Philosophy as a Way of Life: Integrating Pierre Hadot's Spiritual Exercises for Practicing Democracy and Sustainability

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Too often, philosophy appears as a disembodied discourse or method, detached from the profound influence it once had on one's way of life as suggested in the epigraph above. Within education, philosophy is often used as an analytic tool to understand a concept, or as a framework to understand a particular phenomenon (that is, a Foucauldian perspective on power), or as providing tools for learning how to think "critically." However, as Pierre Hadot meticulously documents in his book, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, the ancient schools of philosophy took a starkly different approach to philosophy, an exercise which he calls "the art of living."[1] For the Hellenistic and Roman schools, as Hadot describes them, philosophy was seen as a "concrete attitude and determinate lifestyle, which engages the whole of existence."[2] It corresponded to "a profound transformation of one's vision of the world and a metamorphosis of one's personality."[3] Yet:

> If ancient philosophy established an intimate link between philosophical discourse and the form of life, why is it that today, given the way philosophy is usually taught, philosophy is presented as above all discourse, which may be theoretical and systematic, or critical, but in any case lacks a direct relationship to the philosopher's way of life?

Foundational to Hadot's notion of "philosophy as a way of life," is understanding it as a spiritual exercise. Here, he is not referring to a religious tradition per se, but a spiritual one in the sense of a holistic understanding of thought, psyche, and ethical practice.[4] A spiritual exercise thus becomes a way to talk about philosophy as a way of living rather than as a mere discourse.[5]

Using Hadot's discussion of "philosophy as a way of life" as a springboard, we aim to narrow our focus on the interplay of democracy and sustainability and explore the integration of them in educational contexts, discussing

two scaffolding practices for educators to begin practicing philosophy as an exercise in the art of living; namely, being called into comic questioning and developing a rule of life "to guide and inspire our actions."[6] We will describe how this integration can serve as a catalyst for developing a more robust notion of dialogue in the context of democracy and formulating a rule of life in the context of sustainability.

Our exploration and discussion of philosophy as a way of life finds resonance with the themes addressed in the call for Philosophy of Education Society's 2024 conference: themes centered on the pivotal role of information, misinformation, and disinformation in shaping our beliefs and the realities we inhabit. The notion of *formation*, nested within information, is of importance for us. Particularly in terms of the ways information, misinformation, and disinformation form us to inhabit the world and our lives with others in particular manners and modes. Our focus turns to the interplay between democracy and sustainability, two vital aspects of contemporary society, in order to understand how we inhabit our own lives and how our lives are enmeshed within the lives of others, both human and more-than-human. By reintegrating philosophy as a way of life in education, our paper contributes to the broader conversations about both democratic and sustainability education where the transmission of knowledge and beliefs takes a secondary role to the development of shared practice as formation.[7] In this way, our paper sheds light on the role educators can play in addressing the realities we individually and collectively construct.

In the first part of this paper, we will use Hadot's philosophy as a spiritual exercise to highlight the transformative power of philosophical dialogue, which challenges individuals to question themselves and become aware of their connection to the larger community, ultimately leading them to embody democratic modes of being in society. In the second part, we will discuss Hadot's "rule of life" in the context of spiritual exercises, emphasizing the importance of formulating guiding principles and embedding them within a communal conversation of values to foster a deeper commitment to, and practical application of, sustainability in everyday life.

ON BEING CALLED INTO QUESTION FOR DEMOCRACY

Hadot's understanding of philosophy as spiritual exercise focuses our attention on the ways in which the discipline and activity of philosophy is about both who we are and who we are becoming. When paired with thinking about democracy, this can help make sense of, and further John Dewey's claim that "democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, or conjoint communicated experience."[8] Here, we want to turn attention to the way Hadot's framing of dialogue within his notion of philosophy as a spiritual exercise helps us think through not only democratic education but democracy itself.

Hadot claims that philosophy as a spiritual exercise was brought forth most clearly in the West through the figure of Socrates, and specifically, through the form of dialogue.[9] The importance of dialogue, both enacted and written, was not the specific content, the *what* being discussed; the central question of Socratic dialogues is the question of "*who* is doing the talking."[10] Hadot argues: "Socrates harassed his interlocutors with questions that put *themselves* into question, forcing them to pay attention and take care of themselves."[11] This focus on the interlocutors of the dialogue was a focused attention on the dialogue partners, *calling them into question*.

Drawing on the work of Victor Goldschmidt, Hadot claims the written dialogues were intended:

> Not to 'inform' people but to 'form' them. . . [Plato's] work consisted in 'forming' people — that is to say, in transforming individuals by making them experience, through the example of a dialogue which the reader has the illusion of overhearing, the demands of reasons, and eventually the norm of the good.[12]

As one is put into question through dialogue, one is forced to give attention (*prosoche*) to themselves.[13] Through this attention, "the philosopher is fully aware of what he does at each instant, and he *wills* his actions fully."[14] Hadot argues that this form of dialogue calls one into question and allows them to be transformed, to change their attitudes and understandings as they are questioned,

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and forced to give attention to themselves.

Thus far, Hadot's explanation of dialogue can be understood as focusing on the individual, for it is the individual that is called into question and must give attention to themselves and their actions. However, dialogue necessarily involves the presence of others, and therefore, the possibility of democracy, in at least two important ways. First, dialogue requires a community to sustain it. Spoken dialogues obviously require an other, one outside the self, who engages with the self. Hadot sees dialogue as a "communal spiritual exercise" where one is "invited to participate in such inner spiritual exercises as examination of conscience and attention to oneself."[15] In being invited into dialogue, one comes to see that "only he who is capable of a genuine encounter with the other is capable of an authentic encounter with himself, and the converse is equally true."[16] The presence of a community of others is necessary for genuine dialogue to take place, even with written texts, one is drawn in to both observe and participate in the dialogue itself.

There is also a second way in which the community is essential to dialogue, which helps to draw us directly into the importance of dialogue for democracy, and this is the cosmic dimension of dialogue. Dialogue requires one to give attention to oneself, to be called into question, and this attention leads to the development of a cosmic consciousness whereby one becomes aware of being a part of the larger whole of the cosmos.[17] According to Hadot, this should lead the sage, or the one who loves wisdom, to engage with and act on behalf of the larger community: the sage "thinks and acts within a cosmic perspective. He has the feeling of belonging to a whole which goes beyond the limits of his individuality."[18] Being called into question through dialogue leads one to attend to themselves and thus, to move beyond themselves as they come to see their lives as part of a greater whole—a topic that emerges in the following section as we examine sustainability and the more-than-human world.

This cosmic dimension opens up the possibility of philosophy directing us to learn to live *for* the city. Describing the teaching of ancient philosophical schools, Hadot claims that they "never gave up having an effect on their cities, transforming society, and serving their citizens."[19] This engagement and service

to the larger human community was understood as acting according to justice, which necessitated and required engagement with the community. Thus, far from being an individual activity, dialogue, as that which calls one into question, necessitates a community to support and encourage this form of engagement as it drives one toward full engagement with the larger community in service and for justice.

Hadot's understanding of ancient dialogue can help reposition democratic education. Dialogue that puts individuals into question and leads them out of themselves to be oriented toward the whole community, is, itself, democracy in action. It is about becoming democratic persons. Educating for democracy is not simply understanding governmentality or participation in democratic processes. Nor is it simply engaging in conversations to solve problems or understand more fully the positions of others. While these may be helpful, Hadot's notion of dialogue pushes us to conceive of dialogue with others as a spiritual activity that leads to both inner transformation and community engagement.

Dialogue in the form of discussion is often touted as an important aspect of democratic education. Walter Parker has made the important distinction between the different ways dialogue is used in the classroom. What he refers to as "discussion" in the classroom often aims at understanding diverse perspectives or developing a shared understanding and knowledge base; this is contrasted with what Parker refers to as "deliberation," where students seek not to simply understand but to make "a plan of action that will resolve a shared problem."[20] This basic distinction between "discussion," learning about another's perspectives or a particular phenomenon, and "deliberation," collective decision-making, is a common way to understand the role of dialogue in democratic education. However, both forms of dialogue can often lead to what Bruno Latour refers to as "acting or speaking *about* politics" rather than "acting or speaking *politically*."[21] Latour claims speaking about politics involves the "expression of indisputable values, affirmation of indisputable opinions, and exposition of weaponized grievances" whereas speaking politically entails being "ready to dispute your values, to discuss your opinions, and to abandon or at least demilitarize your grievances."[22] Dialogue, conceived as discussion

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or deliberation, in the classroom too often fails to reach the level of speaking politically and remains at the level of speaking about politics. Hadot's understanding of dialogue allows for the framing of classroom engagement in a way that is speaking politically, opening students up to attending to themselves—their values and opinions—and seeing their lives in light of belonging to a larger community. The formative dimension of Hadot's notion of dialogue allows democratic discussions to challenge and reframe the interlocutors themselves as democratic persons. Instead of the primary focus of dialogue being on a position or issue per se, Hadot's notion of dialogue allows students, and teachers, in dialogue to attend to their own ways of being in the world with others This opens the possibility to be otherwise and for change toward more democratic modes of being in the world with others. In this way, discussion moves beyond discussing a shared understanding or deliberating action on a shared problem, even while those may be helpful and important; rather, dialogue becomes the enactment of democracy as we collectively attend to our shared lives together.

ON DEVELOPING A RULE OF LIFE FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Scaffolding onto this notion of dialogue as calling into question is another closely related and essential spiritual exercise—again, in the sense Hadot ascribes to it as "a profound transformation of the individual's mode of seeing and being"; namely, the formulation of a rule of life.[23] This spiritual exercise, which Hadot attributes to the Greco-Roman philosophical schools, involves developing a set of principles to guide and elevate our day-to-day lives. These principles, according to Hadot, should be readily accessible, deeply ingrained, and instantly applicable to any situation that may arise: "We are to steep ourselves in the rule of life (*kanon*), by mentally applying it to all life's possible situations, just as we assimilate a grammatical or mathematical rule through practice, by applying it to individual cases."[24] Essentially, the rule of life is a code of conduct, emphasizing the development of an inner wisdom to lead one through the complexities, uncertainties, and challenges of existence. An important component in this practice is attending to one's attention: "Attention (*prosoche*)," Hadot writes, "allows us to respond immediately to events, as if they were questions asked of us all of a sudden. In order for this to be possible,

we must always have the fundamental principles 'at hand' (*procheiron*)."[25] These fundamental principles are especially crucial when presented with the questions and challenges life constantly presents to us: "What we need," Hadot clarifies, "are persuasive formulae or arguments (*epilogismoi*), which we can repeat to ourselves in difficult circumstances, so as to check movements of fear, anger, or sadness…. principles which will guide and inspire our actions."[26] This process can be understood as an interplay between imagination and affectivity on the one hand and the training of thought on the other, encompassing both memorization (*mneme*) and meditation (*melete*).[27]

Moreover, the formulation of a rule of life, according to Hadot, is "not linked to a corporeal attitude but is a purely rational, imaginative, or intuitive exercise that can take extremely varied forms."[28] The varied forms could follow, for example, an Epicurean contemplation of the birth of worlds within the vast void, or a Stoic contemplation of the rational and inevitable "unfolding of cosmic events," each of which could exercise the imagination to consider the triviality of human affairs in the grand expanse of space and time.[29] In various philosophical schools, philosophy often centered on attentively concentrating on the present moment, either to relish it in enjoyment or to experience it with full awareness.[30] The aim of the rule of life is to maintain a set of fundamental principles or guidelines, ready not only to understand and contemplate, but to inform how we can engage with the world.[31]

When we apply Hadot's description of a rule of life as a spiritual exercise to sustainability, it is not difficult to see how it could be integrated into, and become an integral part of, understanding and guiding one's way of life. As is often the case, merely possessing a technical or theoretical grasp of sustainability is insufficient; it should rather be interwoven into the fabric of one's day-to-day existence. Formulating a rule of life in the context of sustainability might allow individuals to better understand and navigate the complex situations and challenges of daily life, including the human and the more-than-human interactions and interdependencies that constitute our shared existence.

A source of illumination and inspiration for this kind of work is provided in Robin Wall Kimmerer's widely read and celebrated book, *Braiding Sweetgrass:*

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Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants—a book both of us have used in our teaching. Throughout her book, Kimmerer weaves together "a braid of stories" from three stands—Indigenous knowledge, science, and Anishinabekwe storytelling—which can aid us in developing sustainability as a way of life through Hadot's description of ancient spiritual exercises and the formulation of a rule of life.[32] Kimmerer's chapter on "The Honorable Harvest" can provide us with inspiration as to how we can develop a personal formula or set of guidelines, and her chapter on "Allegiance to Gratitude" can provide us with an example as to how we can develop a collectively shared conversation or dialogue to express our existence as co-existence.[33]

After a discussion of the commonly used conceptions and connotations of sustainability with my students, I turn our attention to the descriptions Kimmerer provides of the Honorable Harvest as a stark juxtaposition that bends Hadotian. Kimmerer describes the Honorable Harvest as an "indigenous canon of principles and practices that govern the exchange of life for life … rules that govern our taking, shape our relationships with the nature world, and rein in our tendency to consume—that the world might be as rich for the seventh generation as it is for our own."[34] She tells us that the guidelines are not "written down, or even consistently spoken as a whole—they are reinforced in small acts of daily life."[35] This being the case, Kimmerer suggests the following as what we could call a model set of spiritual exercises to draw inspiration from as we begin developing a set of our own. She suggests:

> Know the ways of the ones who take care of you, so that you may take care of them.
>
> Introduce yourself. Be accountable as the one who comes asking for life.
>
> Ask permission before taking. Abide by the answer.
>
> Never take the first. Never take the last.
>
> Take only what you need.
>
> Take only which is given.
>
> Never take more than half. Leave some for others.

> Harvest in a way that minimizes harm.
>
> Use it respectfully. Never waste what you have taken.
>
> Share.
>
> Give thanks for what you have been given.
>
> Give a gift, in reciprocity for what you have taken.
>
> Sustain the ones who sustain you and the earth will last forever.[36]

Kimmerer's articulation of the Honorable Harvest provides us with inspiration to develop a set of guidelines to inform and elevate our day-to-day existence in terms of sustainability as a way of life in the Hadotian sense of "a concrete attitude and determinate lifestyle, which engages the whole of existence" in contrast to sustainability as nebulous, abstract, or more-or-less cast into, and mostly concerned about, future generations.[37] Doing so can bridge the gap between conceptions of sustainability as not only learned but lived, especially at the personal scale. While cautioning against wholesale appropriation, inspiration can also be drawn from Kimmerer's chapter, "Allegiance to Gratitude."[38] In this chapter, Kimmerer describes the Haudenosaunee's Thanksgiving Address, known in the Onondaga language as the "Words That Come Before All Else," as "a statement of identity and an exercise of sovereignty, both political and cultural."[39] Kimmerer describes the Address as "invocation of gratitude," "a pledge [of] reciprocity with the living world," and a "scientific inventory of the natural world."[40] As the Thanksgiving Address unfolds, it meticulously names components of the ecosystem, delineating their role and imparting insights rooted in expressions of the living world as a gift and our shared responsibilities, in reciprocity, to those gifts.[41] Kimmerer emphasizes that the "Words That Come Before All Else" should be a daily invocation recited within a circle of people, embodying both unity and shared responsibility for the named beings and those relationships, fostering a spirit of collective action and collaboration. Kimmerer's portrayal of the Thanksgiving Address, as an expression of gratitude, reciprocity, and inventory of the world, parallels what some of the Greco-Roman schools offered their constituents.[42] Kimmerer's emphasis on the

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recitation of the Thanksgiving Address within a community reflects a pledge of sorts to remind those who invoke it that gratitude is "the highest priority."[43] This practice fosters a sense of unity and shared responsibility among its participants; it encourages those gathered to connect with fundamental principles and incorporate them into their day-to-day lives.

To employ these ideas within the space of the classroom, which will hopefully have spillover effects into the daily lives of students, we can work alongside Kimmerer's teachings by encouraging students to develop their own set of sustainability guidelines or principles like the "Honorable Harvest" and collectively reflecting on and co-creating a shared set of guidelines to exercise how our lives are embedded in layers of community like the "Thanksgiving Address."

This first of these exercises would prompt students to reflect on the stories they are part of and to formulate a code of conduct that aligns with the principles and challenges of sustainability. When students are encouraged to craft their "rule of life" in the context of sustainability, they are essentially composing their own narratives. By immersing students in a narrative that emphasizes sustainability as a way of life, students can engage with the actions and practices they have inherited, or develop new ones, and help them grasp their role within the larger, cosmic narrative, however they conceive of it. In the second exercise, students could be encouraged to openly discuss the challenges they face in integrating sustainability into their daily lives and collaboratively refining those challenges to co-create guiding principles that could create a shared collection of values within and a vision for the group. Open and candid dialogue, or calling each other into question, would allow students to openly discuss the challenges they encounter in aligning their principles with their daily actions. Developing a "rule of life," both individually and collectively, in the context of sustainability would include an ongoing and dynamic process, encouraging students to continually revisit and refine their guiding principles.

Sustainability as a way of life as conceived in the senses provided by Hadot and Kimmerer should go beyond merely imparting information; it should involve immersing students in a shared culture that acknowledges the collective

challenges we face. Developing a "rule of life" encourages students not only to comprehend sustainability issues but to integrate them into their communities, fostering a deeper commitment to and shared responsibility for sustainability. Developed in shared practices and a collectively constructed culture, the development of a rule of life as a spiritual exercise enables students to perceive a landscape that they can explore together, which will hopefully have spillover effects in their lives beyond the classroom.[44] This approach not only encourages students to critically engage with the world, but to imagine and begin practicing other ways of relating to the human and more-than-human beings within and among us, challenging established norms and collaborating to shape a more sustainable, democratic, and just future. The "rule of life" evolves into the story that we can embody in our daily practices, enabling us to envision and enact more sustainable lives together.

By embedding moral concepts within these narratives and connecting them to imaginative frameworks, educators can guide students toward a profound understanding of sustainability and inspire them to be active participants in the ongoing story, which could bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical action, enabling students to live out the principles of sustainability.[45] Just as facts require a robust framework of shared cultural values to remain relevant, the principles underpinning sustainability should be woven into a way of life, or an art of living.[46]

CONCLUSION

As we mentioned at the start, philosophy is often used as an analytic tool to understand a concept, a framework for understanding phenomenon, or a set of tools to be used for thinking "critically." Whereas, following Hadot, we are arguing that philosophy in education could help us live certain forms of life—forms that are attentive to ourselves and the cosmic reality we live in. Our exploration of philosophy as a way of life, drawing inspiration from Pierre Hadot's insights, emphasizes the need to reestablish a connection between philosophical discourse and method and the art of living, a connection that could be integrated and implemented creatively in educational spaces. By focusing on the interplay between democracy and sustainability, our aim was to integrate philosophical

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practices into educational contexts. Through the transformational power of dialogue, students are called into question, fostering self-awareness and a deeper connection to the community through cosmic consciousness, both of which are critical for active and engaged participation in a democracy. Scaffolded to this is the notion of formulating a "rule of life" in the context of sustainability which offers a dynamic way to create an ongoing, reflective endeavor, fostering open dialogue in the classroom where students can discuss their challenges and progress in aligning their principles with actions. Both approaches can lead to an understanding that actively encourages students to participate in shared practices, hopefully bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge, philosophy as discourse, and practical action; in other words, philosophy as a way of life. In this way, students are better prepared to face the complexities of the modern world, contributing to a more sustainable and more democratic society. By embracing these practices, educators can become facilitators of not only knowledge but the cultivation of shared values, creating a connection between the principles of sustainability and democracy as ways of life.

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2 Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 83.

3 Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 82.

4 However, he does think both the Greek and Latin traditions of Christianity adopted what they referred to as spiritual exercises from the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition. See Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 82.

5 See also Daniel P. Gibboney, "Spiritual Exercises in Times of Climate Change," *Ethics and Education* 16, no. 2 (2021): 276-287. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2021.1896635

6 Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 85.

7 Bruno Latour is especially insightful here when he writes: "It is not a matter of learning how to repair cognitive deficiencies, but rather of how to live in the same world, share the same culture, face up to the same stakes, perceive a landscape that

can be explored in concerns. Here we find the habitual vice of epistemology, which consists in attributing to intellectual deficits something that is quite simply a deficit in shared practice" (25). See Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

8 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 87.

9 Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 89.

10 Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 89.

11 Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 89

12 Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 73.

13 There may be connections with Gadamer who claimed that questions bring a thing into the open. "The significance of questioning consists in revealing the questionability of what is questioned" (363). He further claimed that "to question means to lay open, to place in the open" (367). In this context, it is the interlocutor that is called into question and thus brought into the open to be understood. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd Edition, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1994).

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21 Bruno Latour et al., "Down to Earth Social Movements: An Interview with Bruno Latour," in *Reassembling Activism, Activating Assemblages*, ed. Israel Rodríguez-Giralt, Isaac Marrero-Guillamón, and Denise Milstein (London: Routledge, 2019) 7.

22 Latour et al., "Down to Earth," 7.

23 Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 83. Hadot continues: "philosophy was a mode

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of existing-in-the-world, which had to be practiced at each instant, and the goal of which was to transform the whole of the individual's life…. Philosophy was a method of spiritual progress which demanded a radical conversion and transformation of the individual's way of being" (265).

24 Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 85.

25 Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 85.

26 Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 85.

27 Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 85.

28 Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 59.

29 Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 59.

30 Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 59.

31 Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 59.

32 Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013), x.

33 Robin Wall Kimmerer, "The Honorable Harvest," in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 175-201; Robin Wall Kimmerer, "Allegiance to Gratitude," in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 105-117; Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 180.

34 Kimmerer, "The Honorable Harvest," 180.

35 Kimmerer, "The Honorable Harvest," 183.

36 Kimmerer, "The Honorable Harvest," 183.

37 Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 83.

38 Kimmerer, "Allegiance to Gratitude," 344.

39 Kimmerer, "Allegiance to Gratitude," 108.

40 Kimmerer, "Allegiance to Gratitude," 108, 116 .

41 Kimmerer, "Allegiance to Gratitude," 108.

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