



# EXPLORATION

## Circle of Life

### Readings



Circles of motion. / Like eagle that Sunday morning / Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky / In wind, swept our hearts clean / With sacred wings. Joy Harjo

Photo by Rachel McDermott on Unsplash

#### 1. *Communion Circle*

by Rev. Mark Belletini

The earth. One planet. Round, global, so that when you trace its shape with your finger, you end up where you started. It's one. It's whole. All the dotted lines we draw on our maps of this globe are just that, dotted lines. They smear easily. Oceans can be crossed. Even the desert can be crossed. The grain that grows on one side of the border tastes just as good as the grain on the other side. Moreover, bread made from rice is just as nourishing to body and spirit as bread made from corn, or spelt or teff or wheat or barley. There is no superior land, no chosen site, no divine destiny falling on any one nation who draws those dotted lines just so. There is only one earth we all share, we, the living, with all else that lives and does not live. Everything, everything, for good or ill, is part of the shared whole: sky, earth, song, words and now, this silence.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/poetry/communion-circle>

#### 2. *Children Widen the Circle*

by Rev. Gary Kowalski

Children widen the circle of our being in ways that are limitless.

Every baby that's born connects us to our history, our own parents, grandparents and unknown forbears who brought new life to the world in each successive generation.

Every baby that's born links us to the

future, to a world yet to come that belongs to our descendants and that we hold in trust for our posterity whom we will never know.

Each child connects us to nature, to the innocence and exuberance of a world always hatching newborns: kittens and pups and lambs and babes.

Each child reminds us of the kinship we share with people of other lands and races who love their young as purely and tenderly as we do.

Each child connects us to the universe, to the holy mysteries of birth and death and becoming from which we all emerge.

Children widen the circle of our being in ways that are limitless.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/children-widen>

#### 3. *Origins* by Rev. Peter Friedrichs

What is the history of any thing? / This apple, let's say, that my grandson just picked / as he sits on my shoulders, / feet dangling like parentheses / around my heart? /

Its father, a random visitor / guided to mother flower by / Ancient Knowledge, / from a teeming hive of workers / intent on serving their queen, / That was brought to this orchard / by an itinerant keeper who, in spring, / drove a thousand coffee-fueled miles / in under a month, in a truck / badly in need of a muffler, / all the while reliving the / fight he had with his wife / just before he left home, / wishing his cell phone had service.

Whose juice, that drips in my hair / From the boy's first taste of autumn, / mere moments ago flowed through / the veins of this tree, / Which was planted decades before / by a man with three sons, / One of whom he disowned / over what now, in hindsight, / seems trivial.

Not to mention the rain that fell this

summer, / broadcast in sheets of lightning and thunder / that woke the baby who lives / in a moldy basement apartment / on the night before her father's / first day of work in more than a year, / when he desperately needed the sleep.

And the sun whose rays / crossed 93 million miles in under ten minutes / to fall on these leaves / and the face of my neighbor / Who, I learned just last week, / has skin cancer.

This child on my shoulders, / I hope, will remember me, / and this day, / so full of sweetness and laughter, / And the simple pleasure of fruit.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/poetry/origins>

#### 4. *Peony Hugging* by Gunilla Norris

Peony hugging, I think to myself as I move from clump to clump. Each place I become more aware of the hard and heavy buds. Their weight has already begun to bend the stems toward the ground. In a few days the blossoms will open, and they will be huge. The whole plant will groan.

I think of human blossoming and how much it, too, needs to be staked and supported. We need a circle of friends to hold us if we are going to open like peony buds and let out the beauty that is in us.

How many of us have keeled over just in the time of blooming for lack of support and encouragement? How many of us have not dared to reveal our true selves because we fear being cut, we fear the dying afterward? How many of us say to life, "This is a mistake. I can't do it. It takes more than I've got?"

It does take everything we've got. I walk around the bed. It is a cradle. The plants reach my navel now. Some have only one bud. Some have two, and some have as many as six blossoms. Their



peony natures have said ‘yes’ and have opened. The petals radiate out — white with pink — pink with white. I want to find the nature in me that will say “yes” like this. And I want to support others in their blooming ...to be a stake, a circle of twine, an encouragement, a witness.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/16132>

## 5. *The Root of All Trouble*

by Joanna Macy

“I am Woompoo Pigeon. I lived in the last pockets of rainforests. I call my song through the giant trees and the cool green light. But I no longer get a reply. Where are my kind? Where have they gone? I hear only the echo of my own call.”

“I am Mountain. I am ancient, strong, and solid, built to endure. But now I am being dynamited and mined, my forest skin is ripped off me, my topsoil washed away, my streams and rivers choked.”

One upstart species was at the root of all this trouble—its representatives had better come and hear this council. So, we took turns, a few at a time, putting down our masks and moving to the center of the circle, as humans. There we sat facing outwards, forced to listen only. No chance to divert ourselves with explanations or excuses or analyses of economic necessities.

When I sat for a spell in the center, a human in the presence of other life-forms, I felt stripped. I wanted to protest. ‘I’m different from the loggers and miners, the multinational CEOs and the consumers they fatten on,’ I wanted to say. ‘I am a sensitive, caring human; I meditate and lead workshops and recycle.’

...The deep ecology that had so lured me with its affirmation of my interconnectedness with other species

now forced me to acknowledge my embeddedness in my own. ...Shared accountability sank in, leaching away any sense of moral immunity.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/11829>

## 6. *The Beginning is not the Beginning*

by Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland

As we consider the circle of life, it is important to remember that the beginning is not the beginning and the end is not the end. Our life does not work that way. We are born into the ongoing stream of life. A river of life flows through us, and we flow through that river.

The beginning is not the beginning. We are born into the middle of a story, into the ongoing cycle of life. Beloved parents, Beloved grandparents. Beloveds—flowing backward in time for generations. Even with our birth, there is memory of loss by those who love us. They bring forward with them all of that and it becomes part of our story, even if we do not realize it. It is in this way that so much that came before is alive in us. And all of this and so much more will become our legacy when the end that is not the end comes.

Our life is never our life alone. We share it with the beloveds: parents and grandparents, brothers and sisters, friends and lovers, partners with whom we share our life, our children and grandchildren, valued friends, coworkers and neighbors and others who are all part of the unfolding of our story in time.

The beginning is not the beginning. Rather it is a time of momentary pause when we were welcomed into the world, invited into the story to create our part with no idea of what part we would play over a lifetime of living and loving and laughing and losing.

Source: Touchstones

## 7. *In Between*

by Rev. Victoria Safford

One afternoon some time ago I brought my little baby out to visit a very, very old neighbor who was dying that year, quietly and gracefully, in her

gracious home. We were having a little birthday party for her, with sherry and cake and a few friends gathered round her bed. To free a hand to cut the cake, I put my baby down right on the bed, right up on the pillow—and there was a sudden hush in the room, for we were caught off guard, beholding.

It was a startling sight. There in the late afternoon light were two people side by side, two human merely beings. Neither one could walk, neither one could speak, not in a language you could understand, both utterly dependent on the rest of us bustling around, masquerading as immortals.

There they were: a plump one, apple-cheeked, a cherry tomato of a babe, smiling; and a silver-thin one, hollow-eyed, translucent, shining, smiling. ...These two were closer to the threshold, the edge of the great mystery, than any of us had been for a long time or would be for a while.

...Cake in hand, and napkins, knife, glasses, a crystal carafe a century old, we paused there on the thresholds of our own momentary lives. Then, “What shall we sing?” said someone, to the silence, to the sunlight on the covers, to the stars. It was only a question, then, as now, years later. What on earth shall we sing?

Source: *Walking Toward Morning* by Victoria Safford

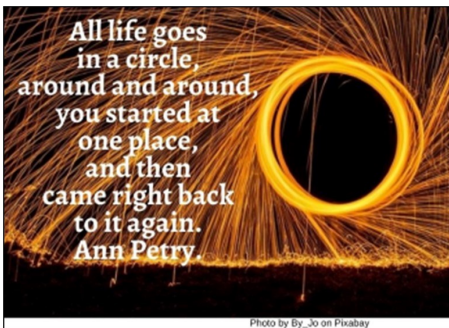
# Wisdom Story

## *Creation from the Dreamtime*

*Adapted from an Aboriginal creation story from Australia.*

When the earth was new-born, it was plain and without any features or life. There were no rivers or mountains, no trees, no grasses, only flat red earth as far as the eye could see—except that there were no eyes for seeing. Waking time and sleeping time were the same. There were only hollows on the surface of the Earth which, one day, would become waterholes. Around the waterholes were the ingredients of life.

Underneath the crust of the earth were the stars and the sky, the sun and the moon, as well as all the forms of



life, all sleeping. All the tiniest details of life were present, yet not awake or alive: the head feathers of a cockatoo, the thump of a kangaroo's tail, the gleam of an insect's wing, the rustle of eucalyptus leaves in the wind.

A time came when time itself split apart and sleeping time separated from waking time. This moment was called the Dreamtime. At this moment everything started to burst into life.

The sun rose through the surface of the Earth and shone warm rays onto the hollows, melting ice which became waterholes. Under each waterhole lay an Ancestor, an ancient man or woman who had been asleep through the ages. The sun filled the bodies of each Ancestor with light and life, and the Ancestors began to give birth to children. Their children were all the living things of the world, from the tiniest grub wriggling on a leaf to the broadest-winged eagle soaring in the blue sky.

Rising from the waterholes, the Ancestors stood up with mud falling from their bodies. As the mud slipped away, the sun opened the Ancestors' eyelids. They saw the creatures they had made from their own bodies. Each Ancestor gazed at their creation in pride and wonderment. Each Ancestor sang out with joy: "I am!" One Ancestor sang "I am kangaroo!" Another sang "I am Cockatoo!" The next sang "I am Honey-Ant!" and the next sang "I am Lizard!"

As they sang, naming their own creations, they began to walk. Their footsteps and their music became one, calling all living things into being and weaving them into life with song. The ancestors sang their way all around the world. They sang the rivers to the valleys and the sand into dunes, the trees into leaf and the mountains to rise above the plain. As they walked, they left a

trail of music.

Then they were exhausted. They had shown all living things how to live, and they returned into the Earth itself to sleep. We don't see them, but they are still present in every sacred place, and their music still hums through the world. In honor of their Ancestors, the Aborigines still go Walkabout, retracing the steps and singing the songs, connecting this waking time to the Dreamtime.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/sing/session1/220266.shtml>

## Snippets

"A classic Zen exercise is the *ensō*, the circle hand-drawn in a single fluid brushstroke. It is close to perfect, but never there. If perfection is what you want, you can produce it anytime by using a compass or a computer, but the *ensō* defies such mechanistic precision; indeed, it is often incomplete, left slightly open as though in invitation to everything beyond it. ... A perfect circle is uninteresting, a closed system containing nothing, while an imperfect one vibrates with warmth. It invites us into the moment of its creation. ... It is open, human, fallible—an expression, that is, of soul." *Lesley Hazleton*

"Gardeners instinctively know that flowers and plants are a continuum and that the wheel of garden history will always be coming full circle. One lifetime is never enough to accomplish one's horticultural goals. If a garden is a site for the imagination, how can we be very far from the beginning?" *Francis Cabot*

"Generally, it appears the case that, when faced with all life's problems, the baby, ... wants to cry about everything, the child wants to question everything, the teenager wants to rebel against everything, the young adult wants to solve everything, the middle-aged adult wants to protect everything, and the elder wants to accept everything." *Criss Jami*

"There are few times when we know with absolute certainty [that] we are go-

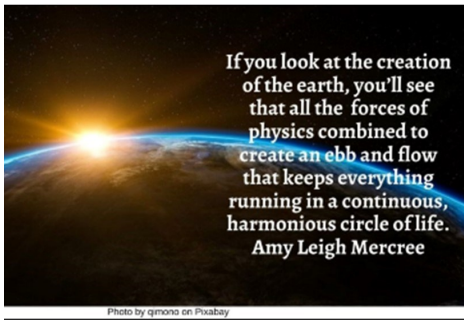
ing to do something for the last time. Life has a way of moving in circles, bringing us back to places we didn't expect and taking us away from those we do. There are too many times we don't pay close enough attention, and moments are lost in our assumption we'll have another chance." *Megan Hart*

"Chrissy said there were only two forces in the world and they balance each other: life and death. Creation and destruction. But she's wrong. There's only one. Because no matter how hard we try, we can't stop life. No matter how much we fight, no matter how many we kill, things keep changing, and growing, and living, and people get lost, and fall away, and come back, and get born, and move on, and no matter what, it's all so much, it's all so hard, the way life just keeps going and going." *Grady Hendrix*

"Night descends as a falling blanket. The city is a constellation of lights, each one representing a hand that turned the lightbulb. A hand attached to a mind containing a universe of memories and myths; a natural history of loves and wounds. Life everywhere. Pulsing, humming. A great wheel turning. A light blinks out here, one replaces it there. Always dying. Always living. We survive until we don't. All of this ending and beginning is the only thing that is infinite." *Jeff Zentner*

"Everything comes from everything and nothing escapes commonality. I am building a house already built, you are bearing a child already born. Everything comes from everything: a single cell out of another single cell; the cherry tree blossoms from the boughs; the hunter's aim from his arm; the rivers from tributaries from streams from falls from springs from wells; the Christ thorns out of the honey locust; a word from an ancient word, this book from many books; the tiny black bears out of their durable mothers tumbling from dark lairs; eightieth-generation wild crab abloom again and again and again; your hand out of your father's; firstborn out of firstborn out of firstborn out of... When you die, you will contribute your bones like alms." *C.E. Morgan*





“It is this earthly city ... that we are building. It is here that we are blossoming and becoming our full selves, drawing others into the comforting circle of life, especially those who may otherwise be left outside. ... Religion starts here in community, in extraordinary diversity, rich in unknowns. Still our hearts are restless with the unexpected, and perhaps that is because we are created full of tomorrow, endlessly hopeful that life, like hope, may be itself endless.”

*William Cleary*

## Questions

1. In reading #1, Mark Belletini writes, “There is only one earth we all share, we, the living, with all else that lives and does not live. Everything, everything, for good or ill, is part of the shared whole: sky, earth, song, words and now, this silence.” How do you regard this shared whole? Do we desecrate it by believing we own part of it because of our dotted lines? Why or why not? What does the blue marble we call earth elicit in you? What of it is sacred to you? Why?
2. In reading #2, Gary Kowalski writes, “Each child connects us to the universe, to the holy mysteries of birth and death and becoming from which we all emerge. Children widen the circle of our being in ways that are limitless.” Has a child connected you to the universe as Kowalski writes? If yes, what was that moment like? If no, has something else connected you to the universe? What? How? How do “Children widen the circle of our being in ways that are limitless?”
3. In reading #3, Peter Friedrichs writes about the history of an apple
4. In reading #4, Gunilla Norris compares the blossoming of peonies to human blossoming. She writes, “We need a circle of friends to hold us if we are going to open like peony buds and let out the beauty that is in us.” Blossoming is part of the circle of life. Gunilla, concludes, “And I want to support others in their blooming ... to be a stake, a circle of twine, an encouragement, a witness.” In your life, what has helped you blossom? Have you helped others blossom? How?
5. In reading #5, Joanna Macy writes about having to sit in the center of a circle, facing outward to be confronted by the Woompoo Pigeon struggling to survive, the Mountain decimated by mountaintop removal, and others. It was the Circle of Life, the one that has been harmed by human activity. What are your thoughts regarding how human activity has harmed the Circle of Life? What can be done to make environmental issues a higher priority?
6. In reading #6, Kirk Loadman-Copeland writes, “the beginning is not the beginning and the end is not the end.” It is an acknowledgement of the generations that came before and those that will come after. Many cultures revere ancestors. How do you regard your ancestors? Why? What do you want your legacy to be to your loved ones who will continue after you?
7. In reading #7, Victoria Safford writes about a birthday party for a very old neighbor who was dying, a party to which Safford brought her baby. She describes the two: “a plump one, apple-cheeked, a cherry tomato of a babe, smiling; and a silver-thin one, hollow-eyed, translucent, shining, smiling.” In terms of the circle of life she writes, “... These two were closer to the threshold, the edge of the great mystery....” As you consider the circle of life, how do you regard the mystery of the beginning and end of life? Have you known elders who shared wisdom with you? What did that mean to you? Have you spent time with babies, human and otherwise? How did that affect you?

### *The following questions are related to the Snippets*

8. Lesley Hazleton writes about the Zen practice of *ensō*, which involves drawing a circle with a single brushstroke. She notes that the *ensō* “is often incomplete, left slightly open as though in invitation to everything beyond it.” She contrasts the imperfection of the *ensō* with the perfection of a computer-generated circle. Which captures the circle of life better, the *ensō* artist or the computer? Why? Which better conveys both beauty and mystery? Why?
9. Francis Cabot writes about gardening as a circle that takes more than a lifetime to really accomplish one’s goals. What can gardening teach us about the circle of life? How can it take us to both beginnings and endings?
10. Criss Jami writes about each stage of life in a concise way: crying, questioning, rebelling, solving, protecting, and accepting. Do these resonate with you? Why or why not? What other words would you suggest for the different stages?
11. Megan Hart writes that, “Life has a way of moving in circles, bringing us back to places we didn’t expect and taking us away from those we do.” Has that been your experience? Can you share an example? She continues, “There are too many times we don’t pay close enough attention, and moments are lost in our assumption we’ll have another



Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. Black Elk

Photo by 9883074 on Pixabay

chance.” Do you agree with this? Why or why not? The author, Betty Smith, wrote, “Look at everything as though you were seeing it for the first time or the last time. Then your time on earth will be filled with glory.” How might we cultivate this kind of attention? How would it enrich our journey through the circle of life?

12. Grady Hendrix writes that it is not about life and death, but about the fact that “no matter how hard we try, we can’t stop life.” In this sense, is life more powerful than death? Why or why not? If this was not the case, could evolution have even unfolded? What does the incredible power of life mean for the circle of life? What does it mean for the future of life on Earth, with or without us?
13. Jeff Zentner writes about life as a great wheel turning, concluding, “All of this ending and beginning is the only thing that is infinite.” Do you agree? In this sense, is reality more a straight line or a circle? Why? How might our perspective cause us to adopt one notion over the other?
14. C.E. Morgan writes, “Everything comes from everything.” She then continues with a litany that begins, “I am building a house already built, you are bearing a child already born.” Her idea of continuity suggests circles within circles, the circular ripple of time and experience.

How might we distinguish between experience as linear or circular? Can it sometimes be one, then the other?

15. William Cleary writes about “drawing others into the comforting circle of life, especially those who may otherwise be left outside.” He continues, “...Religion starts here in community, in extraordinary diversity, rich in unknowns.” Is that how you understand your congregation? Why or why not? He concludes, “we are created full of tomorrow, endlessly hopeful that life, like hope, may be itself endless.” Do you agree? Have you ever been “full of tomorrow?” If yes, how did that affect you?