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A Gift for Nature

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A Gift for Nature

Senior Project

Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by

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Introduction

It is clear to many of us that the balance of nature is the most important factor affecting the stability of the planet. Our world is composed of things from nature and it is the source of our lives and existence. The earth is our great home that we may feel great care and attention from. This care and attention extends from the beingness of nature; when we practice ways of tuning into nature we realize it's aliveness to more subtle degrees.

In this collection of essays I describe ways of developing relationships with nature. These relationships are needed to repair the harms humanity has wrought upon the environment and to move forward in creating a healthier paradigm of human interaction with non-human life. I begin with essays recounting my own experiences of seeing harm done to nature and of the ravages of climate change, as it is these types of experiences that have caused me to look for solutions to the problems they cause and are caused by. I then go on to describe my spiritual observations of nature's beinghood, new ways of understanding the natural world, our place in it, and how we might interact with it. I draw on the reciprocal relationship Indigenous Cultures had with nature and the perception they had towards it which allowed for this dynamic to develop in the first place. Throughout all of my essays there is a pervading emphasis on the deepening of our understanding of nature drawn from the experiences of Indigenous Americans, numerous nature writers and from my own experiences, as I believe it is the way we perceive nature that determines our actions towards it. Finally, I end with a testament to the beautiful Divine nature of human beings, which may be tended and brought to fruition. Ultimately it is the development and recognition of our authentic nature that will bring the most healing and regeneration to our own lives, to others and to the world at large, all of which are composed of nature.

The Oak Being Felled

*Leaves flying up in the air,
as the tree goes flying down.
Leaves bursting from the tree,
as it crashes to the ground.*

It was a cool spring day. I had just finished meditating for hours and was out on my daily run. The meditation practice had put me in a very clear state of my mind, where I could easily tune into the intuition of my heart to receive its guidance to my questions. At this time I was running about 7 miles a day, always along my heavily shaded road in the Catskills. These daily runs were the extent of my departures from home during the state's Covid-19 shutdown in April and provided me with my only opportunities to interact with other people. The more people that were outside during a run the more grateful I was, as even a wave or a short greeting was welcome to me during this time.

These daily jogs not only provided me with the gift of seeing others but with the scenery of nature blooming. It was mid-April and the forest was laden with soft shades of new green and the gem-like colors of buds. Some trees had young leaves with yellow hues while others had large leaves of deep green shades. The flowering Dogwoods, which blossomed earlier in March, were already overflowing with white flowers, as if there was snow tumbling out of them. The weeping willows were also flowering, and were dropping their golden vines closer to the ground every day I passed them. The trees were not only teeming with new leaves and buds,

but with the returned birds and their songs. I would watch them flock together and move from tree to tree, buzzing with movement and providing a pleasant business to the calm street.

This day the sunlight was bright on me, and was embroidering the road with the trees' shadows. About halfway up my road I came upon a crew of workmen with helmets and green shirts on, moving about a neighbors yard. At first I felt glad to see them, thinking of it as another opportunity for a brief interaction, but then I heard the chainsaw they were using. As I began to pass them I saw what they were working on: a dark brown oak with a green crown of fresh leaves. There were long ropes attached to it that were pulling it towards the ground. The chainsaw had already cut deep into its trunk, and it leaned over, looking like someone bending over themselves from some pain.

A familiar tension came over me, the feeling I always get when I see a tree being cut down, or the evidence of one having been so. It is a type of despair one experiences at seeing harm being done to someone they love without being able to stop it. The passivity of my position gave rise to a sense of guilt, as though there was some unknown path of action that I was blind to. Wanting relief from this guilt, I cast blame onto others. I assumed my neighbor was having the tree cut for the yard to look neat, without consideration for the life they were ending. I looked at the workmen, some of whom were standing in a group laughing and talking below the tree while one of them cut it with a chainsaw. They reminded me of pictures I'd seen of men who go to Africa to shoot elephants and lions, then smile for pictures as they stand with one foot on top of the carcasses, evidently proud that they took down something mighty and beautiful with their puny tools.

I was still jogging while viewing this scene, and watched the tree smash to the ground before I passed out of sight. It was particularly disturbing to think that the tree would have taken 20 or more years to have grown to that size, only to be cut down in a few hours. It is a scene like this that demonstrates the vulnerability of nature and why people might feel themselves to be lords over it-- that their machines can undermine it even though it is large and ancient. My

despair continued as I ran, reminding me of my powerlessness in the face of the constant and continual destruction of trees and to the forest in general. It was the despair of watching harm done to something from the sidelines, so that all I could do is watch.

The abrupt change from pleasantness to affliction caused me to want to find a solution to this ongoing problem, and because I had been communing so easily with my heart for the last few days, I sought my relief there. I did this by placing my hand over my heart center into a posture called heart-connecting. I have practiced meditation in this posture for years and now it quickly puts me in a state of calmness and clarity, even while I'm running or engaged in some other activity. It is in this state that I ask my heart questions and receive guidance from its inner Light of wisdom. Heart connecting for a moment while continuing to jog, I asked, "What is the best thing I may do for the tree that was just cut for the highest greatest good God of all?" which is a phrase we use in our practice to maximize our focus on being the greatest benefit that we are able to the world. I soon felt an intuitive answer: that the tree still lives through me, that it is me because all is composed of energy, and therefore I can use myself to support the lives of trees. I thought about my writing and how I can write about protection of trees and plants, and in doing so would always be able to do something for their well-being. I felt considerable relief and a return of personal power at finding a solution to this problem that had so often caused me to feel helpless. As I continued my run I was able to think more clearly about the workmen; they were doing a regular job to keep themselves alive, and I even recalled that my own father had at one time worked a job of felling trees that were a danger because they might eventually fall on people's houses. Finding a solution to my helplessness, I was able to let go of blame-- it was a reminder not to project problems onto others, as this is truly where powerlessness lies.

A Rain in Winter

It rains in winter now.

The climatic tears are too unrestrained for
seasonal propriety. The rain melts the snow
and freezes by midnight.

Yesterday, the landscape was powdered with snow
and was soft and clean to walk on. Today
mud splashes up with my steps.

The trees were wrapped in white
and shone blue in the moonlight. Today they are bare and
exposed. Nature wants to cover the landscape
when there is no greenery to hold it. This weeping
is unbecoming.

I want to reproach the rain
who washed down nature's blanket--who washed down
blankets of grace-made crystal snows,
and left it tarnished and exposed
to bear the winter without soft insulation.

But am not I

when smoke stings my face and eyes
forced to tears, and
not in control of how they flow?
Not in control to how they stain
the linen of my shirt below?

So the climate too weeps its rain
In the suffocating smoke of pollution,
and undoes the harmony that it had
set below.

Eco-Reciprocity

Sitting in my school dining hall two weeks ago eating breakfast alone I noticed that the room was nearly white, with the early morning sunlight avalanching through the windows. Being out in public in the morning always gives me a sense of refinement. The quietness seems to give more space to the hall, and I feel that even my thoughts are calm and deliberate.

I was thinking about a manifesto I had read the night before which described how humans must live in relation to nature if we are to create a healthy Anthropocene. [An Ecomodernist Manifesto](#) was drafted in 2015 by a group of 19 scholars, economists, and scientists, including Linus Blomqvist, Director of Conservation at the Breakthrough Institute, Ruth Defries, Family Professor of Sustainable Development at Columbia University, and Erle Ellis, an environmental scientist at the University of Maryland. Its argument was that the best way to preserve the natural world was to focus on technological advancement that would make us less dependent on natural resources, agricultural intensification to use less natural lands, and most significantly, to decouple and remove ourselves from nature completely. Decoupling meant transitioning from rural communities to urban ones since, as they argue, "cities both drive and symbolize the decoupling of humanity from nature, performing far better than rural economies in providing efficiently for material needs while reducing environmental impacts." The manifesto went on to boldly argue that trying to harmonize with nature was ineffectual to its preservation as even indigenous societies had detrimental impacts on it, and that if humans were to try to harmonize with it at this time, we would effectively destroy the natural environment due to our population size.

While I was inspired and hopeful about many of the points made in the manifesto in regards to the innovative techniques we could advance to preserve nature and also to better living conditions for people, their argument against harmonizing with nature and decoupling from

it managed to confound me. I have always held that the best place for humans was in the midst of nature, experiencing the elements and observing the patterns of natural life. My strong sense of love for the natural world makes its preservation my ultimate goal, and it is this love that causes me to always want to be near it. For this manifesto to then argue that the best way to preserve nature was to be separated from it was unsettling.

I imagined what it would be like for me and others who are devoted to nature to leave it behind for its well-being. As New York city is the nearest city to my home in the Catskills, I naturally compared my experiences of urban and rural life between these two places. One particular October weekend I had to make the choice between hiking the fall mountains with my friend Diksha or visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art with my mother and sister. Diksha had been wanting to explore the forest in its fall colors for weeks, and the idea of being in the vibrant mountains with him was one of the best things I could think of. The last time we had been in nature on an autumn day we spent the entire afternoon in a state of dreamlike astonishment. Fueled by each other's appreciation for the natural world, we explored every pocket of the forest we could. We stood in particular spots to get the best angle to see spiderwebs sculpting the sunlight that hit them, and held up leaves to the sun as it fell through the trees so that their veins lit up in their transparent bodies. Like the blood in the veins of our hands, fresh water once ran through these venations in the maple leaves held up to the sun. The human body is not too different from trees.

This time I decided to go to the city; I felt that it was my duty towards my family. That morning I looked out of my window and beheld an inconveniently stunning day-- inconvenient only because I was planning on leaving it behind. From my bedroom I saw golden leaves stacked over each other against a shining blue sky. The drive down to the city was even more excruciating--from all sides of the road the autumn forest burned with a reddish-orange glow, and the sun looked extra yellow as it lightly ebbed through the foliage. Leaving this land for the

city felt like a descension. Once in the city, its hectic environment sharpened my despair as I considered that I might have otherwise been in the mountains.

Though this experience in the city was less enjoyable than it usually is because I had to give up an enjoyable opportunity, it is still clear that, for me, living with nature surrounding me is paramount. Reflecting on the Ecomodernist Manifesto, I thought, "There must be a way we can live and be refreshed in nature without depleting it." The idea that people who love nature might have to live in cities to preserve it seemed unfair. I want everyone to experience spontaneous things that I have seen in nature, like white dandelion seeds sailing the breezes to make new batches of ray shaped flowers in following springs, or seeing rain fall on the forest while the sun is out, so that the rain looks gold as it drifts sideways in the wind.

While the manifesto provided well-wrought arguments as to why a harmonization with nature would prove ineffectual as it would still lead to land depletion, I have experienced in my own life a harmony with nature not based on physical interactions, but based on a love of the heart and appreciation. Due to my own relationship with nature and the relationship I have seen others have with it, I strongly feel that there is a possibility for harmonizing with it, despite the manifesto's well-wrought arguments against such. Where there is consideration between two beings, there is a possibility of harmony between them, and nature is already open to this harmonization. While many of our human interactions with nature have been harmful, this dynamic must not obfuscate the many positive ones people have had with the natural world, or the potential relationship we may now rebuild.

In her book, [*Braiding Sweetgrass*](#), author Robin Wall Kimmerer explains the necessity of viewing the potential of humanity to be beneficial to the environment if we are to move forward with improving our relationship with it. In a survey, Kimmerer asked her students to rate their understanding of the negative interactions humans have had with nature. Expectantly, "(n)early every one of the two hundred students said confidently that humans and nature are a bad mix." But when asked about the positive interactions humans had with nature, "(t)he median response

was "none." Kimmerer then writes, "When we talked about this after class, I realized that they could not even imagine what beneficial relations between their species and others might look like. How can we begin to move toward ecological and cultural sustainability if we cannot even imagine what the path feels like?" It is necessary for Westerners to know what a beneficial relationship with nature looks like so that we may move forward in establishing this type of dynamic. Examples of good, reciprocal human relationships with nature have been demonstrated by Indigenous cultures.

Indigenous Land Management

Indigenous cultures in the Americas and elsewhere have lived in symbiotic relationships with nature for thousands of years. These symbiotic relationships allowed for these cultures to flourish while they also promoted the continual regeneration of nature. In her book, [Tending the Wild](#), Kat Anderson helps to dispel the notion of the American forest being an untouched wilderness prior to European settlement by describing some of the land management practices of California's Indigenous Community. We learn that far from being untouched, the natural environment was profoundly shaped by these communities. As Anderson writes, "When the first Europeans visited California... they did not find in many places a pristine, uninhabited wilderness but rather a carefully tended 'garden' that was the result of thousands of years of selective harvesting, tilling, burning, pruning, sowing, weeding, and transplanting (Anderson 126). These practices are still having a benefit in the forest today. According to a National Geographic article titled "[Forrest Gardens show how Native land stewardship can outdo nature](#)", "after more than a century on their own, Indigenous-created forest gardens of the Pacific Northwest support more pollinators, more seed-eating animals and more plant species than the

supposedly 'natural' conifer forests surrounding them." In the process of benefiting themselves these communities were also benefiting the rest of nature. As the article states succinctly, "When we look at forest gardens, they're actually enhancing what nature does, making it much more resilient, much more biodiverse—and, oh yeah, they feed people too". Instead of clearing land for agriculture, these communities implemented their gardens into the forest itself, allowing them to sustainably cultivate food without depleting land or resources.

The Indigenous relationship with the natural world is a perfect model for how we may engage productively with our ecosystem today. This type of relationship espouses contributing to nature and being mindful of our impacts on it so that we are able to borrow from it without depleting its resources. As past Indigenous People have shown us, it is by giving nature one's thoughtful attention in helping it be the healthiest, most robust system that it may be that would allow for a society to live amply off its resources. For instance, the Indigenous societies of California were able to create an abundance of foodstuff that supported a vast population. In *Tending the Wild*, Anderson includes the observation made by an early European about the size of California's indigenous population, in which he writes: "The population of this extensive valley was so great that it caused surprise, and required a close observation into the nature of the country that could without cultivation afford the means of subsistence to so great a community" (Anderson). Of course there was cultivation in this country, only the cultivation was embedded within the fabric of the environment so that it benefitted the rest of the ecosystem.

Cultivation was not only created to benefit humans. When John Muir, a well-known voice of California wildlife, voiced his admiration for the purple and gold flowers coating the Yosemite Valley floor, he was in fact viewing the well-cultivated gathering grounds of Indigenous communities who used these lands to feed butterflies, bees, and other insects, as well as themselves with the plants and bulbs gathered in these areas. Ironically, Indigenous societies were [removed](#) from the land when Yosemite was designated a national park. Indigenous cultures understood that benefiting other parts of the ecosystems would also benefit

themselves, since all parts of the ecosystem are connected. The rapport these cultures had with nature shows us that we as humanity can live cohesively with nature if we chose to, and that it is only our *choices* that make us destructive towards the environment, rather than the idea that we are inherently destructive to nature as human beings.

The Indigenous paradigm of reciprocity and contribution to nature serves as a stark counterpoint to the Western mode of extraction and domination over the natural world. We now see the results of two such ways of interacting with nature; one leads to human society flourishing in harmony with nature for thousands of years, while we are currently living with the devastating, crisis-inducing results of the other. It is clear then that reciprocity and contribution lead to abundance and sustainability, while extraction and mastery lead to depletion and poverty of resources. Extraction is never a sustainable mode of interaction as eventually all of which is being taken will be used up and unable to reproduce more. On the other hand, contribution to that which is used is a self-sustaining process, since it is being replaced in one form or another every time it is used.

The Western view of nature as being an object fit for plunder was perpetuated on the idea that human beings were separate from nature, or somehow outside of the environment and ecosystem. This fallacy is being realized now as our world falls apart around us, reminding us that human life and the life of nature are one and the same, and that the plunder and extraction of nature was in fact and a plundering of our own livelihoods. Exploiting the environment for profit is very much the same as pulling a rug from under our feet, then selling it for a few coins, even as we make our way downwards towards the floor. Indigenous cultures on the other hand knew that attention paid to the health and well-being of the ecosystem was attention paid to the health and well-being of their own lives.

As human beings we have profound creative abilities that can make us a significant threat to the environment. But we do not need to be a threat; we may choose to use our creative abilities to have a positive impact on its overall well-being. Problems arise when we take from nature without considering whether or not this action is the best for the rest of the environment, and when we take without replenishing what we have taken from nature. One example of us misusing our creative ability is producing materials that are not environmentally friendly. We have taken natural products and manufactured them to the point where they no longer resemble their original condition. Not only is the resemblance absent, but we have reconfigured natural products to the point where they can no longer be absorbed back into the environment. Looking at simple material like plastic we see the consequences of manufacturing nature past the point of absorption. The naturally occurring ingredients that compose plastic have been so altered that plastic is devastating the environment. Its toxic chemicals get into our soil and food systems, causing harm to ourselves and to other living beings.

However, the mode of taking from nature in ways that harm the ecosystem can be viewed as simply a mistake that can be corrected and learned from. It is not indicative of an inherent effect that human beings have on nature-- it is only a choice that could be chosen differently. That human beings are inherently detrimental to nature is like saying that a plant, a rock, or a stream are inherently detrimental to nature. We are nature so there is no prevailing truth that we are bound to destroy it. Our destructive choices towards the natural world are simply based on a lack of empathy and understanding of our place in it. The forest is continually reborn and preserved through the processes of destruction-- the very creation of life is dependent on the destruction of something before it. In properly running environmental systems, destruction is never a final stage, but is the link to new life and growth.

A good example of a creature who uses natural materials wisely is the beaver. A beaver builds dams that alter the course of waterways and changes the ecosystem. The beaver will even chomp down trees in its area to build its home and dam. However rather than being a

destructive nuisance to the environment, the beaver improves its environment and the ecosystem. Its flooding techniques provide habitats for plants and other animals, and its dam improves the water quality down stream. According to [Defenders of Wildlife](#), beavers can affect their environments for hundreds of years after they are gone. Like beavers and every other organism on planet earth, human beings are constantly giving and taking from the environment. And like the beaver, our extractions from the environment don't necessarily need to be harmful and damaging.

These animals contribute to the overall health and well-being of the ecosystem even when they extract parts of their environment for their own use-- in fact, animals contribute to the health and well-being of an environment *because* they destroy parts of it for their own use. The only time a non-human species is detrimental to the environment is if their imbalance and other non-human species are not able to keep their populations in balance. All non-human species have a rightful impact on nature, and have evolved the capabilities that make it most productive to the continuation of the environment's equilibrium.

We may bring this form of interacting with nature back into our modern American cultural mindset. Of course it will look different than the dynamic indigenous cultures had with nature, as our technology, population, and living standards have changed. Nonetheless we can still adhere to the reciprocity, contribution, and mindfulness of nature that allowed Indigenous cultures to live amicably with all other parts of the ecosystem. I do not think our current modern technologies deny us the possibility of living symbiotically with nature. Rather, in much the same way Indigenous Californians used their tools to facilitate healthy living standards in their environment, we in the United States may use our advanced technologies to improve the natural environment, including human and non-human life, through innovative techniques.

Empathy for Nature

I was once walking along a trail and came upon a young couple who were peeling bark off of a tree. The sight nauseated me. It seemed almost cruel to be stripping the protective layer off of something alive down to its raw and moist wood. And while it's true that they may not have been aware that the tree needed its bark for insulation and regulating its volume of moisture, I still felt upset that they were not respecting the boundaries of the oak. It seemed obvious and apparent to me that the bark was not supposed to be peeled off.

However, in rethinking this experience, I have thought of the causes that may have led to this couple having what seemed a lack of sensitivity towards the tree. Considering these reasons prompted me to recount memories of my own when I dealt harm to nature, and the circumstances that lead to me becoming more considerate towards nature over time.

I tried to understand why this couple may not have felt the same sensitivity toward the tree that I did. This tree they were peeling and all of nature was alive and growing; its bark had grown for a reason and to remove it would obviously harm it in some way. It is the same as the human body having skin-- obviously it serves a purpose to our survival, and damage done to it results in a wound. Why would layers of tree bark be any different? Indeed, bark protects the inner tissue of a tree from the outside world, and removing the bark leaves the tissue vulnerable to disease and infections caused by insects. It occurred to me that the couple may not have had the same guidance about how to respect nature as I did, and so were not able to develop their empathy toward a tree as I did.

Once when I was six or seven I tore down a tree. It was a young, skinny sapling and had many green leaves. I was feeling upset and wanted to destroy something. Tearing the tree down, something I had never done before, seemed invigorating. But a thought pressed itself upon me-- "wasn't the tree alive and growing, and wouldn't I be mean to attack it?" I felt a sort of

friendliness towards the tree, and that damaging it would be a betrayal, and that damaging it would be a betrayal, but I convinced myself that it was "just" a tree, and that there was no evidence that it deserved my respect.

I could have complete mastery over it as I wished. It is like when a child, feeling anger for harm done to him, will push down his friend, thinking that he will regain the power earlier taken from him, but all the while feel a confused shame festering inside of him. So I proceeded to push the sapling and bend it and work to break it, while a sharp guilt did its own damage within me. My logical thoughts that reduced the tree to nothing more than an object were noticeably weak compared to the feeling I had-- that I was wronging a living being. To override this guilt I sought to wreck the tree even more, thinking that I could overcome this guilt with further degrees of apathy.

The tree did not break as easily as I thought it would. It's youthful thinness was deceptive, and I found myself in a desperate struggle to bring it down, all the more guilty as I proceeded, and all the more violent to outpace my guilt. My older sister, who sat with my mother nearby, eventually asked me why I was "beating up" the tree. Her reproach immediately confirmed the validity of my guilt, and my rationalizations could no longer contend with my conscience. I gave up on the tree, leaving it half broken, but bent over, with its leaves hanging over the ground, and walked away feeling ashamed. I have never acted out violence towards nature since that time.

I grew up in a household where sensitivity towards nature was encouraged. My father was an herbalist who spent days gathering plants to heal people with various illnesses. Apart from knowing the medicinal properties of virtually every plant in the Catskill Mountains he would also describe the plants as being his friends and companions. My father was very attentive to how plants were being treated domestically and in the forest. He still praises me for once bringing inside young tomato plants from the rain without being asked to do so. While in the

forest, I was asked to always put back dirt from a plant I was harvesting so that the forest floor was the least disturbed we could make it. We would take all of the plants in a general vicinity, or any more than we needed, so as to leave the forest with the materials it needed to regenerate. He asked me and other children not to throw rocks through the trees or into bodies of water so as to not injure a bird or a fish. As an adult, I now think of throwing stones through the forest trees like throwing stones through someone's neighborhood, where someone could be injured or frightened. It was my father's little lessons that he gained from years of close association with nature that helped shape the way I interact with non-human life and view my place in nature today.

By having empathy, I do not need a reason to care for nature-- I am naturally inclined to do so. And yet applying empathy to my interactions with nature aids me in realizing the benefits it provides for me. In general, empathy is the driving force which causes us to act out of places of compassion and consideration. I think that people who live by viewing nature as an object undeserving of respect or consideration are less likely to feel sensitivity when damaging it.

In my case, I had a family that taught empathy towards nature, and fostered my love for the natural world. Empathy towards the natural world, like empathy towards other people, can be taught and encouraged during our childhood upbringing. I think that teaching children to have respect towards nature is a fundamental solution to curbing our self-destructive tendencies towards the world we live in. It is the ignorance of thinking that our perceived ability to over-master nature in turn gives us the right to actually do so.

It is the foundations of care and empathy that guide us to do well by others. When we do not have empathy towards someone or something, then all additional knowledge is useless in terms of being good to others. For instance, if the couple had all of the scientific data they needed to know how peeling bark of a tree would damage it, but couldn't care less that they were damaging it, nothing would prevent them from doing so. But, if they had empathy, learning how peeling bark off a tree affected it would have most likely offset them from doing so. In the

same way that we enjoy giving to those we love and support them, I too enjoy supporting nature because I care for it, and seeing it flourish uplifts me to a state of awe and appreciation.

Loving Nature

The more loving I am towards someone, the more I see of them. This is the same experience I have with natural things. In fact, loving anything lets me experience it in a clearer light, but for the moment I will speak directly to my interaction with the natural world. I became aware of this way of seeing nature clearly last year during my spring semester. I had been reading well known nature writers, including John Muir's *The Mountains and Me*. In the book, Muir describes his interactions with plants, birds, streams and boulders in the California mountains. The way he spoke about nature in such intimate and compassionate terms allowed me to learn of a new depth to nature, and ways of thinking that allowed me to deepen my own relationship with the natural world.

Muir gave nature the deep care and consideration that one would give to a parent or friend. His writings also affirmed to me just how elegant and deserving of respect nature is, and I have seen this for myself by interacting with it in a personal way. It is like hearing from a friend of someone you mutually know, and learning how that someone uplifted and inspired the one speaking to you, and you yourself remember the ways in which they treated you well, but now you have gained further insight into the scope of their graciousness. So too did I learn more about the generosity of nature from reading Muir's words. He spoke about the lives of water oozles, and respectively described their movements and familial dynamics with the consideration towards any human family, honoring their privacy and their decisions. What Muir made clear in his writing was that he loved nature. He never needed to say so explicitly, it was reflected in the words he used to convey nature's autonomy.

John Burroughs was another writer who encouraged me to observe nature with intention. In *Leaf and Tendril (1908)*, Burroughs describes his "the art of seeing things" which, just as it indicates, describes intelligent ways of seeing the natural world. He humorously states, "I have as little hope of being able to tell the reader how to see things as I would have in trying to tell him how to fall in love or to enjoy his dinner. Either he does or he does not, and that is about all there is of it. Some people seem born with eyes in their heads, and others with buttons or painted marbles, and no amount of science can make the one equal to the other in the art of seeing things" (146). Burroughs is telling us here that being born with a pair of eyes only will allow you to see so much. The organs themselves only allow us to perceive the surface of things as a way of functionality, but do not inherently show us the true quality of the thing we are seeing. It is the inner mind of the observer that allows their ocular capabilities to perceive things in deeper, or more compelling ways.

Burroughs tells us that, "The great mass of mankind are, in this respect, like the rank and file of an army: they fire vaguely in the direction of the enemy, and if they hit, it is more a matter of chance than of accurate aim. But here and there is the keen-eyed observer; he is the sharpshooter; his eye selects and discriminates, his purpose goes to the mark" (146). While many can see, Burroughs is telling us there are only a few who can see clearly and purposefully. He then tells us just how to see things with purpose and clarity, "The secret is, no doubt, love of the sport. Love sharpens the eye, the ear, the touch; it quickens the feet, it steadies the hand, it arms against the wet and the cold. What we love to do, that we do well. To know is not all; it is only half. To love is the other half" (146). Burroughs is telling us that knowing what we're seeing is only half of the process of observation. It is love that takes the step further of real seeing, of a more intimate level of understanding. It is like when you see a person, and you know that they are expressing themselves, and when you have cared for them, you are vested in seeing what that expression means.

One evening in late February I went to Blithewood Gardens, an area on my college campus that overlooks the Hudson River and the Catskill Mountains behind it. Feeling inspired by Burrough's after reading him that day, I set out to observe nature with the intention of viewing it with love. I have always viewed nature with a sense of appreciation, and now I wanted to engage Burroughs' approach as the lens by which I viewed things. I first went to a tree and laid on my back beneath it, so that I could see it extending above me. Later that night, I wrote in my journal an account of my time there: "My gaze drifted up to the thin branches that twirled against the sky, which was moving into deeper blue behind it. Remembering Burroughs, I looked at the tree with eyes of love and saw it more clearly, more fully. Details began revealing themselves as though beckoned by my affection." The tree took on an identity, or rather I became aware of its identity. It was no longer a passive object, a mere result of the systems of nature, but a personality with its own expression and autonomy. What I am saying is, for the first time I saw the tree as having a life. Not just alive in the sense that organisms were functioning and that it was able to turn sunlight into oxygen, but that it had created a life of its own. It seemed clear that it grew its branches in the way that it did because it wanted to, that these growth formations were an extension of its character, rather than being a purely functioning reaction for its survival. Simply observing the tree with empathy revealed to me it's more personal qualities.

Love guides us to see the meaning of things, rather than merely their physicality. "What we love to do, we do well", is a maxim that applies to every discipline. When I play the guitar, I do so not just to produce the sounds of the piece I am learning, but to draw them out in beautiful and flowing melodies. Or when I am painting, I labor over colors and composition for hours, fighting against sleep and fatigue as the desire for making something beautiful is too alluring to resist. So too when you look at something you love, you search to see more of it, since it makes you glad to see more of what you love.

Little Natures

I found myself in a Brooklyn neighborhood last summer with London Planetrees planted one after another. I was in that neighborhood to move a friend's heavy furniture into my car, while rushing to catch a plane from JFK. The whole situation was hectic, and I was feeling the most stress I had felt in a while. I remember walking up a part of the sidewalk for a moment to my friend's apartment, and noticing the presence of the trees and the calming effect they were having on me. I felt a sense of relief walking on that sidewalk, as the trees seemed to absorb the sounds of the city, and not only shielded me from the sun, but cast a shade of calmness over me. There was something pleasant about them being all the same size and shape, and they gave me a sense of well-being, a feeling that permeated the whole neighborhood. These London Planetrees had a distinct presence as they were so contrary to the rest of their surroundings.

I am not the only one who feels relief upon seeing greenery in the city. In a study led by [Eugenia C. South, a Professor at Penn's Perelman School of Medicine](#), participants experienced lower heart rates and reductions in their stress levels when they walked past empty lots converted into green spaces. Simply by seeing green spaces, let alone interacting with them, we are eased and uplifted, better able to create well-functioning lives for ourselves. Another study published by Harvard Health Publishing in 2019 found that study groups who walked for 90 minutes in natural settings "had lower activity in the prefrontal cortex, a brain region that is active during rumination — defined as repetitive thoughts that focus on negative emotions." Dr. Stauss, one of the researchers of the study, further explained that, "When people are depressed or under high levels of stress, this part of the brain malfunctions, and people experience a continuous loop of negative thoughts." The study groups who walked in urban settings did not experience any change to their stress levels.

The main reasons for these nature induced health benefits is that the quiet nature affords us soothes our nerves and, similarly to what was described in the first study, "the visual aspects of nature can also have a soothing effect." According to Dr. Strauss, "Having something pleasant to focus on like trees and greenery helps distract your mind from negative thinking, so your thoughts become less filled with worry." These are some important reasons why green spaces and greenery must be cultivated in urban areas.

While the London Planetrees I walked beside did not provide complete silence against the buzz of the city, they did noticeably help me relax and go about dealing with my errand with more ease and clarity. I truly believe that had the London Plane not been there, completing the errand would have been more stress-inducing than it was. Simply looking at them had a calming effect on me, just as the study found.

Once when traveling from the Catskills into New York City, I was already missing the scenery of woods when we came upon two blooming cherry trees on an island between multiple lanes flooded with traffic. The cherry trees stunned me-- I was taken with the unexpected view of their gleaming white flowers. I found it breathtaking that my whole view of blurred cars and concrete suddenly changed to trees full of flowers undulating with their white blossoms that I knew to be soft, and this immediately changed my mood. I sat in the passenger seat stunned by their sudden appearance for several minutes afterwards, feeling more optimistic than I had felt before.

My acute sense of appreciation for trees when I come upon them in the city is not just because of their scarcity, but because the urban environment allows me to see the magical way they can impact their surroundings. When I am home in the countryside I am pleased to observe the many trees, but due their abundance, their individual contributions are not as easily seen. In the city however, I see and feel clearly how the presence of even one tree contributes to the space around it. I could feel the pleasant calm that the London Planetrees were providing because they were the only nature around, and to me they alone imbued the neighborhood with

these refreshing qualities. I am reminded of the cleanliness of the earth when I walk past trees on Manhattan sidewalks with plastic rubbish strewn about. The greenery of them seems to counter the rubbish and other derelictions of the city, and enhance it as points of stillness, greenness and calm.

In his essay, "The Problem With Wilderness", William Cronon argues for the importance of respecting the nature that is near us and part of our lives. Instead of focussing our conservation efforts solely on land deemed "wilderness" that is romanticized as being separate from human beings, it is necessary that we start recognizing the nature growing around us, as having a relationship with this nature is needed for our well being just as much as is the distant and untouched wilderness. If we consider our backyards as nature, we can see that many of us already do have an appreciation for nature. This shows us the value of creating more "little natures" in our towns and cities, rather than relying on the vast wilderness as a means of having a connection with nature.

Forward Into Harmony

Indigenous cultures lived in harmony with nature because they knew and understood nature. I do not mean they only knew and understood nature by purely biological or functional terms, though they did, and this knowledge is important, but they knew the personality and the consciousness of the ecosystem. "All plants are our brothers and sisters. They talk to us and if we listen, we can hear them" is a well known [Arapaho](#) quote, and portrays many of the beliefs of Indigenous cultures throughout the Americas and in other parts of the world. Indigenous cultures developed this highly beneficial way of living in nature because they were intimate with the rest of life around them. They knew that all of nature was alive and could be accessed and understood in the same ways that we understand, learn from, and create bonds with other humans.

In *Tending the Wild*, Kat Anderson shares the quote of a Pit River man: " Everything is living, even the rocks...Everything is alive. That is what we Indians believe. White people think that everything is dead" (Anderson, 8). Anderson goes onto describe that, "Trusting that respect and understanding would come through relationship, native people believed that animals--birds, toads, lizards, bears--could become familiar with, even grow accustomed to, the ways of homo sapiens" (Anderson, 17). It is by knowing nature in this more direct, personal way that Indigenous cultures were able to develop a close, symbiotic relationship with it. It is the same as in human relations-- the better you know and understand someone the better you are able to have a beneficial dynamic with them. It is necessary for all of us to establish this level of intimacy with nature if we are to develop a functioning relationship with it.

Developing an intimacy with nature is an experience available for everyone. Simply by thanking the air that we breathe for its service and noticing how the soil is supporting our life we can develop a sense of intimacy and establish our relationship with nature. We can establish our

relationship with nature. And engaging with one part of nature affects one's perception and interaction with other non-human forms as well. For instance, if one develops a certain level of familiarity and respect for one tree, this perspective will carry over when viewing another tree or a forest of trees, since the capacity of empathy for non-human life was already developed.

Naturalist, artist, and educator John Muir Laws, not to be confused with John Muir the writer, encourages us to develop a deep attention to nature. "Love of nature is where stewardship flows", [writes Laws](#). "In contrast, disconnection from nature leads to apathy in the face of all environmental problems." Laws goes on to describe his own experience of developing a relationship with nature while pursuing an art project of painting different species: "By the time I was done drawing, a relationship had been forged between me and the plant. Instead of picking a plant, I would sit beside it, draw it to scale, add my watercolor, then stand up, and fluff up the grasses where I had been sitting. Toward the end of the six years of this work I found myself talking to the plants as I painted them and thanking them and the place I found them before moving on" (Laws). Laws is describing that simply by spending time on plants and giving them his attention, he became more considerate of nature and even developed a personal connection with it.

A fundamental way we may move forward is helping our children learn about and connect with the earth. Children naturally tend to be more open and curious about the natural world in ways that would aid them in creating better environments in the future.

This reminded me of two years ago when my friend Sophia told me about an activity she helped to facilitate as a counselor at a summer camp for young girls called [Gaia Passages](#). Sophia explained that the activity consisted of each camper sitting next to a plant of their choosing and speaking with for a half an hour. The campers were at first indifferent to the plant, but after the allotted time were more protective and caring for their individual plants. "Some of the girls did not want to leave their plant" said Sophia, "and were attentive to it for the rest of

their time there". Sophia describes how the girls related their feelings towards the plants, that they were now friends, and how they were genuinely concerned for their well-being. The activity was so simple, yet had been deeply impactful, especially for the children. It made me wonder what future generations would be like in their views and interactions with the rest of nature if we were to encourage our schools and camps to introduce children to nature, and let them forge bonds with plants, soil, and water through the interactive means of speaking with and observing them. I am certain that a generation brought with these lessons would not only care more deeply for the natural, non-human world, but would strive to learn ways to live sustainably and harmoniously with nature. It is the level of intimacy we have with nature that allows us to find ways to work with it, and to develop beneficial relationships with non-human life.

The Consciousness of Water

Nature is alive with energy and consciousness. The inner-life of nature is subtle and requires a level of sensitivity to be felt, and with the usage of our spiritual faculties, it may be experienced to deeper degrees.

I have been committed to a spiritual practice for the last three years under the tutelage of my teacher, [SatGuru Jnanda Moksha Brahmananda](#). This practice involves the uplifting of one's inherent spiritual faculties and awareness so that we may be of better service to ourselves and to others. This practice has deepened my relationship considerably with the natural world.

During my practice I have learned that in all the elements of nature, in light, ether, air, fire, water, and earth, there are nature beings, or elementals, that express nature's consciousness and carry out its functions. For instance, light elementals help to spread sunlight over the earth and air elementals help to administer rain storms.

The first time I became familiar with the elementals was when I looked with my mind's eye or spiritual eye at the water elementals of the reservoir I was sitting by, and saw them to be very cheerful and playful. I wondered at their childlike nature and learned from Jnanda that evening that in pristine environments, the elementals are generally happy, as nature is always working in a state of harmony. Wanting to teach me something, Jnanda then directed me to view the water elementals in the vicinity of Fukushima off the coast of Japan. Immediately I saw that these elementals were suffering. They were heavy and bogged down with pain, and I could feel their moans and helplessness. It was difficult for me to view this, as they were childlike entities in a state of agony. Jnanda was also affected by what we were seeing and came to tears, which I have rarely seen him do.

Now in the midst of writing this I looked at the air elementals around Slide Mountain, the tallest mountain in the Catskills, and saw them going about their work of bringing in heavy snow

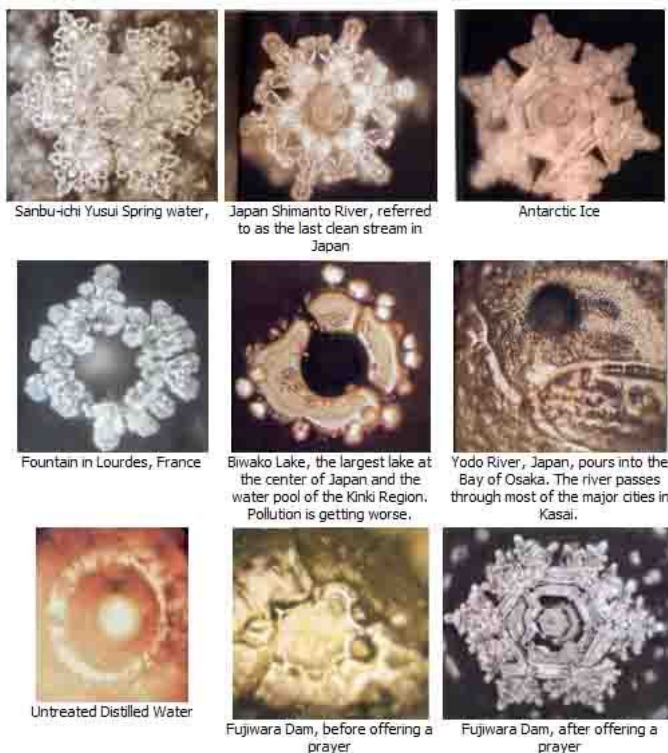
to this area in a state of peace. I then looked at the air elementals in the most polluted section of Delhi India, which was the most polluted place I could think of, and immediately felt the elementals to be desperately trying to get out of the area, rather than peacefully going about their work as they have a right to.

It is not only air and water elementals being devastated by human impacts, but fire and earth elementals are being affected as well. For instance, one night over the summer I dreamt of some men ravaging the earth in some way, with a pain and discord pervading the dream. When I intuitively analyzed this dream upon waking I found that it was identifying a fracking operation happening near me, and that the elementals were panicked, in pain, and frightened, in the same way that human beings would be when an invading army marauds through their home.

I did energy healing work for the elementals to help them endure the assault, but know that it would take acts of legislation to bring these economic practices to a halt. While trying to pass legislation on the basis of nature beings suffering from them is not an option, I have heard others express their dismay of fracking not only in regards to the detriments it causes to human life, but also on the basis that they feel it is violence towards the earth. Several people I know are sensitive enough to feel that breaking into the ground is a form of violence, and that the earth is suffering in some way, even if they do not use the language to describe it as I have. It is these voices that will help to protect elementals from the continuation of violence.

The consciousness of nature has not only been captured by mine and other's spiritual eyes, but by microscopes as well. In his New York Times Bestseller, [*The Hidden Messages in Water*](#), author and scientist Masaru Emoto shares his research experiments on water. As described in the book, Masaru and his team photographed frozen ice crystals of water from different regions. The photographs reveal that in the polluted bodies of water, the crystals are disfigured and dull, while in the clean bodies of water, the crystals are symmetric and beautiful.

Here are a few images of the water crystals from various pages:



The water crystals from polluted look parasitic, while the ones from pristine waters show complex and graceful structures. Masaru and his team also exposed water to different subjects, such as music, images, and human words. After exposure to these subjects and freezing the water, the researchers photographed the frozen water's crystal formations. The differences in results were similar to the differences between clean and polluted waters--positive subjects, like uplifting words and positive music produced beautiful crystals, while negative subjects, such as words of malice or discordant music produced disfigured crystals. Below are photographs of water crystals after different words were written on the jars that contained them:



This experiment shows us that pollution and pristiness does not only apply to the outer environment, but to our inner ones as well, as we ourselves are composed of water and the elements. It shows us the importance of doing our best to become more centered on love and appreciation, and less on anger and resentment, so that our inner waters are pristine and well-rounded by the energies we radiate. This is what it means to be a gift to nature-- to tend to its outer and inner environments

The Art of Nature

Light flowing around trees,
In the ember glow of dawn.
A dove call in the forest—
The tone of light moving.

Morning Birds

Many mornings in the warmer months I awake with birds singing in the branches beside my window. I have come to notice, during the moments in which I have layed in bed listening, that there is a procession of different birds singing alongside the movement of the sun. At the start of dawn a mourning dove will begin with its deep dulcet call that rolls through the forest like a wave. Robins and thrushes will tend to soon follow with lighter pitched calls, and as the light increases, smaller birds with quicker, more exciting calls join. By the time the sun is up the trees are teeming with song birds, when only an hour or so before the forest is silent save one lone dove call.

It is this sort pattern that draws me into an awareness of the defined order of nature that nature as a whole uses to express itself. It is as though nature has designed its own orchestra to amplify the progression of the sun, with its first pre-arrival being marked by a slow introduction, then an ever increasing rapidity until at last, when the sun fully emerges into the sky, the forest reaches a zenith of sound, just as a common orchestral does which it reaches its own crescendo in a piece of music. Indeed, the sun's rising may be the most important event

each day for the natural world and life on our planet, seeing as it is the foundation for life and growth, so I understand why nature would evolve to announce it each morning in some way. When experiencing the gifts of nature I do not consider that eons of evolution amounted to the beauty around me-- I can only experience the majesty of that particular moment.

Though unlike a musical orchestra composed of musicians who intend on making a climatic moment, the birds are singing for their own needs. It is commonly believed that they sing to attract mates and claim their territories. They may fall into the natural morning crescendo looking for berries ripening on the ground and fruit in trees, and the cool, colorful fragrances of flowers, and maybe a part of them is simply happy that the sun is rising. Hearing them sing may sound to me like an aria, or piano moment, which is easy to feel and understand, but it is difficult to imagine the technical labor and volume of time supporting this seemingly effortless grace of music. It is the same as with the birds, that their eons long evolution has resulted in their own movement in the morning, which looks and sounds to me as though they are singing light into existence as the sun comes up.

It is the way of nature using its minute aspects to create a unified expression, even though its aspects are working in seemingly unconnected terms, that reminds me of nature's inherent aesthetic structure. It is like an artist applying individual strokes of color onto a canvas--- colors not doing anything but emitting their own essence. It is because the artist arranges them according to his liking that the colors work in relation to each other and constitute the whole piece. The colors themselves of course do not work to highlight and contrast each other but are only doing what they naturally do, and because of this the artist is able to use them so freely. In this same way, nature has created a procession of bird songs to accent the sun.

The Sun and Gratitude

To wake up in the mornings to the gift of bird song gives me a feeling of gratitude that I should experience such a gift simply by being close to nature. This feeling of gratitude does not stop in the mornings, as throughout the day I am able to see things like the figure of a mountain, the shape of a river, and the patterns on the back of a butterfly as it bounces off a breeze, showing the ease of being weightless.

The gifts of nature are always forthcoming, delighting the senses with patterned leaves, fresh water and soft grass, berries ripening on the ground and fruit in trees, the cool, colorful fragrances of flowers, and the sun. This ultimate giver always has something for my well-being, and conveys to me an awareness of a certain generosity in the world. For instance, one chilly morning I stood in a field directly in a spot of sunlight, which kept me warm in the cold air around me. As the sunlight made its way through my closed eye-lids with a warm orange light, and then covered my body, I considered for the first time that in all of my years I have never considered the almost absurd fortune we are given through the means of the sun.

How is it that a series of so many events has led to the sun beaming down on us and supporting all life on earth? NASA tells us that clouds of interstellar dust collapsed and created the spinning solar system, with the sun being in its center. How is that dust in space has led to a point in which earth is supported by the sun? It is not the steps of the evolution of the solar system or of life's living organisms that I wonder about but why. Out of all things that could have happened, why did the sun become a burning ball of gas, and the earth grow full of soil and plants, and the relationship between these two orbs to become that one is the perpetual giver and sustainer, and the other the endless receiver?

The Divine Indweller

In these essays I have described my love for nature and my love for human beings, and the ways in which I would like us to move forward in considering others and the natural world. The most important lessons I have learned from viewing the awesome scenes of nature is realizing that its magnitude dwells within me and all beings. There was one day when I was hiking up a mountain trail behind my house to reach the summit that overlooked the opposing valley and mountains. I was walking fast to reach the summit before the sunset turned to dimmer colors. This was often the case around sunset-- I would hurry to a good view to see the sunset colors as though I were worried of missing some special event. Out of the shadowed woods from which I could scarcely see the flaming sky through the covering tree branches, I emerged onto the summit, and there overlooked mountains quilted in an amaranth light. It looked as though the sunlight had draped its last robe over these mountains, to give them all that it had for their warmth that winter evening.

I was aware that I was viewing a stunning scene on that mountain, but was unable to feel its beauty. There was a disconnect between my inner state and the outer one, as the outer one depicted a scene of calm serenity, while my inner one felt a painful desire to grasp it. I could only view the external but did not feel or experience it. Frustrated I turned to the Divine Indweller in my heart and asked, "How am I to experience this beauty that I am seeing on the mountains?" The answer promptly came back as, "All external beauty comes from the Divine within, since the Divine gives all of the world's its beauty. Because of this, that which I do not feel within, I will not feel without". With this knowledge I placed both hands over my heart and looking down, smiled deeply. I understood that the power which generates all the world's beauty

is in the core of my being, and that the beauty of seeing mountains filled with light is an extension of the beauty that dwells within me.

I stood there for a moment with this knowledge, then suddenly felt a change of energy. I was conscious of a ray of peace upon me, like a sun ray hitting me, and all of my being was basking in this energy. I remember laughing, then being brought to my knees and shaking my head, then laying on my back weeping lightly with tears of joy. And although I was no longer looking at the robed mountains, but at the bare trees above me, I was feeling the most beauty I ever had. I understand now that I was given this experience so that I may remember where true beauty comes from, and so that I may tell others that the beauty of nature is found within themselves.

In the same way that I do not wish to preserve nature by living away from it, but rather to live within its magic and tend to it, so too do I wish to not merely view the surface of human beings, but rather tend to their Divine Nature and help them cultivate it. Everyone has a Divine potential, and for those who are open and willing, I am here to help and support them.

Because the external nature is a manifestation of Divine Nature, it serves as a reflection of the Divine Nature that we are. Because of this, whenever we see a prominent mountain range radiant with snow, we may remember that it is the power and fortitude of our own being, and when watching a leaf float down onto a small pool brimming with the gold of the reflecting trees overhead, we may know that the scene describes our own gentleness and peace.

This knowledge has aided me in not being dependent on the external for a sense of awe and beauty. For instance, three days ago while biking past an open field, I felt a moment of disappointment for not being able to take in the sunlight beaming across the landscape. However, I remembered where that beauty truly comes from, and so was able to feel the Sun of Love in my heart, and its light that spread over me at the thought of it.

Conclusion

Human beings have a rightful place in nature. This rightful place is one of equality with non-human life and other natural systems. When human beings live in a state of equality with the rest of nature, as have the Indigenous cultures, a state of balance and equilibrium may be achieved, allowing for the entire ecosystem to benefit. However, when we view nature as being unequal to us and take from it without consideration, we disrupt and disparage the very ecosystem our lives depend on.

However, this perspective regarding nature may be corrected and rectified. We can learn to interact with nature in ways that are sustainable, eco-friendly, and most importantly, as a life-force. Understanding that nature is alive can open up a profound world to us, where we can develop a true relationship and closeness with nature, allowing us a greater capability to live harmoniously with it. It is by discovering the Nature within us, the very nature of beauty that dwells in the heart, that will bring us the most peace and understanding, and which will allow us to have the greatest impact on the world around us.

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