



Greater Good in Education
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

EARTHRISE PHOTOGRAPH: BEARING WITNESS TO OUR PLANET

"I happened to glance out of one of the still-clear windows just at the moment the Earth appeared over the lunar horizon. It was the most beautiful, heart-catching sight of my life, one that sent a torrent of nostalgia, of sheer homesickness surging through me."

—Astronaut Frank Borman

OVERVIEW

Students watch the film Earthrise and reflect on the power of bearing witness.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- At the start of a unit on earth science, environmental science, ecology, or astronomy
- On Earth Day, April 22nd
- Anytime throughout the year

TIME REQUIRED

- 2-3 class periods

LEVEL

- Middle School
- High school
- College

MATERIALS

- Internet access and TV/projector

- Earthrise [film](#) (30 minutes) from [Go Project Films](#) on [Vimeo](#)
- Earthrise [photograph](#)
- Earthrise mini-clip (1 minute): "[Frank Borman in Congress](#)"

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Understand that when we bear witness to something—a person, thing, or event—we become present in unexpected ways

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Social Awareness
- Responsible Decision-Making

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- In 1968, three astronauts completed the first manned orbit around the moon, becoming the first humans to see the Earth from space--as it had never been seen before. The first color photograph taken beyond Earth's orbit was later titled Earthrise.
- This new perspective, shared with the world through the Earthrise photograph, radically changed humanity's view of itself and our relationships with each other and the planet. The visible lack of national boundaries and seeing the Earth as a beautiful complete whole in the vastness of space, provided a window into the beauty, unity, and vulnerability of life on Earth.
- "Bearing witness" can be defined as a way of seeing and being with people and events that emphasize awareness and presence without necessarily including action, conceptualization, or understanding. When we bear witness to something, we are present in unexpected ways.
- Take a moment to reflect on the Earthrise photograph. What emotions and/or thoughts does the photo bring up for you?
- Think about how the Earthrise photograph gave an opportunity for the first time in human history to bear witness to the Earth as one ecosystem and one shared home.

INSTRUCTIONS

This practice is the second in a series of three practices on the Earthrise photograph: [Earthrise Photograph: Fostering Awe \(Practice #1\)](#) and [Earthrise Photograph: Cultivating Global Citizenship \(Practice #3\)](#); it can also be done on its own. If using this practice with the other two, you may skip the initial viewing of Earthrise in Part 1 below.

PART 1 (45 MINUTES)

- Share with students background information about the film Earthrise:
 - *In 1968, three astronauts completed the first manned orbit around the moon, becoming the first humans to see the Earth from space--as it had never been seen before. The first color photograph taken beyond Earth's orbit was later titled Earthrise.*
 - *The film "Earthrise" tells the story of this image captured by the Apollo 8 astronauts—Bill Anders, Frank Borman, and Jim Lovell—and recounts their experiences, exploring the beauty, awe, and grandeur of the Earth against the blackness of space.*
- Watch the film [Earthrise](#) (30:01) with students.
- Display the Earthrise photograph. Ask students:
 - *What thoughts and/or emotions come up for you when you look at this photograph?*
 - *Astronaut Frank Borman said that seeing the Earth from space "sent a torrent of nostalgia, of sheer homesickness surging through me." Why do you think Borman felt homesick at the sight of the Earth? What do you think influenced his feelings?*
- Share with students that one way to define "bearing witness" is a way of seeing and being with people and events. It is marked by awareness with presence, without understanding or the need to take action or analyze.
- Share the short film clip "Borman in Congress" that shows astronaut Frank Borman describing the Earthrise moment to Congress. Ask students:
 - What does bearing witness mean to you?

PART 2 (30 MINUTES)

- Lead a discussion with students exploring some or all of the following questions:
 - Review the [short clip](#) in which Borman reads a poem by Archibald MacLeish.
 - "To see the earth as we now see it, small and beautiful in that eternal silence where it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the earth together, brothers on that bright loveliness in the unending night—brothers who see now they are truly brothers." — Archibald MacLeish, U.S. Poet, "Bubble of Blue Air" in *Riders on Earth* (1978). "Riders on Earth Together, Brothers in Eternal Cold," *New York Times* (Dec. 25, 1968).
 - He said the poem "captured the feelings that we all had in lunar orbit." What feelings do you think Borman was trying to convey through MacLeish's passage?
 - The Apollo 8 astronauts witnessed the Earth rising above the lunar landscape. How might bearing witness to something reveal a bigger truth? Describe how this occurred for the Apollo 8 astronauts.
 - Astronaut Jim Lovell said about the Apollo 8 mission, "[It] makes me feel a little disappointed. We did something that ended up showing the Earth and its people exactly how we existed where we are, that we were really here on Earth...[just] like we were on [a] spacecraft having to

work closely together to accomplish a mission, down here we seem not able to do that.” (*Earthrise*, 27:39) How do you think seeing the Earth from space impacted Lovell’s perspective and worldview? Why do you think he was disappointed? What impact on the perspective of others did he hope for?

- Describe a time or situation in your life where you bore witness to something which you felt was awe-inspiring and powerful. Include as many details as you can remember. How might bearing witness and the feeling of awe lead to positive change in one’s own life as well as the greater good of society?

CLOSURE AND HOMEWORK (30 MINUTES)

- Share with students:
 - *Images play an important role in our world. "National Geographic" photographer Steve McCurry said, "The photograph is an undeniably powerful medium. Free from the constraints of language, and harnessing the unique qualities of a single moment frozen in time."*
- Have students select two iconic images from any time period, and bring these photographs into class for a gallery walk. (Images can be printed and displayed in the room or can be presented individually through Google Slides).
- Ask students to reflect on the following questions and present their response to the class:
 - *What do each of these two photographs represent to you? To society?*
 - *How might iconic images, including the Earthrise photograph, shine a light on world issues and challenge core beliefs?*

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

How did students respond to the practice of bearing witness? Do you notice whether students respond more thoughtfully to new ideas or to each other?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

"Bearing witness" is often considered a contemplative practice that can help cultivate a mindful way of being in the world.

While research on the effects of mindfulness on children is still in the early stages, a [2016 review of 12 studies](#) suggests some promising outcomes for young children relative to attention, self-regulation, and motor skills. A [2014 meta-analysis](#) that focuses on 24 studies of K-12 students showed demonstrated changes in students’ attention and resilience to stress, including positive emotions, self-esteem and self-concept, and well-being.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

In a world of distractions, few of us take the time to absorb a photo, a work of art, or something extraordinary and awe-inspiring, letting the experience wash over us and then noticing our thoughts, beliefs, or emotions as a result.

Providing students with an experience of bearing witness allows them to see what it feels like to stop for a moment and see the world in a different way—a practice that can help to navigate daily challenges and also to engage more deeply and meaningfully with this beautiful thing called "life."

SOURCE

The Global Oneness Project is a free multimedia platform that brings the world's culture alive in the classroom by using stories as a pedagogical tool for growing minds. Their collection of documentary films, photo essays, and lesson plans highlight cultural, environmental, and social issues with universal themes including our common humanity. <https://www.globalonenessproject.org/>

To access the entire Earthrise curriculum, visit the Global Oneness Project: [click here](#)

The film Earthrise was nominated for a Webby Award for the best video in the science and education category. In addition, Earthrise was a finalist in the Creativity category for Fast Company's World Changing Ideas Awards.