

# ACTIVISM AND RHETORIC

ROUTLEDGE

Theories and Contexts for  
Political Engagement

SECOND EDITION



EDITED BY JONGHWA LEE  
AND SETH KAHN

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**Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group

NEW YORK AND LONDON

Second edition published 2020  
by Routledge  
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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First edition published by Routledge 2010

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*  
A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN: 978-1-138-50170-6 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-50171-3 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-14453-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo  
by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India

## 16 Social Justice Activists, Environmental Fatigue, and the Restorative Practices of Doing “The Work That Reconnects”

*Madrone Kalil Schutten*

My education has informed my activism and my activism has primed much of my scholarly focus. I consider myself lucky to have a career that blends well with my non-academic life. I have spent my adulthood as an activist for a variety of social justice causes. When I was younger, I felt I was born in the wrong time and should have been a young adult during the late 1960s to 1970s, longing to be a part of the radical history that helped shape the modern United States. Given the recent rise of nationalism in American society, I no longer feel that I missed my time. Rather, I feel that now is a time of urgency perhaps more so than ever before. The United States has not owned its destructive and violent past acknowledging that we have significantly wounded the earth, humans, and “more-than-humans” (Abram). In our denial, we have forgotten our place in the web, our interconnections.

This chapter is not a typical chapter about environmental conflict or crisis in the way you may be used to reading. Rather, my goal is to illustrate an environmental ethic of care by highlighting communities that use alternative symbolics that work to shift our anti-earth paradigm. Specifically, this chapter looks at a group, Woman’s Way Red Lodge (WWRL), who provides a healing space for activists suffering from environmental fatigue due to the intersectional social justice issues facing us today. First, we explore WWRL and learn about the practice of magick, Hoop communities, and alternative symbolics. Next, we discuss burnout, environmental fatigue, and social dramas. Following this we look at the rhetorical practice of grief as an access point for The Work That Reconnects (Macy and Brown). The alternative symbolics discussed in this chapter require you to briefly suspend your disbelief as a “modern literate” and believe in magick (conscious will) because “magick works, sometimes intentionally, to overcome the trained incapacities of modern literates, incapacities that are central to the objectification, exploitation, and destruction of the natural world” (Schutten and Rogers 274).

### **Woman’s Way Red Lodge and Alternative Symbolics**

Woman’s Way Red Lodge states, “we work to learn how to co-create our lives in a deep body connection with nature and natural cycles. We remember

the wisdom of our ancestors, celebrate the beauty in what is, and honor our intuitive sensing" ([wwrl.org](http://wwrl.org)). WWRL strives to create a power-from-within model versus a power-over structure. I have been involved with WWRL for several years and served as a member of their board as a "lodgekeeper" from January 2013 to January 2016. I facilitate a group called Drumming into the Seasons, which honors the changing of the seasons on the Wheel of the Year (Winter Solstice, Spring Equinox, Summer Solstice, and Fall Equinox). I also facilitated a WWRL service project called Weaving the Hoop that Connects (Hoop). This group was an intergenerational women's group that met once a month for six years to explore the mysteries of the sacred feminine. WWRL takes seriously the wisdom of the sacred feminine and "woman's way" but is open to everyone who wishes to explore the feminine side of themselves and their earth walk. The work of WWRL advances the alternative symbolics and listening practices discussed in Salvador and Clarke and Schutten and Rogers. They also actively advance a re-membling of the sensuous world (see Abram). The purpose of WWRL is as follows:

Responding to an urgent call to restore balance, we build community and connection in safe and healing spaces for discovering, growing and sustaining the joyful warrior within each of us. We empower and recharge spiritual and social justice leaders from all walks of life to collaborate creatively so that we joyfully contribute to learning and sustaining a new paradigm for positive change in our larger communities.

([WWRL.org](http://WWRL.org))

Much like trees that need a deep taproot to draw their strength from, in order to advance and sustain social justice work, we must have a root structure that supports us. WWRL teaches this through creating healing spaces via community ritual events that honor multiple interconnections like the examples mentioned above. They also acknowledge and practice magick, intuitive knowing, earth walking, and other forms of sense-making that have not been accepted as "legitimate" by the dominant paradigm. These ways of knowing are often seen as intuitive rather than reasonable or factual and thus are typically not viewed as valid knowledge claims. Take for example the practice of magick which can be defined as the "exercising of conscious will in the manipulation of natural materials and symbols, and the attendant fostering of alternative ways of listening to natural entities" (Schutten and Rogers: 262). Magick fosters an alternative listening and/or alternative symbolic that embraces the senses. Starhawk ("Dreaming"), an environmental activist, Neo-Pagan leader, and self-identified witch, explains that "learning to work magic is mostly a process of learning to think-in-things, to experience concretely as well as to think abstractly" (27). WWRL encourages and props-up these forms of knowing as core, legitimate, and important. This retraining helps humans to "re-member immanence in all entities through exercising modes of sensation that have become dormant"

(Schutten and Rogers 267). In addition to the practice of magick as an alternative symbolic, Schutten and Rogers argue that

Neo-Pagan practices [like those of WWRL] hold substantial potential for the cultivation of a sustainable environmental ethic and provide a useful illustration of the kinds of practices that are consistent with a transhuman, "green" theory of communication, one that actively includes the natural as part of the communication process, deconstructs the symbolic (ideational)/material dualism, and fosters a sense of the interconnection between culture and nature, human and other-than-human. (279)

Ritual practices that foster grounding and a re-membering or connection to the senses provide one way that humans can re-connect to the natural world around them. This project of how we teach and nurture reconnection to the senses cannot be overlooked or underestimated if we are to shift our paradigm to view the world as interconnected.

WWRL as a non-profit embraces alternative ways of knowing that attempt to enliven the senses. WWRL functions as a part of a larger environmental justice movement. I have argued elsewhere that ecofeminism could be seen as a social movement merging with the Neo-Pagan Movement where witches are the primary activists (Schutten and Rogers). WWRL members do not necessarily identify as witches but they do operate from a strong ecofeminist/Neo-Pagan lens, even if they may not necessarily use these words to describe themselves. These alternative groups are important because they are doing the work of shifting ideologies from linear and mechanized epistemologies to cyclical and intrinsic ways of knowing. This is key because in order to respond to the current environmental crisis we need an alternative discourse. To this end, Bullis writes:

Treating the environment as an issue within a dominant discourse is inadequate because the dominant discourse inherently perpetuates the environmental destruction responsible for the current [environmental] crisis. Instead, alternative discourses not grounded in the current dominant discourse are essential for adequate transformation. (123)

The research I have been doing most of my career has been aimed at understanding what these alternative discourses look like "on the ground." WWRL is one example of an organization working to re-surface alternative ways of knowing, in turn countering dominant modes of thinking that reject cyclical understandings of nature. Their values merge with an important Neo-Pagan tenet arguing that it is important to resist "a dominant discourse about the nature of reality, which marginalizes certain kinds of spiritual and imaginative experiences as irrational and irrelevant" (Magliocco 197). This alternative



symbolic put forth by WWRL is actively being cultivated by members and has the potential to deepen our awareness of how to nurture, heal, and thrive in community while honoring the earth.

### **Burnout, Environmental Fatigue, and Social Dramas**

Given our current environmental crisis, many organizations and community partnerships are needed in order to create meaningful change toward a sustainable future. Environmental communication scholarship has illustrated that Westernized humans do not see themselves as part of nature (Schutten "Chewing" Carabaugh). Thus, many environmental scholars have argued for a dialogue with nature where nature has a voice as a participant and is not simply an object used in the construction of both symbolic and material reality (e.g., Bullis; Burford and Schutten; Milstein; Peterson et al.; Rogers). Because of this dominant view, it is crucial to help humans see that they are interconnected and that nature is a participant in their realities. People need to feel connected to their environment and to have a "sense of place." This is a challenge as technology moves us farther away from natural rhythms.

Our access to instant information has propelled some social movements farther but it can also create a feeling of overload. Evces writes that burnout is a "persistent feeling of exhaustion, cynicism and inefficacy resulting from chronic exposure to work-related stress" (18). Historically, this term referred to drug abuse or overwork at one's job. However, in today's political climate, many people claim activism as a second or third job, becoming increasingly more involved in democratic processes as a part of an informed and active citizenry. As such, they are struggling to manage excessive exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy or a lack of power. Compassion fatigue is an effect of burnout and refers to a form of desensitization where people have exercised their compassion in so many directions that they become fatigued (Patel). This fatalist exhaustion can be caused by news media and also "too many social crises occurring in one year, distance or relevance of issues, unsolved humanitarian issues, or personal traits and values of audience members" (Patel 4).

With each new environmental shock, we experience increased "social drama" (Turner). Turner discusses four phases of social dramas: breach, crisis, redress, and either reintegration or recognition of schism. We are living in a time where there is continued breach after breach and crisis after crisis with little time to complete or begin processing the third and fourth stages of the drama. Turner writes, "Social dramas are in large measure political processes, that is, they involve competition for scarce ends—power, dignity, prestige, honor, purity—by particular means and by the utilization of resources that are also scarce—goods, territory, money, men and women" (71–72). Dramas like the destruction caused by hurricanes Harvey, Irma, Jose, Maria, the pulling out of the Paris Agreement, the raging fires in California, Oregon, Montana,

and much of the west all occupied headlines during the summer and early fall of 2017. Social dramas involving pipelines (Dakota Access, etc.) and mines (Boundary Waters in MN), an Environmental Protection Agency director that was decidedly pro-corporation, shrinking habitats, bark beetles destroying forests due to drought, increased flooding, increased temperatures, more or less moisture, "red tides," "green slime," and so forth merged with political dramas. These political dramas include, but are not limited to, struggles over health care reform, tax reform, immigration (and resulting detention camps for children), international instability (Niger, North Korea, just to name a couple), and open discrimination against race, gender, sexuality, and climate refugees. All of these dramas created breaches and crises that have kept activists busy lobbying Congress, creating rallies/marches, and doing whatever they can to have some control in shaping futures. Just this small list is illustrative of the environmental/political dramas or breaches of the norm, that have created burnout and compassion fatigue. In 2013, *The New York Times* ran a piece on "environmental warning fatigue." Today, environmental warning fatigue has transitioned into more of a general constant environmental issues fatigue. No longer is the fatigue about warnings of what might happen but an "on the ground" reality with activists responding to continual anti-environmental policy changes and acknowledging finite time for increased actions to mitigate harms. It is as if every aspect of life is being challenged and nowhere is this more obvious than with the consequences of human-caused climate change. In addition to Turner's phases, Burke writes that rhetoric is a "strategy for encompassing a situation" (109). So, rather than just adding up all the repeated breaches and crises of repeated social dramas, I offer the Hoop (and circles like it) as an alternative strategy embedded in alternative symbolics.

Our historical moment of environmental compassion fatigue requires sacred spaces to "fill up" and take care of ourselves so we can continue to do the important work of "co-creating a new paradigm for positive change in our communities" (wwrl.org). This is the purpose of WWRL. As such, the vision for the Social Justice Hoop (SJ Hoop) is to hold space for activists, generators, and change agents so they can more fully, and in a healthy space, recharge in order to continue this important paradigm-shifting work. Communities like this articulate another moment in the Turner schema that does not necessarily reside in the public sphere. Activists who participate in the Hoop have an opportunity to regenerate in private and then, as activists with "bodies on the line," are social movement actors agitating for change within public spheres. Reading Turner this way is useful because even though Hoops are not public, they directly inform actions in the public sphere. I have long been interested in the public and private issues facing movements noting that "using a culturalist lens, public spheres need not be the only arenas for contestation. Actually-existing democracies include multiple public spheres such as emergent subaltern counterpublics" (Schutten, "Coming" 22).



In this way, the WWRL Hoops function as a subaltern counterpublic of larger social movements (e.g., environmental). They may advertise publicly for members, but at some point, most Hoops shift to meeting in private spaces. Thus, when we think of Turner's schema for social drama, we must address the relationship between public and private spheres for social movement change. Turner defined the first stage of a drama as manifesting itself as "a breach of a norm, the infraction of a rule of morality, law, custom, or etiquette in some public arena" (70). His schema referred to "some public arena"; however, we do not always publicly see the rhetoric of dissent within "official" public spheres (Fraser). Critics of the culturalist perspective (more private) of social movements contend that culturalist movements are apolitical (Buechler). Elsewhere I have argued "this creates a false dichotomy between a movement that is political and a movement that is cultural when movements can be comprised of both aspects" (Schutten, "Coming" 3). I see more value in looking at movements from both perspectives because the cultural perspective allows us to understand aspects that may be missed by using only a political lens. For example, using only a political lens would not highlight or focus on the energy activists' gain in the private sphere (Hoops). Activists in the Social Justice Hoop value the importance of gathering to create a safe space through the experience of magick and the power of sitting together in a circle to tell our stories, to release the pain and sorrow of what does not serve us, and to rise again with renewed energy to sustain the multiple movements of which we are participants. Movements today are not bounded but rather are fluid, intersectional, and fragmented. As a result, the activist strategies to sustain action for multiple campaigns need to take into account ways to cope with extreme fatigue.

### Doing "The Work That Reconnects"

The practices of self-care in order to do the important environmental social justice work that this moment demands are not typical and not mainstream. Rather, these rhetorical practices fall into performatives and co-creative rituals that bring communities together in non-traditional ways. The practices of WWRL and Hoops could be seen as part of the larger project of what Joanna Macy and Molly Brown refer to as "The Work That Reconnects" (64-65). "The central purpose of the Work That Reconnects is to bring people into new relationship with their world, to empower them to take part in the Great Turning, and to reclaim their lives from corporate rule" (Macy and Brown 65). The Work That Reconnects walks a metaphoric spiral and has four consecutive stages: "Coming from Gratitude, Honoring Our Pain for the World, Seeing with New Eyes and Going Forth" (Macy and Brown 67). *Gratitude* helps people to come back to their "source" or center and to express our love for life on earth, which helps us "be more fully present and grounded for acknowledging the pain we carry for our world" (67). When we *honor our pain*

we learn to "suffer with" and this pain that had "isolated us in private anguish now opens outward and delivers us into the wider reaches of our collective existence" (67) so we can move closer to healing and shifting our paradigm. These first two stages help us move to the third stage where we *see with new eyes* and feel a growing sense of interconnection to past and future generations and other species (Macy and Brown). Finally, we *go forth* into the actions that call us as we apply our new understandings to the social change we are working toward (Macy and Brown). The spiral begins again and again, and the sequence could repeat within any phase (Macy and Brown). For example, the Seeing with New Eyes step "may reveal to us with greater clarity the horrors being inflicted on the Earth community, bringing up fresh grief and outrage. We may need to honor that pain with a practice or ritual before moving on" (Macy and Brown 68). These stages are part of what WWRL as an organization and the Social Justice Hoop articulates in their projects. Moreover, The Work That Reconnects nurtures and promotes what Emily Plec defines as internatural communication or "the exchange of intentional energy between humans and other animals as well as communication among animals and other forms of life" (6). The SJ Hoop and WWRL do the work of validating alternative symbolics (e.g., intentional energy) and in turn help to shift human ways of *interaction with* and *listening to* the natural world. Put another way, Rogers states, "we need to learn how to listen in the 'wrong' ways" (255). He goes on to write that the aim is "not to escape symbolism, but to promote and nurture different modes of symbolic activity" (268). Now let's turn for a moment and explore what a Hoop's structure might look like in creating new models for symbolic activity.

In all examples, the process of a Hoop or any circle is co-creative. This understanding allows for spontaneity and "spirit" to influence the outcome of the circle. Hoops are not rigidly organized or held to what was planned prior to the actual gathering. Members begin a gathering by acknowledging the elements (air, fire, water, earth) and sitting together in a circle. Circle work is a powerful form of joining-with that creates a synergistic feeling and energy (Macy and Brown). WWRL circles embrace both new and powerful vernaculars that illustrate human to more-than-human connections or pain and they embrace emotive sharing about these connections with the natural world. I argue that the ritual forms of healing in Hoops come from alternative symbolics or propping up alternative ways of understanding the natural world that are not on the "rational" end of the dualism but fall more on the "intuitive" side. In circle, we learn to trust our body wisdoms as legitimate voices in turn honoring our abilities to listen to natural rhythms and callings (intuitive knowing).

Of course, humans are not going to suddenly embrace alternative symbolic activities. As such, there are ceremonial practices that circles like the Hoop create to help participants access new ways of seeing the world and enlivening our senses. At the first SJ Hoops we discussed a general ritual structure that would have a round for shared releasing, a round for filling up, reclaiming, healing

and so forth, and finally end with a round of raising energy. This last round was conceived to shift one's self out of continued exhaustion and worry for the world into the place of a joy-filled warrior. These rounds "work" the spiral and help members continue their sustained activism by providing a sacred space to heal wounds from sustained political action.

I have two brief examples I would like to focus on as restorative co-creative ritual/ceremony. These examples highlight practices that bring humans more into their body wisdoms in turn strengthening their resolve as activists and shifting how they see themselves in the web of life. The stories I share here are mine but are characteristic of experiences that may be co-created in circles like the WWRL Social Justice Hoop. Over the years, I have heard similar stories from other WWRL members that speak to these circles as examples of enlivening the senses and creating alternative symbolics.

WWRL offers me spaces to practice and to re-learn how to *think about* and to *feel into* the earth and its beings as having intrinsic worth, as interconnected with humans (an ecofeminist tenet). For example, I remember early in my MA graduate career (1997ish) learning about ecofeminism and the phrase "rape of the earth" to describe the powerover nature we as a society continue to wield. To many, including my uncle who looked at me like I was ridiculous for using this phrasing, this idea would be considered over the top or too strong of a statement, a linguistic description that should be reserved for humans only. WWRL language, not only what is spoken about, but the way the language is used, re-constitutes the world around us as inclusive of environmental realities both human and more-than-human. Groups like WWRL that are co-creating vernacular that reflects and embodies the natural world are doing part of The Work That Reconnects. I argue that as symbol-using beings, this re-languaging starts the process of recognizing interconnection in order to move us to a place where there "are no words" to describe a variety of phenomenological experiences.

More recently, the WWRL Morning Circle members held space (offered support) as I shed tears learning of the death of Tilikum, a captive SeaWorld orca who died after living almost all of his life in a concrete prison (see Buford and Schutten for more on orca captives). I had been working for two years writing about captive classes and analyzing the documentary *Blackfish*. Because of this, I felt a strong release and awareness of the freedom death would bring him. My emotion caught me off guard but someone from the circle pointed out that it would be more bizarre for me to *not* feel grief after such a sustained interconnection to his reality. Our connections to the animate world are real if we allow them to seep into our consciousness. These types of perspectives are validated and shared in a SJ Hoop where we re-language our relationship to the earth and this type of sharing is status quo, to be expected, and understood versus dismissed as coincidence, cute, or overly emotional. Together, members of Hoops co-create a new normal that cultivates an "internatural communication" (Plec), which is important for further environmental

stewardship ethics. Stories of internatural communication are validated and recognized in these circles. Speaking about connection to more-than-humans is not dismissed as a "hippy dippy tree hugging" experience but as legitimate communication.

In the example above, I discussed how Hoops and WWRL embrace vernaculars that highlight interconnection illustrating how global pains of the world or specific entities affect consciousness and ways of being. Next, I would like to consider practices of releasing grief. Grief is not an emotion that many feel comfortable discussing or expressing. As a rhetorical practice, grief about environmental injustice is an everyday reality and thus a key point for generating action and change. As a practice, Hoop members learn that grieving is both an individual and collective process. We start by allowing tears whenever they flow without explanation or apology. Practicing expression of grief in these circles has given me permission to extend my heartache to all living entities, including the perceived pains of the earth without feeling strange or odd for tuning into the more-than-human.

My next example of releasing the global pain of the world is achieved by literally screaming. In their book *Trauma Stewardship*, Laura van Dernoot Lipsky and Connie Burk write that trauma stewardship "demands that we embrace a paradox: If we are truly to know joy, we cannot afford to shut down our experience of pain. We know that there have been many attempts to hide the evidence of suffering in the world" (15). In this way, it is clear that honoring pain is a radical action performed by the SJ Hoop. Awareness of pain is important for an environmental ethic of care to flourish where humans see their actions as cyclical and affecting themselves and other entities. We live in a world with "systemic oppression" or institutionalized formal and informal oppressions (Lipsky and Burk). As such, it is not startling that emotions of grief have an omnipotent presence for activists.

The first time I tried to "scream out" my pain, the pain of others, the pain of the earth, I could not get anything to come out. Standing in my power trying to scream was no easy task. I asked for help from the circle and another woman stood behind me with her arms hugging me around my hips supporting me as I tried to work up the courage to scream. I could not believe how hard this was. I was in a safe space, outside by a river, on several acres of land, with no one near me to fear mistaking my scream as a cry for help (although it could be interpreted this way regardless). Finally, I got three screams out and felt a huge relief. I was able to shift some anger and grief inside me in order to be more fully present for both my own continued growth and for others. Interestingly, trying this in a car or into a pillow did not have the same feeling as releasing with nature as witness.

At another circle I had the opportunity to grieve with community. During this experience, I realized the power of releasing through group screaming, crying, moaning, yelling, and movement. Grieving in a group takes courage and trust to not be stuck in your rational or ego mind worrying about what

others think. Even writing this here takes courage as sharing about personal experiences in a piece of academic writing is not the norm. In this particular circle we first shared some of what we were grieving for ourselves, others, the earth itself, the beings on the earth, and so forth. It was wisely suggested that we not to compare our grief to others. Next, we released vocally while a drumbeat played on in the background as if this sound was helping us to push out the pain. The drumming was constant and just like our heartbeats gave us the strength to keep walking forward into the darkness, into our deep knowing of the pains in the world. It felt like a birth with laboring and exhaustion. It was a re-birthing. Others echoed my screaming, my tears were witnessed and mirrored, and being keenly aware that these opportunities for release are rare, we were encouraged to let it all go. We were in a liminal (Turner) ritual experience, a time out of time. Turner writes that during a liminal ritual moment "the cognitive schemata that give sense and order to everyday life no longer apply, but are, as it were, suspended—in ritual symbolism" (84). Because we were in a safe space, what made "sense" in the everyday mundane world gave way to the new sense of tuning into our pains in order to shift. Turner also writes that achieving a state of ritual liminality is "in most cultures regenerative" (84). This regeneration process is hard to articulate because with the example I have shared, words have no place. The experience is about energy, emotion, synergy, and a whole host of phenomena that are not best articulated with words but rather through experience. Suffice to say that this rhetorical practice of grieving as activist work offers an opportunity to wail for the world, to honor this pain. Just like we might send prayers to the wombs of the world (a WWRL Red Tent activity), we can send energy through our screams, our tears, and our commitment to the work of releasing this pain so we can move forward as social justice warriors fighting injustice. What happened in this circle was nothing short of magick, my conscious will to change my being by releasing grief, and in turn, healing. Every healing we do individually contributes to healing the cellular memories of the collective, human and more-than-human, and the earth.

### **Going Forth**

WWRL and circle communities like the Social Justice Hoop help us to See with New Eyes and Go Forth as activists championing holistic change free from systemic oppression. Lipsky and Burk write:

Oppression plays a leading role in creating and maintaining systems that perpetuate suffering and trauma for all sentient beings, as well as the planet we share. The more we can understand this relationship, the better our insights into the ways that trauma affects us individually and collectively around the globe. (28)

There is much work to be done to gain insight into these traumas. The information we need to heal from trauma and environmental fatigue will not be found by reading books and looking up statistics about social justice crimes against the earth and humanity but it can be found in our conviviality to the forests, oceans, deserts, and so on. We must re-member where we came from without going back to some pre-industrial way of life. Put another way, when it comes to earthly ways of knowing, rational paradigms do not provide the full story. These epistemologies ignore the intuitive parts of our being, the parts needed to cultivate an internatural communication.

In this time of post-truth, it feels ironic to be advocating alternative symbolics that ask us to believe in what has been dismissed as "illegitimate" ways of knowing. But perhaps this time it works to the activists' advantage. If everything is deconstructed into nothingness, if there is no one Truth, but multiple truths, and fact has been eroded, perhaps there is room for new ways of seeing and going forth to surface. After all, this is a practice Hoop members engage in regularly. They listen to people when they have an intuition about something and do not dismiss these alternative symbolics and/or signs as untruths even when they have not had the same experience. In this way, there are multiple truths or interpretations of the natural, each unique to those who are open to listening. Our interactions with the environment and the natural world are dependent on our ability to recreate balance. To this end, Starhawk "Fifth" writes:

All people, all living things, are part of the earth life, and so are sacred. No one of us stands higher or lower than any other. Only justice can assure balance; only ecological balance can sustain freedom. Only in freedom can that fifth sacred thing we call spirit flourish in its full diversity.

(Forward)

In the SJ Hoop these words are prescriptive. The practices and actions of this circle actively engage in restorative exercises that are a part of The Work That Reconnects. These activists link the ecological stability of the earth with freedom from systemic oppressions. Together, by honoring pain and co-creating vernaculars that support internatural communication, they are working toward a new environmental ethic of care.

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