work: Coursework submitted for credit in one course cannot be submitted for credit in another course. While technically not plagiarism, this type of infraction will be treated in the same manner as plagiarism and will be subject to the same penalties. If you are using small amounts of material from a previous submitted work, that work should be referenced appropriately. When a student is writing their final program requirement (paper, project or thesis) it may be appropriate, with their advisor's permission, to include portions of previously submitted materials if properly referenced.

Grading Scale:

- A (95-100) Demonstrates excellent mastery of the subject matter, a superior ability to articulate this, and provides helpful connections to daily life or contemporary issues. Exceeds expectations of the course.
- A- (90-94) Demonstrates mastery of the subject matter, ability to articulate this well, and makes connections to daily life or contemporary issues. Exceeds expectations of the course.
- B+(87-89) Demonstrates a very good understanding of the subject matter, able to articulate lessons learned in the assignment well. Meets expectations of the course.
- B (83-86) Demonstrates an understanding of the subject matter and the ability to articulate lessons learned. Meets expectations of the course.

- B-(80-82) Demonstrates an understanding of the material at hand, has some difficulty articulating this, and basic connection of the material to daily life or contemporary issues/life. Meets basic expectations for the course.
- C+(77-79) Demonstrates a basic comprehension of the subject matter, weak articulation and connections. Does not meet expectations for the course.
- C (70-76) Demonstrates a minimal comprehension of the subject matter and has difficulty making connections. Does not meet expectations of the course.
- F (below 70) Unable to meet the basic requirements of the course.

HIU Inclusive Language Policy: Inclusive language is encouraged when the writing is the student's own. In general, do not use the terms "man" or "mankind" for human beings; use instead "human beings," "humans," "persons," "people," "individuals," "humanity," "humankind," "figures," etc.

- Pronouns: generally, use the non-binary pronouns "they/them/their" when referring to people whose gender/gender preference is unknown or unrelated to the context, or when the preference is expressed as non-binary.
- Avoid using the third person singular masculine or feminine, unless you are certain that the person referred to is male or female or expresses as male or female exclusively. For example, revise a sentence like: "A student must ask questions if he expects to learn" to something like: "Students must ask questions if they expect to learn," or "A student must ask questions if they expect to learn."
- When a source you quote uses exclusive language, you may quote it as it appears, or substitute/add bracketed words, e.g., "[humanity]" – unless to do so would, in the judgment of the student, defeat the purpose of the quotation or violate the integrity of the student.
- Students who prefer to use male pronouns for the deity should consult with their professor/advisor on a case-by-case basis.

For all other questions of policy, see the HIU Student Handbook

(<https://www.hartfordinternational.edu/current-students/student-resources/student-handbook>) and/or the **HIU Academic Policies website** (<https://www.hartfordinternational.edu/current-students/academics/academic-policies>).

Note: This syllabus is subject to change. I will make every effort to alert you to changes promptly.



I look forward to this semester and to the growth and insight we will experience together