

PATH GUIDE TO
SPIRIT IN NATURE

of the
Unitarian Universalist Congregation
of the Upper Valley



by Philip Kern

second edition
August, 2003
Norwich, VT

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Thank you for the gift of this life.

Thank you for something instead of nothing.

Thank you for the unfathomable universe, and for this green
and singing planet.

Thank you for mystery and the capacity to wonder.

Thank you for beauty beyond comprehension.

Thank you for the possibility of meaningfulness.

Thank you for love.

Thank you for violets, the singing thrush, and black flies.

Thank you for music, poetry, and art.

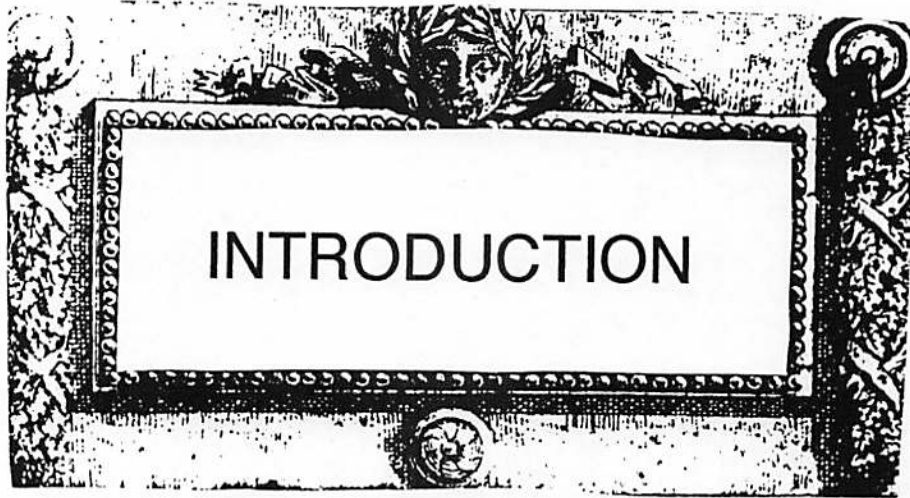
Thank you for the dream of freedom, peace, and justice for
all creatures.

Thank you for the conceivability of gods, of grace, of hope.

Thank you for the tree with the lights in it.

Thank you for keeping us awake.

Thank you for this day.



What do we ever know that is higher than that power, which, from time to time, seizes our lives and reveals us startlingly to ourselves as creatures set down here bewildered? Why does death so catch us by surprise, and why love? We still and always want waking. We should amass half-dressed in long lines, like tribesmen, and shake gourds at each other, to wake up. Instead we watch television, and miss the show.

Annie Dillard

SPIRIT IN NATURE

The spiritual life is, then, first of all a matter of keeping awake.

Thomas Merton

Spirituality is, at least partly, a matter of waking up, of paying attention to our lives, and of acknowledging the profound mystery of existence. Acknowledging mystery means consciously confronting life's fundamental questions: why is there something instead of nothing? who are we? where are we? why are we here? In seeking paths by which to address these questions we must keep awake by avoiding the myriad distractions -- livelihood, politics, misguided religious traditions, mindless chatter, drugs, and entertainment, including sports and the daily news -- with which we humans deliberately cloud our minds in order to avoid

this very inquiry. Avoiding distraction is necessary because these questions can be addressed only through seeking to know and understand the real world beyond the human screens, the world of "nature", specifically the origin and character of all life, and of the universe itself.

Those aspects of life's mystery that we can begin to resolve on nature's paths you may find to be instructive. Strangely enough, also, the more we comprehend of the natural world, the deeper the underlying mystery, reaffirming the mystical character of our quest. The spiritual lives that we crave, then, are to be gotten not out of the tangled strands of popular human culture, but by communion with the four-billion-year-old interdependent web of life and of all existence, of which we are a part. If you would find spirit, you will have to seek it, at least in large part, in "nature", in realms of thought that are formally addressed in physics, chemistry, cosmology, biology, and natural history. One could begin by walking on these paths, getting to know some of our neighbors, and learning the ways of the neighborhood.

GENESIS

Events leading to the creation of this Spirit in Nature path and this guide began in the spring of 2001 with a congregation workshop on social justice. The unexpected but unanimous consensus of that workshop was that the single most urgent social problem was environmental degradation. Our determination to address this issue was reinforced in two ways. First there was a request for summer Sunday morning programs on natural history and the environment. Then we discovered that the Unitarian Universalist Association's study/action issue for that year was on the topic of Responsible Consumption as a Moral Imperative.

The ensuing eight-week series on that topic was one of the most well-attended and enthusiastically received summer programs we have had. By June, 2002, we were one of the first five Unitarian Universalist congregations to be recognized as a Green Sanctuary. One of our projects in that undertaking was to create these paths, on the model of the Spirit in Nature Interfaith Path Sanctuary in East Middlebury, Vermont.

Reverend Paul Bortz, Unitarian Universalist Minister and President of the Board of Directors of the East Middlebury Spirit in Nature, has been most generous with advice and encouragement

of our efforts. Funding was provided by the congregation's Sustainability Action Group, by a gift from former congregation member Louise Wickware, and through a grant from the New England Grassroots Environment Fund. Ms. Heather Trillium of the Upper Valley Trails Alliance offered assistance in path planning and construction, while some materials and all the design and labor were provided by members of the congregation. Design and construction of the boardwalk and associated structures were directed by Colin High and Bob Eliason. Bob also made the numbered stakes, the plant labels, and the inspirational signs. Initial construction of the boardwalk, the paths, and the various signs was completed in the summer and fall of 2002, and final work was completed in the summer of 2003.

This booklet, first prepared in February and March, 2003, and a second edition offered in August, 2003, is a guide to the paths and to the natural history of this land and of the Earth. It may also serve as a faltering first step on a path seeking spirit in nature. On the paths and around the Meeting House you will find tags identifying many of the plants and other natural features, and also numbered stakes keyed to the discussions in the following pages. You will also encounter signs with contemplative writings from a variety of spiritual traditions that may speak to Unitarian Universalists.

You are welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Congregation's Spirit in Nature paths. We invite you to walk here in peace and love, to meet our fellow creatures on the land, to learn from nature's ways, and to meditate on human spirit and wisdom, and on the meaning of existence. Here, as elsewhere, you are in community with the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.

LIST OF PLANTS

The plant list, which is included in Appendix B, was initially compiled between May and December, 2002, was corrected and expanded from April through August, 2003, and is intended to be continually updated. More than 160 species and groups of species are included, showing both common and scientific names. Each plant's abundance is shown for five areas -- the yard, the meadow, the wetland, the dry woodland (orange path markers), and the wet woodland (yellow markers). Also shown are the months when each species was in flower (or in spore) and whether it is a native or an alien (not native to this region).

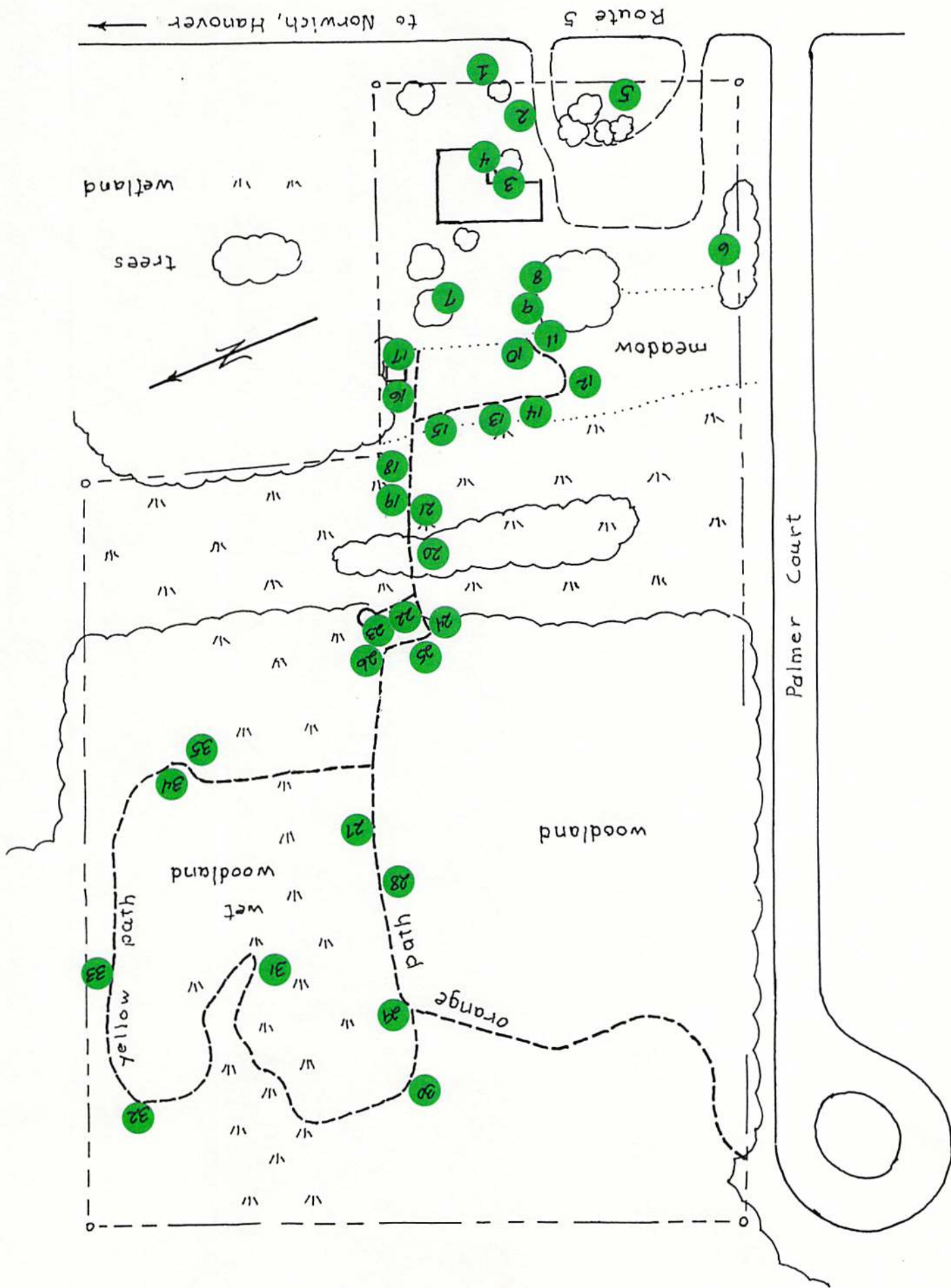
A plaguing question turns on what plants to include. What about garden species like forget-me-nots that have escaped to the woods? What of planted trees or shrubs like the Norway spruce, the lilacs, or the mock orange? These, too, can escape to the wild. The question is too difficult. All are included, the only exceptions being flowers in the small garden at the front door.

Still this guide is far from complete. I have not tried to identify the various species of mosses, violets, grasses, goldenrods, asters, and some others; many species have certainly been missed (several dozen were added in the second season); and there must be misidentifications and other corrections to be made (many have been made already). Also, there are no lists of birds, mammals, or insects. We welcome any corrections or additions you are able to offer.

MAP OF PROPERTY AND PATHS

The map on the following page shows the course of the paths.





Route 5 to Norwich, Hanover

wetland

trees

meadow

woodland

woodland

wet

yellow path

orange path

Palmer Court

