fireweed institute
transforming working and living for a sustainable world
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the fireweed force

Fireweed Force Newsletter December 2003 / January 2004

Looking through my music collection, I realize that when a musician wants us to hear the pure sound of their instrument, the magic of their artistry, and the true essence of their message, they do an "uplugged" album. From Clapton to Cockburn, these albums do not use artificial amplification, fancy accompaniments, or technological enhancements. This music is the real thing…the way music has been played and appreciated among communities for centuries.

For this reason, our second Fireweed Friday is called "Christmas Unplugged: Searching for Simplicity and Wisdom." How can we be part of this season in a way that allows us to hear again the true essence and see the magic? Just like the overloaded store shelves, we experience material and sensory overload at this time of year. However, an appreciative walk in the crisp air and crunchy snow reminds us of the purity that this time of year represents. It is a time when we ponder what means the most to us, our purpose, and what we want to "give back" to our communities.

This reflectiveness has been fostered by many religious celebrations that occur during this time of year…when sunlight is low. There are several common themes that run through the Hindu Diwali, Muslim Ramadan, Jewish Hanukkah, Christian Christmas, and the Pagan Winter Solstice Festival. Most of these holidays are celebrated with lights, to honor and call back the sun and to symbolically welcome the Divine to earth. As part of spiritual en"light"enment, reflection and prayer are part of the practices of purity to help seekers focus on the Divine. All of these festivals are also marked by joy, feasting, and gift-giving. In particular, it is about giving part of one's blessings to those who have less and who suffer. This generosity in deed and wealth-sharing is a way to spread joy and love among earth-dwellers.

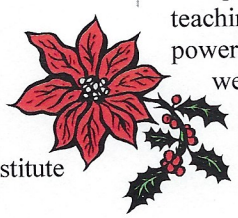
Some of the ways we can move toward the true essence and magic of the season, is by slowing down, pondering our purposes, seeing with soft eyes, loving with a pure heart, giving thanks, looking for need, and using our hands for creative and generous acts. Focussing on these qualities of the season can help us avoid the commercialized overload and foster peace in our own hearts and in the world around us.

Our January Fireweed Friday speaker will continue these themes by teaching us to see through new eyes as we make change toward sustainability. Come and join us!

Best wishes for a wise and simple season that is the real thing,

Beth

Elizabeth Lange, Council Chairperson, Fireweed Institute



Fireweed Fridays!

December Fireweed Friday
"Christmas Unplugged: Searching for Simplicity and Wisdom"

December 5, 7-9:30 pm, Robertson-Wesley Hall, 10209-123 Street, Edmonton

This special Fireweed Friday will be a wonderful celebration of the growing community that is the Fireweed Institute! This is an **intergenerational (all age)** event that is hosted by Sara Coumantarakis and features speaker Bob Zuber, crafts, regional/ seasonal food, music and storytelling by Kate Quinn! Come, bring your family or a friend, enjoy, relax, meet people of goodwill, all as a sign of hope for our world!!

Dr. Bob Zuber, a noted educator on human rights and sustainability and a pastoral team member of All Saints Church in Harlem, New York City joins us. He will explore how we can unplug the Christmas commercialism machine. Bob will present ideas for simplifying our lifestyles and deepening our insight to give us more time and energy to ponder how we can grow in wisdom and respond more faithfully to our families and communities. Bob has graduate degrees from Yale and Columbia Universities and has just finished designing a new initiative, Polluted Places, for pollution clean up in the developing world. At All Saints Church, he helps conduct adult education classes, a food pantry, a community school, and youth programs housed in a community center.

January Fireweed Friday
"The Earth Speaks: Lessons for Personal and Social Change"

January 9, 7-9 pm, Robertson-Wesley Hall, 10209-123 Street, Edmonton

In keeping with the ritual of new beginnings that is associated with New Year's, **Dr. Ray Allan,** Professor of Biology at Red Deer College, will present on what lessons we can learn from the Earth that can guide how we approach personal and social change. Many of us are seeking to live more sustainably in a way that respects human and environmental well-being. Using living systems theory from New Science and Buddhist teachings from educator Joanna Macy, Ray will share some powerful understandings and activities that help shift the way we see and act, in keeping with sustainability. These understandings can help us undertake personal and social change and communicate our intentions more effectively.

News on Fireweed Happenings

Spirit and Nature

This wonderful retreat weekend with Wes Gietz was attended by 13 participants just after the first snowfall. It was a magical experience that left participants "floating on air" and "inspired" as they seek to deepen their meditation and other spiritual awareness practices. The connections between the participants were amazing! Thanks Wes!

Tree-Free Papermaking

This weekend was attended by four participants who couldn't say enough about the inspiration, knowledge, gentle guidance and hospitality that Evelyn David provided. They all went home with their own handmade paper and lots of supplies to continue papermaking for their own pleasure and for gift-giving. Thanks Evelyn!

November Fireweed Friday

We wish to thank Myles Kitagawa for his thought provoking presentation of what it means to build a public vision from a private vision. His understanding of Walt Disney's desire to build a model city in Florida that would manifest the four principles of 1. effective mobility; 2. education-enhanced environment; 3. occupation and fulfillment, and 4. ambience of safety and comfort, was compelling. It certainly led to some stimulating discussion of what is possible here in Edmonton. Of course, Mickey Mouse and all the great photos added to a great evening! Thanks to all 25 participants and their willingness to engage Myles and discuss participatory ways to build a public vision for Edmonton. A special thanks to Linda Hancock for all her hard work in organizing the many facets of this evening!

Christmas Giving: Help Create a Sustainable World

Give a Donation! Be a Sponsor!

The Fireweed Institute is a community of people who support each other in learning to live more sustainably – ways that respect themselves, the Earth and the human family. Please think about giving a donation and being a sponsor of the Fireweed Institute as part of your Christmas giving. Our day to day operations are funded largely from sponsor donations and membership fees, so your generosity is most appreciated.

Be a visionary - $1000 and over
Be a pioneer - $500 and over
Be a transformer - $100 and over
Be a steward - $50 and over
Be a sustainer - $25 and over

Together, we can magnify our impact toward a sustainable society…which is the purpose of the Fireweed Institute!

Buy a Membership!

If you have a membership to the Fireweed Institute, it is time to renew…or if you would like to join for the first time, a new membership year is upon us. We have a wonderful new membership package that offers you coupons to local stores/restaurants with similar values. Membership also offers reductions in workshop fees, this bi-monthly newsletter, access to the members-only section of the website, invitations to special events, and ongoing information about the Fireweed community. We now have $25 individual memberships or $40 family memberships. Please renew or join and encourage others to do so!

Give Time!

We are in need of at least one new member for each of our three teams. These 2-year positions involve bi-monthly meetings for 2 hours with your choice of contribution hours in between.

The **Marketing/Programming Team** plans all the workshops and courses and publicizes them.

The **Membership Team** plans all the social gatherings, member services, and ways to encourage membership.

The **Fundraising Team** pursues grant funding, individual and small business sponsorships, and organizes fundraising events.

Please consider joining these teams, we would be most appreciative! They have fun together and are VERY creative, as we try to live out sustainability as an organization.

Other Volunteer Opportunities

We also need several people who are willing to take our display to various events and conferences to discuss the Fireweed Institute with attendees. Please let us know and we will keep you on our rotating list. We will also brief you on key information.

Please contact the Fireweed Institute at (780) 433-1830 or email, info@fireweedinstitute.org, if you are interested in the above-noted opportunities.

Newsletter Ideas

Input from our members is always welcome.

Please contact Linda Hancock at lchancock@shaw.ca or 458-7478 with your submissions and ideas.

What Unplugging the Christmas Season Means to Me

Many thanks to the writers below who have generously shared their thoughts about unplugging the Christmas season!

Giving Christmas Presence

submitted by Gary Garrison

In the '60s, the Beatles recorded a song called "Can't Buy Me Love," which addressed one of the key problems with consumerism. But it took raising three children to adulthood before I finally learned not only that money can't buy love but that it's no good in expressing love either. In fact, the children are the ones who taught me. It didn't matter how much I bought them for Christmas, birthdays, or any other time if I exhausted myself earning money and wasn't present for them when I should have been.

In recent years I decided that the only kind of Christmas shopping I will do is to buy ingredients for fruit cakes, rum balls, fudge, cookies, peanut brittle, and other goodies I make myself. I have always enjoyed baking, And so I make gift packages for relatives and friends as a way of giving of myself. I also enjoy writing, and so my last Christmas with my kids I wrote a short story as a gift to them, and they all created craft gifts based on their own talents. Now that I've started writing poetry, I plan to share some of that this Christmas.

For me, unplugging Christmas means giving myself to others in a card, a phone call, a visit, or something I've made. It's something anybody can do; however, your life has to be simple enough that you have the time to do it.

But think of all the time you'll save by not shopping!

What Christmas Unplugged Means to me

submitted by Kate Quinn

The first step in unplugging Christmas for us was to make choices about how to celebrate throughout the festive season and how to remember those among us who are isolated, ill, or struggling with poverty.

Our family leads full lives and we decided that spending time together is more important than material gifts. My husband and I do not exchange gifts, we go on a date. This may be cross-country skiing in the river valley, or, enjoying a visit over a nice cup of coffee. We gather with his family in Edmonton to share a meal and there is no other gift exchange. We then travel to Calgary where my family shares a meal and one gift. We have chosen to draw names and purchase or make a gift for that chosen person, called "Gift Person" or GP. My extended family is very large and this approach means taking time to focus on just one person and choose something that affirms them in a special way. We have set a modest dollar amount and encouraged creativity. We spend a long and fun afternoon featuring each gift and then share a pot-luck supper.

This year, some of the family will volunteer on Christmas day to make up beds for homeless guests from the "Inn from the Cold" ministry in Calgary. Several family members are involved on a regular basis and this will be a chance for the rest of us to help out. There is also a proposal to drop the "Gift Person" idea and donate money to help a family friend in the States in her long recovery from severe neurological damage due to the West Nile virus. The most important thing has been to stop, reflect and make changes as appropriate.

Our family also enjoys setting aside time to make our donations to our favourite social justice causes and charitable organizations. We take time to enjoy the wonder of the darkness, the comfort of candles, the call to silent reflection, and the joy of festive celebrations.

Having the Christmas You Really Want!

Submitted by Sara Coumantarakis

True or False?

- *Christmas is a $150 billion industry.*
- *The monthly wage of a skilled worker in China, where most Christmas toys are manufactured, is equivalent to the cost of a single toy in North America.*
- *I'll have plenty of time with family and friends this Christmas.*

Unfortunately, the first two items are true and the third item depends upon the decisions you make over the next few weeks.

In ***Unplug the Christmas Machine: How to Have the Christmas You've Always Wanted***, authors Robinson and Staeheli (New York: William Morrow and Co. 1982) conclude that children have four basic wants and needs at Christmastime:

1. ***Relaxed and loving time with their family;***
2. ***Realistic expectations about gifts;***
3. ***An evenly paced holiday season***
4. ***Strong family traditions***

They state that in the 20th century, a short preparation time, simple and few gifts and a an emphasis on celebration with family and friends has been replaced by weeks and weeks of build-up and an emphasis on gift-giving as the primary Christmas activity.

They include a pledge to help those who would like to create a more joyous, peaceful and justice-based Christmas in keeping with the deeper meaning of the season:

My Christmas Pledge

Believing in the beauty and simplicity of Christmas, I commit myself to the following:

- To remember those people who truly need my gifts;
- To express my love for family and friends in more direct ways than presents;
- To rededicate myself to the spiritual growth of myself and my family;
- To examine my holiday activities in light of the true spirit of Christmas;
- To initiate one act of peacemaking with my circle of family and friends.

Fireweed Friday on December 5th on the theme of " Christmas Unplugged" will provide the opportunity to think about and plan for a simpler, more meaningful Christmas.

Hope to see you there.

Announcements

We wish to offer our congratulations to Mary-Frances Wright and her husband Gerard on the birth of their 7 lb. 10 oz. baby boy, Alistair Joseph MacLellan-Wright born on October 18.

We also wish to offer our congratulations to Lara Pinchbeck and her partner Rhonda on the adoption of their new twins, Lulu and Max.

All the best to you as your children grow and bring you and the world joy through their presence!

Congratulations to Matt Dance, Fireweed Council Member, on his engagement to Michelle McGarry. We wish them the very best on this new part of their life journey.

Citizen's Corner

Pesticide Hearing at City Hall

submitted by Cherry Dodd

In September, City Councillors were considering the total ban of cosmetic uses of pesticides in the city. While they didn't ban use, they voted unanimously to drastically reduce pesticide use on city land, including school and sports fields. They will also educate the public about reducing pesticide use in their yards. They recommended that there be a registry for chemically sensitive people, who once registered, would have a buffer zone around their house by asking people in neighbouring yards to not use pesticides. They are also considering reducing indoor pesticide use in city offices and schools. This is the first time that the city council has been interested in reducing pesticides and giving a strong message to their Parks employees and the public.

We still have the opportunity to impact this process as Community Services designs a plan for Integrated Pest Management. I will provide more details as it becomes clear where we can make a contribution about reducing the use of toxins on public land.

Buy Nothing Day – Friday, November 28

forwarded from David Parker

As this holiday season is upon us we witness the excesses of consumerism becoming more socially accepted, and indeed demanded.

Extreme consumerism can be dangerous as many shoppers are unaware that their dollars may be negatively affecting the environment and supporting sweatshops, among other things. People are bombarded daily with advertisements compelling them to relocate their values to inanimate objects and elusive brands. Excessive consumerism is not necessary and further propagates the widening economic inequality present the world over.

For these and many other reasons we are celebrating Buy Nothing Day as an experiment with our North American lifestyle; an escape from the daily grind of work, shop, die.

Fireweed Winter Courses

Urban Wild Gardening II

For Edmonton gardeners who wish to incorporate native species into their existing gardens. Includes a general introduction to native Alberta perennials and grasses, growing conditions, landscape design ideas, and hands-on training in growing from seed.
4 Monday evenings January 12, 19, February 9, 16
Facilitators: Lara Pinchbeck - GardenInk Designs, Bruce Bashforth - Bedrock Seedbank

Money and Life: Making it Work!

Explores how to let go of old ways of relating to money and create a plan for a healthy financial future, as part of sustainable living.
5 Tuesdays January 27, February 10, 24 & March 9 and 16
Facilitators: Jackie Gendre, Lori Thesen

The Art of Mindful Living

Introduces concrete practices that can help cultivate mindful living: including, various reflective practices to deepen daily awareness, foster a sense of place, and awaken the best in our human capacities.
Saturday, February 21
Facilitator: Kathy Patterson

Urban Wild Gardening I

Introductory gardening course for Edmonton homeowners who wish to convert lawn into a low maintenance landscaped garden using native species – flowers, grasses, shrubs, berry bushes, and trees.
6 Mondays February 23 – March 29
Facilitator: Lara Pinchbeck - GardenInk Designs

For detailed information on the above courses, as well as the Spring 2004 courses offered, please visit our website at www.fireweedinstitute.org.

Disappearing Pumpkin Cookies

1 cup white sugar
1/2 cup brown sugar
1/2 cup margarine
2 eggs beaten
1 1/2 cups canned organic pumpkin
1 cup raisins
(optional) 1 cup pecans, chopped
2 1/2 cups organic, unbleached flour
2 tsp baking powder
1/2 tsp baking soda
1/2 tsp cinnamon
1/4 tsp ginger
1/2 tsp nutmeg
1/2 tsp salt
1/4 tsp cloves

Cream sugar and margarine together. Add eggs, beat well. Beat in pumpkin and stir in raisins. Mix dry ingredients together and stir into pumpkin mixture. Drop by teaspoonfuls onto a greased cookie sheet. Bake at 350 for approx. 10 -15 minutes. Makes 5 dozen if small, 2 dozen if medium. They are aptly named!!

December 2003

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
	1	2 **Transforming Working and Living 6:30pm - 9:30pm**	3	4	5 **Fireweed Friday "Christmas unplugged" - 7-9:30pm**	6
7	8	9	10 International Human Rights Day	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19 Hanukkah Begins	20
21	22 Winter Solstice	23	24 Christmas Eve	25 Christmas Day	26 Boxing Day Kwanzaa	27 Hanukkah Ends
28	29	30	31 New Year's Eve			

January 2004

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
				1 New Year's Day	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9 **Fireweed Friday "The Earth Speaks" - 7-9pm**	10
11	12 **Urban Wild Gardening II 7pm - 9:30pm**	13	14	15	16	17
18	19 **Urban Wild Gardening II 7pm - 9:30pm** Martin Luther King Jr Day	20	21	22	23	24
25	26 International Week - U of A	27 **Money and Life: Making It Work 6:45pm - 9:30pm**	28	29	30	31

The Fireweed Force is a bi-monthly publication.
We welcome your feedback and ideas.
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