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## Honoring the Gift: An epistolary exploration of an alternative approach to learning grounded in reciprocity and gratitude

Tegan Keyes

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# Honoring the Gift

*An epistolary exploration of an alternative approach to learning  
grounded in reciprocity and gratitude.*

Tegan Keyes

Advised by Dr. Natalie Baloy

Introduction	2
Part I: Reimagining Education	7
1. Emergence Theory	7
2. Indigenous Systems of Education	13
3. Gift Economies	17
Spinning a Yarn: Imagining an Alternative Approach to Education	21
Part II: Letters of Gratitude	34
Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (author)	35
Dr. Moore (WWU teacher)	39
Robin Kimmerer (author)	43
David Rossiter (WWU teacher)	47
Michael Feerer (director of Whatcom Million Trees Project)	50
Scott Linneman (director of WWU Honors Program)	53
Nick Stanger (WWU teacher)	57
Dr. Baker (WWU teacher)	62
Mo Wells (WWU teacher)	67
Zander Albertson (WWU teacher)	71
Dr. Goldman (WWU teacher)	76
Natalie Baloy (capstone advisor)	82
Appendix I	86

## Introduction

Thank you for being here.

It's important to me to say that first. This project is all about gratitude, and while it does make me uncomfortable to release this document into the world when it still feels so unfinished, I am truly glad and grateful that you are taking the time to read it.

Writing this introduction is difficult because I have no idea who the "you" I am addressing is - a stranger browsing through the WWU Honors College CEDAR archive, one of the family members, friends, or teachers who share my interest in gratitude and have supported this project, or a future version of me taking a trip down memory lane. In case you did arrive at this document without knowing anything about me: hello and welcome! My name is Tegan. I'm graduating from Western in three days with a degree in Environmental Studies. I love the Salish Sea and am still learning how to be an environmentalist in a way that is appropriate to my position as a white settler to this place. I am sustained by my relationship with my family, by time spent outdoors with plants and soil, by writing poetry and making art and everything yarn-related. And I have spent the last six months working on this capstone project on gratitude, knowledge, and education.

### **A brief explanation of this project:**

This project has grown out of the gratitude and amazement I was feeling at the start of my senior year (Fall of 2022) when I looked back on how much I had learned while at Western. Even with the disruption caused by the pandemic, I truly feel that I have learned so much and that I have been incredibly lucky to have had such brilliant teachers. The more I reflected on this, the more I began to appreciate what a gift it is for someone to share their knowledge, particularly with the care and patience that so many of my teachers have shown me.

Around the same time, I read an essay called "Land as Pedagogy" by Leanne Simpson,<sup>1</sup> a Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar who writes about the importance of reciprocal relationality in Indigenous education systems. Reading this made me think more critically about my own approach to learning, and how it lacked reciprocity. I typically showed up to class at the start of the quarter, accumulated as much knowledge as possible for ten weeks, and then left without more than a brief thank-you email to acknowledge the teacher's generosity in sharing their

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<sup>1</sup> Leanne Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

knowledge with me. I began to feel that this was extractive - that it was an inappropriate way to receive this gift.

I decided then that for my Honors capstone, I would write letters to the teachers who had contributed to my learning while at Western - professors, authors, mentors, family members, and others - thanking them for their gifts of knowledge. I have a specific memory of going for a walk to think through the details of this project in early Fall, when all the trees were beginning to change colors. I remember thinking that these letters would be like the leaves that the tree returns to the soil after the growing season.

At this moment, I have written fourteen letters. It has been a slower process than I expected and so I have not yet written to everyone I wanted to, but I plan to continue working on them into the future. Writing these letters has been a wonderful opportunity to reflect on what I have learned and how my thinking has changed, to recognize my teachers' generosity and attempt to reciprocate it. Each one has been a different experience to write but I am proud of how they have all turned out, and writing them has helped me feel more prepared to graduate.

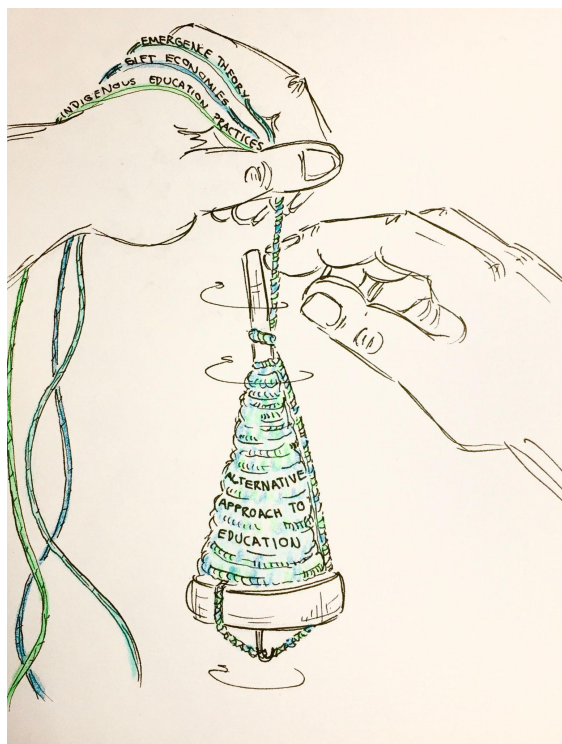
I have included the majority of the letters in Part II of this document. If the letters are like the leaves of a tree, then Part I is like the trunk - the theoretical work supporting the letters. I did not originally plan for this to be part of my project. Instead, it emerged from the questions I began asking myself after I started writing the letters - why did I have to independently design this gratitude practice? It had been such a meaningful experience for me, why was it not a normal part of every student's college experience to reflect on what they had learned and thank those who had taught them? What would my time at Western have been like if I had not felt so pressured to accumulate knowledge at such a quick pace that I could not justify taking the time to look back and express my gratitude to those I was learning from? I tried to imagine an alternative education institution where gratitude and reciprocity were more central, and I began doing research to find models for what that alternative institution might look like.

Through that research, I identified three concepts - Western emergence theory, Indigenous education practices, and gift economies. They might not all sound relevant to education, but reading about them has helped me think through what it means to teach and learn in a way that is grounded in gratitude and reciprocity. In Part I of this document, I attempt to summarize my research on these concepts and describe how they inform my vision of an alternative approach to education.

### For the metaphorically-minded reader:

I like to use metaphors to help structure my thinking (especially yarn-related metaphors!) and so I offer the following illustration in case it is helpful for readers in understanding how I have organized this project:

I understand this project as an act of spinning. This illustration shows a drop spindle, a tool used for spinning single strands from loose wool or for plying multiple single strands together into a thicker yarn. The spinner must first spin the spindle in the air so that the fibers twist together, then let the whorl (the weight at the base of the spindle) drag the yarn down through their fingers as the spindle spins. This allows the twist to continue traveling up the yarn. Watching the whorl spin is meditative and an opportunity for the mind to wander. Together, these complementary processes of active spinning to set the spindle in motion and reflective rest as this motion is sustained produce a sturdy yarn.



In this metaphor, I see each of my three areas of research - emergence theory, Indigenous education, and gift economies - as separate strands that I have attempted to ply together. I have engaged with these three concepts both by actively embodying them through my epistolary gratitude practice and by researching and reflecting on them. The result is this document, where I “spin a yarn,” or tell a story, of what an alternative education system modeled after these three concepts might look like.

### How to use this document:

This project exploded out into many more pages than I had predicted, and so my hope here is to offer a guide to reading it to make it more approachable.

Firstly, whatever your intention in opening this document, I encourage you to read through a few of the letters first. They’re located in [Part II](#) because I worried that nobody would want to scroll through fifty-ish pages of personal writing to get to the rest of the document, not because

they're any less important to this project than the research component in Part I. My hope is that everyone reading this will be inspired to express gratitude to the teachers in their own lives. Reading one or two of the letters here might offer some ideas for what that could look like.

If you're interested in the concept of knowledge as a gift and what that could look like on a much larger scale, [Part I](#) is where I review the three guiding concepts I identified and attempt to spin them into a vision of an alternative approach to education that is grounded in gratitude and reciprocity, that is relational and life-sustaining, and that rejects capitalistic and colonial understandings of teaching and learning. I have organized it into four sections - the first three review my research and personal reflections on each concept ([emergence theory](#), [Indigenous education practices](#), and [gift economies](#)). If you are interested in these concepts, read these sections. And then read the books that I reference there, because while I have done my best to summarize the parts that are relevant to this project, these authors are brilliant and I encourage you to produce your own interpretations of their work.

The [last section](#) of Part I describes a vision of what an education system modeled after these three concepts might look like. I am using the term "vision" intentionally, because it suggests something vague or imaginative. It's not that I think this vision is an impossible dream - I strongly believe that it is achievable. I simply haven't had the time to identify exactly how we will achieve it. My intention with this section is not to offer specific recommendations to achieve educational reform - though I see that as a possible extension of this project in the future - but to suggest what we should be working towards.

Lastly, if this is all too much text and you want to look at a cool picture, see [Appendix I!](#) I crocheted a fall tree to represent this letter-writing practice.

**This is not a disclaimer:**

I want to emphasize that this project is incomplete. I have a great deal more research to do - some of the authors I reference here have published many more books than the ones I was able to read, not to mention the many other brilliant authors and artists and scholars exploring these topics whose work I haven't even touched yet. I plan to continue this project - both the research component and the epistolary gratitude practice - and so I consider this document a snapshot within a much longer process of learning and thinking that I've only just begun.

I am not saying this to absolve myself of responsibility for what I have written here. Rather, I want to emphasize that there is so much space for other people to contribute their thinking to this project. I can only write from my own position, and this vision of an alternative system of

education would be much more complete and transformational if it incorporated other perspectives. I invite readers to actively engage with this document - to read it critically, to spend time reflecting on it, and to think about how you might incorporate any of the ideas here into your own processes of learning and teaching.

## Part I: Reimagining Education

### 1. Emergence Theory

#### Influential Reading

- *Emergent Strategy* by adrienne maree brown<sup>2</sup>
- *Leadership and the New Science* by Margaret Wheatley<sup>3</sup>
- *A Simpler Way* by Margaret Wheatley<sup>4</sup>

*Emergent Strategy* by adrienne maree brown was my first introduction to the concept of “emergence.” I was initially confused by how brown wrote about it as though it was not just a scientific concept or social theory but something much more immense - a universal and natural truth. She provides a helpful definition in her introduction - “emergence is the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions”<sup>5</sup> - but I was still left feeling uncertain. I could tell that this was an expansive idea, and I was feeling intimidated about approaching it.

I kept reading though, because brown describes emergence as one of nature’s brilliances, an underlying principle connecting everything from the way ants act cooperatively to form complex societies to how starlings synchronize their flocking patterns without a central leader. Emergence was not some inaccessibly abstract and obscure theory, it was all around me if I could just learn to see it.

I was also feeling encouraged by brown’s style of writing - I had never read a book that was such a collage of poems, essays, quotes, interviews, and personal stories, but I recognized that amazed, wholehearted vibrancy. It felt similar to how I react when I encounter something I find exciting and wonderful - poking at it from all sides and holding it up to every aspect of myself to find the places where it fits. I felt like brown was doing something similar - engaging with the concept of emergence as completely as possible, not just as a scholar or activist or artist but as her entire self. I thought that emergence must be sacred to her, because I would react the same way if it was sacred to me - doing my best to honor it by showing up with my full presence. I wanted to trust that emergence could become sacred and wonderful to me as well.

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<sup>2</sup> adrienne brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico: AK Press, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World* (3rd ed.) (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers, *A Simpler Way* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 2.



And as I continued reading *Emergent Strategy*, the concept of emergence did start to become wonderful. The idea that the world is a network of relationships, and that small interactions within this network cascade into large-scale change, complexity, and beauty felt *right*. It was a different way of seeing the world than I had been brought up with, but it felt more true and I wanted to learn more. After finishing *Emergent Strategy*, I moved on to one of the books that brown highly recommends: Margaret Wheatley's *Leadership and the New Science*.

This book and Wheatley's subsequent book, *A Simpler Way*, helped me understand the lineage of emergence theory (specifically in Western thought) and how it has grown out of once-obscure scientific findings to become a transformational way of understanding the world. Wheatley weaves together insights from quantum mechanics, chaos theory, and biology to suggest that emergence is a foundational property of the universe. All kinds of living systems in nature self-organize and develop complexity through emergent processes. And in the spirit of biomimicry, Wheatley sees emergence as a model for human organizations, if we can just learn how to apply it - or more precisely, unlearn the individualistic and linear assumptions about the world that have caused us to reject it.

Wheatley suggests emergence as a model for relational and adaptive leadership, challenging conventional, mechanistic understandings of management. brown focuses on emergence as a model for activism and a pathway to creating a just, liberated future. I am interested in following these brilliant, biomimicking authors in their exploration of how human systems can be brought into alignment with emergence - specifically in how emergence can be applied to Western systems of education.

### **What makes emergence a good model for education?**

One of the brilliances of emergence - and the reason it is such a compelling model for human systems - is that it supports complexity, diversity, and abundance. adrienne maree brown describes this as creating more possibilities.<sup>6</sup> Margaret Wheatley describes this as life organizing into systems so that more life can flourish.<sup>7</sup> Emergent systems provide protection and stability (albeit a stability maintained through ongoing adaptation) in which new, diverse forms of life can bloom into being. They exist without irreversibly depleting the environment around them or seeking to outcompete the other systems they are in relationship with.

So what does organizing to support life and create more possibilities look like in a human system? I think it means creating a just future where life can flourish – *all* life, human and

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<sup>6</sup> brown, *Emergent Strategy*.

<sup>7</sup> Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, *A Simpler Way*.

other-than-human. This means dismantling the structures of colonialism, racism, heteropatriarchy, and extractive capitalism that destroy or constrain life, and creating an alternative. Emergence theory offers lessons for how to bring about this life-sustaining future and is therefore deeply relevant to the question of how we are to manage human systems.

*Okay, but how does emergence relate to systems of education specifically?*

I have been lucky in my educational experience, but I would argue that the Western education system - like much of Western thought in general - is out of alignment with emergence. It is not life-sustaining.

Grace Lee Boggs writes in *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century* that the role of education should be to transform students from angry rebels into productive change agents.<sup>8</sup> Emergent systems are characterized by high individual autonomy and a high degree of connectivity between individuals, both of which I think are necessary to empower students to engage in meaningful change-making work. If we want our educational systems to support young people in learning to address our social and environmental issues, I think we need to orient these systems around emergent processes.

### **How does emergence occur in systems?**

Before I describe what an emergent system of education might look like, I want to review Wheatley and brown's thinking on the general process of emergence - how organization arises in living systems. Wheatley identifies three conditions necessary for emergent processes to take place: information flows, identity, and relationships.<sup>9</sup> In reviewing each of these conditions, I have also drawn from the six elements of emergence that brown identifies.<sup>10</sup> I have already discussed one of these elements (Creating More Possibilities), the rest are: Fractals, Intentional Adaptation, Interdependence and Decentralization, Nonlinearity and Iteration, and Resilience.

#### *Information flows*

Emergent systems have no fixed structure - rather, they are constantly changing through a process of intentional adaptation.<sup>11</sup> This adaptation is prompted by inputs of environmental information into the system. Wheatley likens these information inputs to energy - an essential

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<sup>8</sup> Grace Lee Boggs, *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, *A Simpler Way*.

<sup>10</sup> brown, *Emergent Strategy*.

<sup>11</sup> brown, *Emergent Strategy*.

resource for life that organizes physical matter into form.<sup>12</sup> Just as living systems must constantly import energy from the environment, they must also be open to environmental information for emergent processes of organization to occur.

Therefore, to create the conditions for emergence in human systems, we must allow outside information to flow freely throughout the entire system. As all the participants in the system freely interact with this information and creatively respond to it, the system as a whole undergoes an ongoing process of adaptation from which organization arises. This goes against our frequent assumption that to create and maintain organization in a system, we must erect boundaries that protect it from the chaos of the outside world. Thinking with emergence tells us that it is better to allow information to flow openly through the system rather than shielding against it or restricting it only to the highest authorities in the system.<sup>13</sup>

To a leader who wants to maintain order, this might sound messy or complicated. Systems that are free to adapt in response to environmental information develop in nonlinear ways and are therefore harder to predict and to control. Wheatley argues that we have to embrace this messiness, opening our systems to the outside world with a playful willingness to be surprised by what changes will result.<sup>14</sup> We have to trust that disturbance does not have to mean decline, and that apparent disorder can prompt organization - indeed, that disorder is necessary for organization.

### *Identity*

Openness to environmental information is key to prompting adaptation. But as adrienne maree brown emphasizes, emergent systems aren't just adaptive, they're *intentionally* adaptive.<sup>15</sup> The system is adapting freely in response to environmental information, but in a way that maintains its integrity and functionality. For example, though a river channel may meander across a landscape in response to changes in streamflow or other conditions, generating temporary forms each different from the last, it continues to fulfill its purpose – to flow downstream towards the ocean.

Wheatley describes this process as *autopoiesis*, where life creates itself and then adapts in a way that preserves the integrity of that self. When the system is young, adaptation is completely free. Eventually, the system defines a self and begins to reference that self to inform how it adapts to further environmental information. As the inner self becomes the main source of

<sup>12</sup> Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*.

<sup>13</sup> Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*.

<sup>14</sup> Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, *A Simpler Way*.

<sup>15</sup> brown, *Emergent Strategy*.

information guiding adaptation, the system becomes more resilient and less vulnerable to environmental influences, which can nudge but no longer control the development of the system. It is instead dominated by self-organizing processes.<sup>16</sup>

What is the “self” that guides adaptation in emergent human systems? Wheatley argues that human organizations must have a consistent and coherent identity, vision, or governing principle that all participants in the organization can reference to guide their response to external change. This governing principle should be simple, allowing individual participants to freely interpret it in diverse ways. It is not intended to impose the final structure of the organization, but rather to empower the participants to cocreate the structure.<sup>17</sup>

This governing principle is like the equation of a fractal, a complex shape characterized by simple overarching patterns and high individual autonomy.<sup>18</sup> Fractals begin with a basic equation that is left to feed back on itself infinitely, producing a highly organized pattern out of apparent chaos. The equation does not plot the final shape of the fractal - rather, “(t)he simple iteration in effect liberates the complexity hidden within it, giving access to creative potential.”<sup>19</sup> Likewise, in human systems, the governing principle liberates the potential of each of the individual participants to meaningfully contribute to the whole. The task of the system’s leader is to clearly communicate this principle to all the participants so that they can use it to inform their decision-making and thus sustain the system’s integrity.

### *Relationships*

Emergent systems are decentralized - instead of a single leader handing down decisions about how the system will adapt, individual participants have a high degree of autonomy over how they interpret the system’s governing principles and react to environmental information. However, this autonomy occurs in a context of interdependence, not individualism. Relationality is a foundational principle of every living, emergent system. In these systems, participants exist within a web of relationships that both facilitates flows of information and increases the ways they can respond to that information. As Wheatley argues, joining into relationships evokes capacities not present in the individual - “we are identities in motion, searching for the relationships that will evoke more from us.”<sup>20</sup> Relationships empower participants to contribute more to the system than they could as individuals.

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<sup>16</sup> Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, *A Simpler Way*.

<sup>17</sup> Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*.

<sup>18</sup> brown, *Emergent Strategy*.

<sup>19</sup> Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*, 114.

<sup>20</sup> Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, *A Simpler Way*, 92.

When a system meets these three conditions - information, identity, and relationships - emergent processes can begin. In the last section of Part I, I will describe how systems of education could begin to meet these conditions. Before I do that, however, I want to review the second key area of research that has shaped my vision of an alternative approach to education - Indigenous systems of education.

## 2. Indigenous Systems of Education

### Influential Reading

- *As We Have Always Done* by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson<sup>21</sup>
- *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back* by Leanne Simpson<sup>22</sup>
- *Rehearsals for Living* by Robyn Maynard and Leanne Simpson<sup>23</sup>

I first encountered Leanne Simpson's writing in a class on decolonization during the Fall of 2022, where we read an excerpt from her book *As We Have Always Done*. At the time, I was struggling to readjust to a college schedule after spending the summer with my family in Seattle. Moving back up to Bellingham for classes and knowing I'd only be able to engage with the people I cared most about through sporadic weekend visits and phone calls left me feeling lonely and homesick. Even though I enjoyed my classes, I was also feeling frustrated by how much of my time they were taking up. I had been lucky to have my summer free, and I had spent it gardening, making art, writing, and reading, but when Fall quarter started up I struggled just to find time to exercise regularly. My classes were interesting and I was grateful for the opportunity to take them, but I resented how they monopolized my time.

Distanced from my most meaningful relationships and feeling pressured to set aside many of my interests so that I could focus on being a good student, I felt disillusioned and critical of the higher education system. I liked being in an environment devoted to learning, but it felt inevitable that my presence in that space would conflict with other parts of my identity. Within that context, reading the essay "Land as Pedagogy" from Simpson's book *As We Have Always Done* was especially impactful. Simpson described an Indigenous approach to education that was rooted in reciprocal relationships, and whose goal was to support individuals in developing their unique gifts so that they could fulfill their responsibilities to the community in a way that resonated with their unique humanity. I knew that as a white settler student, I was not the intended subject of this vision of education, but I found myself imagining what it would feel like to engage in a process of learning grounded in relationality and self-determination, one that nurtured my relationships and interests instead of conflicting with them.

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<sup>21</sup> This entire book is brilliant, but my main source for this writing was Chapter 9, "Land as Pedagogy," in: Leanne Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

<sup>22</sup> Leanne Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence* (Chico: AK Press, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Robyn Maynard and Leanne Simpson, *Rehearsals for Living* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022).

## Indigenous Education and Emergence Theory

Leanne Simpson writes that “Nishnaabeg thought comes from the land and therefore, it embodies emergence.”<sup>24</sup> When I first read this, I was excited at the possibility of connecting my readings on decolonization and Indigenous resurgence to my readings on emergence theory. I began noticing parallels between Simpson’s description of the processes by which Indigenous intelligence systems organize and Wheatley’s description of the processes by which living systems in nature self-organize.

I do not want to assume that just because both authors use the word “emergence” that they are referring to exactly the same concept. Nor do I want to suggest that Simpson’s arguments are only valid because they align with the insights about emergence that Wheatley has drawn from developments in Western science. Simpson specifically writes that a key difference between emergence theory in Nishnaabeg thought and Western science is that Nishnaabeg thought recognizes that the processes giving rise to organization are mediated through the spirit world.<sup>25</sup>

However, on a very broad level, both writers are describing systems that create more life. Margaret Wheatley writes that life self-organizes into systems so that more life can flourish<sup>26</sup> and Leanne Simpson writes that “our way of living was designed to generate life...the life of all living things.”<sup>27</sup> In contrast to the structures of settler-colonialism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism that uphold the settler state at the expense of human and other-than-human life, Indigenous practices encourage life to flourish. I am interested in respectfully and ethically exploring the intersections of these understandings of what it means to create life and applying them to education.

I have reflected on whether it is appropriate for me, as a white settler, to be using Simpson’s writing for this project when I know it was not intended for me. Simpson is clear that she is interested in looking beyond white people in her search for allies. She states that instead of trying to “help” Indigenous communities, white settlers need to help themselves and “find a way of living in the world that is not based on violence and exploitation.”<sup>28</sup> I see this project as one way to honor that responsibility by developing a vision of an education system that is non-violent and non-exploitative, that does not replicate settler-colonialism, and that is life-sustaining. I have chosen to include Simpson’s perspective because her descriptions of

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<sup>24</sup> Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back*, 91.

<sup>25</sup> Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back*, 91.

<sup>26</sup> Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, *A Simpler Way*.

<sup>27</sup> Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 101.

Nishnaabeg understandings of education are highly relevant as a model. Writing her a letter of gratitude was one important way that I tried to engage with this knowledge respectfully.

I have been strongly influenced throughout this project by a particular quote from *As We Have Always Done*: that the goal of community is “the re-creation of beings that continually live lives promoting the continuous rebirth of life itself.”<sup>29</sup> I think that learning communities should have a similar goal - to produce students who are empowered and motivated to live and work in a way that promotes life. For non-Indigenous students, this would certainly mean standing in solidarity with Indigenous resurgence projects and contributing to decolonization as allies and accomplices in the work to create an Indigenous future.

### **Indigenous Processes of Education<sup>30</sup>**

Simpson writes that Nishnaabeg thought systems are oriented around process and context rather than content. This process-oriented approach to knowledge and education stands in contrast to structure-based colonial education systems that rely on rigid hierarchies and strictly enforced rules. This reminds me of Margaret Wheatley’s description of emergent systems as dynamic processes of organization rather than stable, static structures.

Interdependent relationships are central to both emergent systems and Nishnaabeg education practices. Simpson writes that learning comes from being embedded in the land, in relationship with all the spiritual and physical aspects of creation, including landforms, water, plants, animals, spirits, family and community members. Knowledge flows through these intimate, reciprocal relationships with the rest of creation in a lifelong process. One example of how knowledge moves is through visiting, an important practice that reflects the centrality of hospitality and sharing in Nishnaabeg thought. Simpson describes how in a Nishnaabeg understanding, the home is considered a place of inviting visiting relatives in to share their stories, not a private property to be defended against intruders.<sup>31</sup> This reminds me of Margaret Wheatley’s argument that emergent systems must be open to outside information so that they can continue to grow and adapt.

These intimate relationships through which individuals come into wisdom are free of coercion and hierarchy. Children are not told directly what to think or punished if they don’t conform - rather, parents and other community members model desirable behavior and children learn through observation and listening. Teachers present themselves in a consensual way, and

<sup>29</sup> Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 158.

<sup>30</sup> This section synthesizes information from: Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back* and Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*.

<sup>31</sup> Maynard and Simpson, *Rehearsals for Living*.



learners have a high degree of individual self-determination in how they receive teachings. Simpson notes that Nishnaabeg thinking is not as rigid and fundamentalist as colonial thinking - that individuals are free to creatively interpret and embody teachings in multiple ways. She writes that “the shift that Indigenous systems of intelligence compel us to make is one from capitalistic consumer to cultural producer.”<sup>32</sup> Individuals in these systems interpret teachings and produce intelligence in a way that resonates with their own personal truths in addition to the community’s collective set of shared values. Throughout this learning process, and with the support of their relatives, they identify and develop the unique gifts and skills with which they will fulfill their responsibilities to the community.

An essential part of this process of creative learning is actively engaging the body in cultural practices that encode Indigenous intelligence. Simpson argues that thinking in isolation from action and from the land does not produce knowledge. She describes theory and active practice as cogenerators of knowledge.

From a Nishnaabeg understanding, the wisdom produced from self-reflection and engagement in cultural practices is not private property to be accumulated. Rather, once individuals have generated their own interpretations about how to embody a teaching, they are responsible for sharing this wisdom back to the community. Disagreement is considered a normal part of this process, and diversity is respected and valued. This is consistent with Margaret Wheatley’s description of the role of disorder and chaos in generating order. Through these contributions of personal truths, a collective ethical framework emerges to guide decision-making. It is maintained not by violent enforcement but by mutual accountability.

I have had to condense a lot of the complexity of these processes of knowledge exchange, and I strongly recommend reading the essay “Land as Pedagogy” in Simpson’s *As We Have Always Done* (and then reading the rest of her books). Her writing is brilliant on its own, and I think it intersects in productive ways with adrienne maree brown and Margaret Wheatley’s writings on emergence theory, particularly in its emphasis on relationality and self-determination. In the next section I will discuss gift economies, the third and final concept that has inspired my vision of an alternative approach to education grounded in reciprocity and gratitude.

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<sup>32</sup> Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 173.

### 3. Gift Economies

#### Influential Reading

- *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Kimmerer<sup>33</sup>
- *The Serviceberry: An Economy of Abundance* by Robin Kimmerer<sup>34</sup>
- *Sacred Economics* by Charles Eisenstein<sup>35</sup>

I first encountered the concept of gift economies in Robin Kimmerer's book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, which I have a clear memory of reading on the lawn outside my grandmother's house in the spring of 2021. This book, and Kimmerer's essay *The Serviceberry: An Economy of Abundance*, introduced me to gift thinking.

Making and giving gifts has always been special and sacred to me, the way I weave myself into relationship and speak my love for the people around me with my hands. Kimmerer's writing helped me to see all the ways that I receive gifts as well - to feel the wonder that came from recognizing the world around me as a gift and to consider my responsibility to receive that gift well. It also helped me think about how I could extend my practices of gift giving beyond the confines of birthdays and holidays - whether generosity and gifting could be the principles by which I lived my life. I began to think of my abilities as gifts I could give to the world, a way of practicing reciprocity for all it has given me.

After reading Kimmerer's work, I moved on to one of the books she references - *Sacred Economics* by Charles Eisenstein, which discusses how our contemporary money system could transition towards a gift economy. It helped me consider how other systems - such as our educational system - could also be oriented around gift thinking, gratitude, and reciprocity. After all, gift economies are a form of exchange, and education is a kind of exchange of knowledge.

#### An Overview of Gift Economies<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Robin Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> Robin Kimmerer, "The Serviceberry: An Economy of Abundance," *Emergence Magazine*. October 2022. <https://emergencemagazine.org/essay/the-serviceberry/>

<sup>35</sup> Charles Eisenstein, *Sacred Economics: Money, Gift and Society in the Age of Transition (Revised)* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2021).

<sup>36</sup> This section synthesizes information from: Kimmerer, "The Serviceberry." and Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

Robin Kimmerer and Charles Eisenstein both see gifts not just as a human construction, but rather a property of the universe as a whole. Kimmerer sees many examples of symbiotic exchanges of gifts in nature, from the trees whose blossoms give energy to the insects that pollinate them to the bushes whose berries sustain the birds that spread their seeds. Human gift economies emerge from recognition of the gift properties of the universe and are sustained by similar relationships of reciprocity.

The basic definition of a gift economy is a system of exchange where goods and services are given as gifts without explicit expectation of compensation. This generates a very different organization than a capitalist market economy where products are bought and sold. When a customer buys a product, they can immediately fulfill their responsibilities to the seller of the product by compensating them with money through a brief, impersonal transaction. Gift exchanges, however, generate deeply personal, ongoing relationships between people.

The instinctive response to receiving a gift from another person or from the world as a whole is gratitude for the generosity of the giver and a desire to reciprocate. Gratitude creates a sense of abundance, encouraging us to appreciate and care for what we have instead of hungering to accumulate more. In contrast, capitalist market economies rely on manufacturing artificial scarcity to create demand, converting the free gifts of the earth into privately owned commodities for people to buy. To grow the economy and keep commodities circulating, more and more earthly gifts must be exploited and extracted. In this context of scarcity and competitive individualism, security lies in hoarding private property and achieving “self-sufficiency.”

Gift economies do not rely on scarcity. The circulation of gifts is maintained by people’s mutual accountability to uphold their sacred and ethical obligation to reciprocate the gifts they receive. This responsibility is not a burden, but rather an entry point into a web of relationships connecting all the individuals within the community to each other and to the land. Reciprocity is an opportunity to act on one’s gratitude by joyfully and generously sharing one’s own gifts, offering what one has in abundance to those who need it and contributing to the community’s flourishing. Security in a gift economy lies in the quality of one’s relationships, not the quantity of one’s possessions. Wealth means having enough to share, not individualistic success at the expense of others.

### **Gift Economies and Emergence Theory**

I think that gift economies can be seen as a kind of emergent system. Through repeated gift exchanges guided by the simple principle of reciprocity, a complex network of relationships

emerges and a community is organized. I see within this process of organization many of the elements that adrienne maree brown associates with emergence - Intentional Adaptation, Nonlinearity and Iteration, Fractals, Interdependence and Decentralization, Resilience, and Creating More Possibilities.<sup>37</sup>

Not all gift economies function in the same way - sometimes the exchange of gifts is fairly structured. I am more interested in gift economies that are sustained by an organic and spontaneous process of exchange, because I think these align more closely with the concept of emergence. These types of gift economies, like emergent systems, do not have a fixed, rigid structure. They are better understood as a dynamic process of circulation, a flow of gifts that is constantly shifting and intentionally adapting to support those in need.

Gift economies are sustained by participants' mutual accountability to uphold a simple set of social and moral agreements. I see these basic agreements as analogous to Margaret Wheatley's concept of organizational vision or identity<sup>38</sup> - the simple principles that guide every member of the organization as they process new information and adapt accordingly. In gift economies, the most basic, general agreement is to understand everything as a gift, and to receive it with appropriate gratitude and reciprocity.

Reciprocity could be a direct, one-for-one exchange, where I receive a gift from someone and reciprocate by giving them a gift in return. It can also be indirect, where I give a gift to someone who gives a gift to someone else, and so on until the gift circles back to me. That someone need not be another human - Kimmerer writes about how we can practice reciprocity towards plants and the rest of the world.<sup>39</sup>

In other words, gifts do not move in a linear, predictable fashion. Rather, they circulate within the system through repeated processes of giving and receiving that are flexible to everyone's needs. These exchanges spiral out freely and chaotically into a dense web of interdependent relationships. In this way, gift economies are similar to fractals, where a simple starting equation iterates infinitely, liberating a complex pattern. The simple agreement that everything is a gift is reinforced in each reciprocal exchange, liberating each individual's generosity and creativity and blooming into a complex organization.

There is no central organizing authority enforcing this agreement or directing who gives to whom - the system is decentralized. The web of relationships through which gifts circulate

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<sup>37</sup> brown, *Emergent Strategy*.

<sup>38</sup> Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*.

<sup>39</sup> Kimmerer, "The Serviceberry."

self-organizes, without a coordinator engineering the system. The result is that each individual has a high degree of autonomy over how they participate in these relationships and fulfill their responsibilities to uphold the agreement that everything is a gift.

These relationships are the foundation of the gift economy, the channels through which gifts flow. They connect individuals into a resilient community where people can rely on each other to meet their needs, a community where everyone can flourish. Individual well-being does not come at the expense of other individuals or the land. In this way, I would argue that gift economies support life and diversity. They create more possibilities.

### **Gift Economies and Education**

What lessons does the exchange of gifts in these emergent gift economies hold for how we can organize exchanges of knowledge in our education systems? What would an education system modeled after an emergent gift economy look like?

I have argued that gift economies spiral out like fractals from a simple agreement - that everything is a gift. That agreement generates responsibilities of gratitude and reciprocity that guide people's interactions and exchanges, cascading into a complex web of life-sustaining relationships. I want to think through what kind of education system would emerge from the simple agreement that knowledge is a gift. What kind of complexity might be liberated if the system was allowed to self-organize around this principle, if students and teachers alike could freely engage with this concept and the ethical responsibilities of gratitude and reciprocity that it implies?

## Spinning a Yarn: Imagining an Alternative Approach to Education

I am only just beginning to explore the many ways that these three strands of intelligence - Western emergence theory, Indigenous education methods, and gift economies - can be spun together. I offer here a starting vision of what an alternative approach to education - specifically undergraduate education - inspired by these three concepts might look like. In the future, I intend to continue refining this vision and learning, thinking, and writing about what must be done to make it a reality.

### **Knowledge is a Gift**

I want to begin by stripping away all the structures we've imposed on our educational institutions - all the assumptions we have made about how these institutions must be managed to successfully facilitate the exchange of knowledge. Set aside the curriculums, grading systems, schedules, hierarchies, departments, rules, standards - all the mechanisms for controlling how knowledge moves through the system. Consider the possibility that organization within this educational system can be maintained without these mechanisms - that it need not be rigidly enforced, but rather can emerge from a clear and consistent set of principles that guide how all members of the system act. What are the principles from which an effective system of education might self-organize?

As I have already suggested, I imagine an undergraduate education institution organized around the simple understanding that *knowledge is a gift*. I believe that this single principle is like the equation of a fractal - if allowed to freely develop, it is capable of blooming out into a complex, organized education system. It creates a nest of values and responsibilities in which teaching and learning processes emerge. These processes are sustained not by the enforcement of a rigid, imposed structure, but by every individual within the institution orienting their decisions and actions around the guiding principle that *knowledge is a gift* and the responsibilities this generates.

### *Gratitude and Reciprocity in the Classroom*

In my research on gift economies, I have learned that these ethical responsibilities include receiving gifts with gratitude and reciprocity. I imagine students recognizing their teacher's contributions to their learning as gifts and responding accordingly. I have attempted to do this through the letter-writing portion of this capstone project, where I wrote letters to the people I considered teachers (including professors, authors, and mentors) expressing my gratitude for their teachings. In my vision of an alternative approach to undergraduate education, practices

like this would be encouraged for all students as opportunities to reflect on what they have learned and recognize their teachers' generosity.

I have thought about whether my letter-writing practice is an act of reciprocity in addition to an expression of gratitude. Each letter represents time, care, and thought, all of which could be considered gifts that I have given to reciprocate the teachings I have received, though there is a part of me that wishes I could have also given more tangible gifts like artwork or food. I am still thinking through the most appropriate way to reciprocate a gift of knowledge.

Perhaps there are many ways for a student to fulfill their responsibility to reciprocate the teachings they receive. In some situations, expressing gratitude as I have tried to do may be sufficient reciprocity for a gift of knowledge, or perhaps simply paying respectful attention to one's teacher is enough. In others, students may be called to give more in return for the knowledge they receive. I think students can also practice indirect reciprocity by applying the knowledge they are gifted in a good way. There is a lot of space for creativity in how the responsibility to reciprocate is interpreted, and in an education institution where every action is oriented around the understanding that *knowledge is a gift*, every student would be engaged in these kinds of reflections.

### *Decentralizing the Authority to Teach*

In asking what gifts students have to give in return for the knowledge they receive from their teachers, I think it is essential to recognize that students are sources of knowledge too, not just empty vessels to be filled with teachings. Leanne Simpson writes that in a Nishnaabeg understanding, every individual is recognized as capable of and responsible for actively producing intelligence, including young people.<sup>40</sup> I imagine an education institution where every participant is considered a source of unique brilliance, and where the goal is to facilitate reciprocal flows of knowledge, not one-way exchanges from a few designated authorities to a mass of passive consumers.

Within this institution, nobody would be locked into the role of teacher or learner. In place of rigid hierarchies, the authority to teach would be decentralized, with individuals taking turns teaching and learning, giving and receiving. The officially designated instructor, as the person with the most experience in the subject of discussion, would likely have special responsibilities and would take on a teaching role more often. However, everyone's unique intelligence would be respected and valued, resulting in plenty of opportunities for students to share their knowledge with their learning community. Fluid and adaptive relationships of knowledge

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<sup>40</sup> Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*.

exchange would arise in each classroom, shifting depending on who has relevant intelligence to share in each moment and guided by the understanding that *knowledge is a gift*. Occasionally taking on teaching roles would allow students to participate in a new kind of relationship with their professors and peers, exercising different capacities and living closer to their full potential.

### **Generating Relationships**

Providing opportunities for students to engage in a diversity of relationships of knowledge exchange - relationships infused with respect, gratitude, and reciprocity - should be a central goal of education. If, as Leanne Simpson writes, relationships are channels for knowledge to flow,<sup>41</sup> then linking students into relationships makes more knowledge accessible to them. As I already discussed, officially designated teachers are not the only sources of knowledge. I imagine many opportunities for students to share knowledge with each other, and for students with common goals to come together in collectives where the impact of their work is magnified. I see this as different from most conventional group project assignments because of the emphasis on consent. Leanne Simpson writes that Indigenous processes of coming to know are characterized by consent and individual self-determination,<sup>42</sup> and I imagine a system of education where these values are centered and students can freely come together into collectives and disperse as they choose. Through consensual relationships of knowledge exchange, students teach and learn from each other.

I also think that these relationships of knowledge exchange should stretch outside the education institution, connecting students not just to their professors and peers, but to the community and place in which the institution is located. Too often, higher education and academia in general is treated as a fortress floating above the rest of the world, a source of pure and universal truth untethered from any particular context or place. I believe that knowledge is meant to flow like water,<sup>43</sup> not stagnate in academic spaces because it has no grounding in the real world or because it is too dense and incomprehensible to be meaningful anywhere else. Education institutions should be like estuaries where flows of knowledge from academics, local community members, and the land itself converge.

I imagine an education institution that recognizes the community in which it is located as a source of knowledge and invites community members in to share their knowledge. The curriculum becomes a kind of commons, collectively managed by educators, students, and community members. This reminds me of Leanne Simpson's description of an Indigenous

<sup>41</sup> Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*.

<sup>42</sup> Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*.

<sup>43</sup> Joanne Barker, "Confluence: Water as an Analytic of Indigenous Feminisms," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 43, no. 3 (2019): 1-40.



understanding of home as a place of inviting visiting relatives in, rather than a place to be defended from outsiders.<sup>44</sup> I imagine education institutions as home-like spaces that practice hospitality by hosting local community members to share their brilliance. This might sound chaotic or messy - how is the school supposed to maintain any kind of consistency in what is being taught? - but Margaret Wheatley argues that this openness to outside information is a key condition for emergent processes to take place.<sup>45</sup> As long as these relationships with community members uphold the guiding principle that *knowledge is a gift*, they support the education system's process of self-organization.

I also imagine an educational institution that honors the land and the entities we share it with as a source of knowledge and provides opportunities for students to learn from the land and deepen their relationship with it. Some of the most impactful moments of my college experience have been going on class hikes or plant walks in which the professor acted as an interpreter and mediated a flow of knowledge from the land to us. I think many disciplines offer unique ways to deepen one's relationship with land - through art, storytelling, scientific experiments, and more. I imagine students learning to respectfully listen to the land on which they are located, and responding with appropriate gratitude and reciprocity to its teachings.

### **Decolonizing Education**

I imagine an education institution that supports students in cultivating relationships that attach them to place, but I think that this must necessarily be a critical engagement of place. One of the reasons I am drawn to the three concepts I am using as models for this vision of an alternative approach to education - emergence theory, Indigenous systems of education, and gift economies - is that all three are life-sustaining. Emergence is how life organizes into systems so that more life can flourish, promoting complexity and diversity.<sup>46</sup> Indigenous education practices teach children to think and act within Indigenous intelligence systems, which regenerate Indigeneity.<sup>47</sup> Gift economies generate an ethical framework that promotes respectful, sustainable use of resources rather than capitalistic extraction. An education system founded on these three concepts must also be life-sustaining, which I interpret to mean refusing the structures of settler-colonialism, racism, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism that destroy life and generating a just future where all life - human and other-than-human - can flourish. The education system I envision is decolonized, or at least working to decolonize itself, which means that its students learn to engage with place with an awareness of their position as settlers or as Indigenous people.

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<sup>44</sup> Maynard and Simpson, *Rehearsals for Living*.

<sup>45</sup> Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, *A Simpler Way*.

<sup>46</sup> Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, *A Simpler Way*.

<sup>47</sup> Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*.

### *Salish Sea Studies*

Several of my classes, along with my independent reading, have discussed what it means to decolonize education (while I have not spent as much time thinking through how education institutions can challenge racism and heteropatriarchy, this will certainly be a central focus as I continue to work on this project). In particular, my classes in the Salish Sea Studies minor at Western have been an opportunity to experience an approach to education that is more oriented around decolonization and supports students in developing a critical sense of place and an awareness of their responsibilities to that place. It was in one of these classes that I first heard myself described as a settler and began to identify the ways my thinking - and simply my presence in the Salish Sea - replicates settler-colonialism, and how I could instead support decolonization, reconciliation, and Indigenous resurgence.

The Salish Sea Studies program currently only reaches a fraction of all the students attending Western, but I imagine this approach to education spreading throughout the entire college. I imagine the program itself expanding so that every student has the opportunity to take the core classes. I also imagine all the other departments at Western modeling their classes after the program. I think there are opportunities in every discipline to root educational practices in the particularities of place and to integrate discussions of how the subject matter upholds or undermines settler-colonialism. I envision a diversity of land-based, decolonial pedagogies emerging to suit all different types of knowledge.

### *Becoming Guests*

I want to spend some time exploring how decolonizing education aligns with the alternative approach to education I have described, where the foundational organizing principle is that *knowledge is a gift*. I am inspired by the article “Beyond Land Acknowledgement in Settler Institutions,” which asks “What would it mean for a settler speaker of a land acknowledgment to say, ‘I am a visitor, and I hope to become a proper guest?’”<sup>48</sup> I imagine an educational institution where this question informs every settler participant’s decisions and actions, not just how land acknowledgements are delivered. The responsibility to be a proper guest to the Indigenous communities on whose traditional territory the institution is located would become another of the guiding principles organizing the institution, alongside *knowledge is a gift*.

I have already argued that the purpose of educational institutions is to support students in developing a diversity of relationships of knowledge exchange by “hosting” local community

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<sup>48</sup> Theresa Stewart-Ambo and K. Wayne Yang, “Beyond Land Acknowledgement in Settler Institutions,” *Social Text* 39, no. 1 (2021): 34.

members who contribute their unique knowledge to a collectively managed curriculum “commons.” I think that building relationships with local Indigenous communities is also the key to transitioning from visitors to proper guests. These relationships would be channels for ethically integrating Indigenous values and understandings of land, relationships, and responsibilities into curriculums. This does not mean extracting Indigenous knowledge in a way that entrenches settler-colonialism by fulfilling the settler fantasy of becoming native and therefore innocent of responsibility.<sup>49</sup> Rather, it means holding space for Indigenous people to share their knowledge on their own terms, in a way that prioritizes an Indigenous future. It means investing serious time and resources into cultivating respectful, culturally sensitive relationships. Through these reciprocal relationships of knowledge exchange with consenting Indigenous communities, I believe that educators, students, and Indigenous peoples can collaborate to transform colonial relationships and state structures, and to further decolonization.

### *Practicing Reciprocity Through Community Engagement Projects*

Because the contributions of knowledge from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members are recognized as gifts, students in this vision of education would have a responsibility to practice reciprocity by sharing knowledge back into that community. I imagine students reciprocating the gifts of knowledge they receive through projects that identify problems and implement solutions within those communities, mobilizing their own personal knowledge to address community needs. This is not about outsider students stepping in to “save” the community, but rather approaching with the understanding that the community is the expert on what it needs and the student is playing a supporting role in meeting those needs. Students must approach with humility, recognizing that these projects are another learning opportunity. I imagine a college where student success is measured in how knowledge is redistributed through community engagement projects, just as wealth in a gift economy lies in the relationships formed through sharing.

Engaging with knowledge through hands-on projects that are accountable to community needs has many benefits for students - it is certainly not a sacrifice in the name of reciprocity or a distraction from “real” learning. Grace Lee Boggs writes that such projects are an opportunity for students to exercise their productive capacity and learn social responsibility, and should be the basis of school curriculums in place of conventional subjects like English or math.<sup>50</sup> I have had several opportunities to participate in projects that address actual community needs in my

<sup>49</sup> Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 13.

<sup>50</sup> Grace Lee Boggs, “Education: The Great Obsession,” *Monthly Review*, July 2011. <https://monthlyreview.org/2011/07/01/education-the-great-obsession/#en3>

time at Western, and this work is always the most engaging and meaningful. For example, during my internship with LEAD, Western's ecological restoration organization, I helped plan and implement a forest restoration project that not only engaged other students and community members as volunteers but will provide increasing benefits to the community as it matures. Working on this project has been an incredible learning experience, and it has connected me into relationships with other local restoration practitioners through which I can continue to learn even after I graduate, supporting me in my goal of engaging in lifelong learning. Creating more opportunities for students to participate in projects like these empowers them to envision and create the future they want to see.

### **Student Self-Determination**

For these community engagement projects to be empowering for students, they have to support student self-determination. In the three systems I have used as inspiration for this vision of alternative education - emergent organizations, Indigenous systems of education, and gift economies - individuals exercise self-determination within the framework created by the system's guiding principles. Emergence theory states that organization is not imposed on a system by an authority, but rather arises from the individuals within that system creatively and freely interacting with each other and with outside information.<sup>51</sup> Leanne Simpson writes that knowledge exchange relationships in Indigenous education systems are necessarily consensual and free of coercion, and that learners are encouraged to produce their own creative interpretations of the teachings they receive.<sup>52</sup> Gift economies are not managed by a central authority who controls how gifts circulate, rather they are maintained by the participants' mutual accountability to uphold their responsibilities in whatever way makes the most sense for them.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, in the alternative system of education I envision, these community engagement projects are not forced on students by school authorities. Students in this system exercise self-determination to creatively fulfill their responsibility to uphold its guiding principles in a way that is meaningful to them.

I envision students developing and engaging in a diversity of community projects according to the personal gifts they feel called to give. Eve Tuck uses the term "deep participation" to describe when people are invited to define how they participate, in contrast to "shallow participation" which is more common in schools but only allows people to participate in

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<sup>51</sup> Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*.

<sup>52</sup> Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*.

<sup>53</sup> Kimmerer, "The Serviceberry."

predetermined ways with little potential for generating significant structural change.<sup>54</sup> Deep participation allows students to participate, to produce meaning, and to engage in acts of radical imagination in a way that touches the spirit and contributes meaningfully to liberation.<sup>55</sup> I envision an educational system that creates opportunities for students to engage in deep participation by expressing their particular gifts in service of the community - including those gifts traditionally undervalued by the academy, such as artistic skills. I imagine services developing to support students in discovering and expressing their gifts, in learning how to learn in a way that they love. When students have the opportunity to engage with education in a way that truly resonates with them, they will feel more invested in honoring the guiding principles organizing the educational system.

### *Control-Based Educational Structures Infringe on Self-Determination*

I think that this kind of student self-determination is incompatible with our current, control-based approach to organizing educational spaces, which imposes a rigid structure and hierarchy that is enforced by authorities. I agree with thinkers such as Leanne Simpson<sup>56</sup> and Charles Eisenstein<sup>57</sup> who identify pedagogical mechanisms of control such as grades as coercive. Too often we assume that these mechanisms are essential for maintaining order in our educational spaces - that without them, learning will not take place. This is exactly the kind of mindset that Margaret Wheatley critiques as stemming from a fundamental misunderstanding about how systems organize.<sup>58</sup>

I believe that the educational system I have described is self-organizing - it does not need structure imposed upon it to keep it functioning. It fulfills the three conditions Margaret Wheatley identifies for organization to emerge - an identity or guiding principle (that *knowledge is a gift* and that settler members of the system have a responsibility to contribute to decolonization), relationships (within the system and extending out of it to connect students to place), and a flow of information (community members contributing to the curriculum). It does this in a way that meaningfully engages students, recognizes them as valuable sources of knowledge and gifts, and centers self-determination and consent. In this context, I think students would be motivated to participate out of genuine interest in the work they are doing, and out of respect for the teachers and community members with whom they have formed

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<sup>54</sup> Eve Tuck, "Locating the Hope in Bone-Deep Participation," in *We Saved the Best for You: Letters of Hope, Imagination and Wisdom for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Educators*, ed. Tricia Kress and Rober Lake (Leiden, Netherlands: BRILL, 2013), 11-14.

<sup>55</sup> Tuck, "Bone-Deep Participation."

<sup>56</sup> Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*.

<sup>57</sup> Charles Eisenstein, "Grades: A Gun to Your Head," *Charles Eisenstein* (blog), October 2005, <https://charleseisenstein.org/essays/grades-a-gun-to-your-head/>.

<sup>58</sup> Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*.

close relationships characterized by reciprocity and shared accountability. There is no need to threaten students with bad grades if we trust that they are naturally curious and capable of self-directed learning.

### **What is the role of teachers in this alternative education system?**

In arguing that students are capable of self-directed learning, I am not trying to suggest that there is no place for established teachers. Rather, I am arguing that the role of teachers is not to hand down knowledge from above to empty, passive minds and to police how those minds engage with that knowledge. As Charles Eisenstein writes, “(t)he teacher should be a resource, someone students seek out and incorporate into their own learning agenda, not the imposer and enforcer of academic discipline.”<sup>59</sup> I am suggesting that the role of the teacher in the classroom shifts, so that they can develop healthier and more productive relationships of knowledge exchange with students.

If, as Margaret Wheatley writes, we should turn our focus from designing organizations to creating the conditions through which organization emerges,<sup>60</sup> then the role of teachers is to create the conditions for students to organize. This could mean giving students the knowledge they need to get started on their projects in a more conventional lecture format, or by referring students to community members who hold relevant knowledge. In one of my Salish Sea Studies classes, the professor played an important role in initiating a relationship between the class and a member of the Indigenous community we were learning about. After this contact shared suggestions for projects that the class could undertake on behalf of the community, the professor continued to play a supportive role but mostly gave us freedom to organize into groups and complete the projects. Facilitating connections between students and other knowledge holders is an important way that teachers support student self-organization.

In addition to helping students access knowledge, teachers play an important role in communicating to students that the knowledge they hold is valuable. This is particularly true for knowledge that is typically devalued in “rational” Western educational spaces, such as emotional, spiritual, or bodily intelligence. One way to accomplish this is to encourage students to generate their own unique interpretations of the class material and create opportunities for them to take on a teaching role and share these interpretations with the class.

Many of the responsibilities of teachers in this alternative education system that I have described fall within the model that Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze have developed for

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<sup>59</sup> Eisenstein, “Grades.”

<sup>60</sup> Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, *A Simpler Way*.

facilitating emergent organization. This model consists of four stages: Name, Connect, Nourish, and Illuminate.

*“We focus on discovering pioneering efforts and naming them as such. We then connect these efforts to other similar work globally. We nourish this network in many ways, but most essentially through creating opportunities for learning and sharing experiences and shifting into communities of practice. We also illuminate these pioneering efforts so that many more people will learn from them.”<sup>61</sup>*

I think that teachers likewise play a role in identifying students' attempts to organize, connecting them into relationships with others both within and outside the institution, supporting them in their work in a variety of ways, and then helping them share and celebrate the results. In other words, teachers support the emergence efforts of students. This role is necessarily flexible, and shifts depending on the context and the students' needs. Sometimes, the best way that the teacher can fulfill this role is to step back and make space for students to exercise their autonomy, trusting that the apparent disorder that results will resolve into organization.

As they engage with students, teachers in this educational system would also be responsible for modeling the ethical principles that organize the system. By demonstrating how to honor *knowledge as a gift* by receiving it with gratitude and reciprocity and how to center decolonization in one's work, teachers encourage students to value and uphold these principles as well. This accountability is how the system maintains its organization in the absence of coercive, control-based mechanisms. Therefore, teachers do not only support the emergence efforts of students, they also help maintain the integrity and stability of the entire educational system.

### **Limitations**

I think that there are many opportunities for our current education system to come into better alignment with this vision of a life-sustaining approach to education, but I also recognize that the current system may only be able to change so far. I don't know if it is possible for an education system that is so closely connected to the settler state to ever fully decolonize. I don't know if it is possible to separate it from our individualistic, extractive capitalistic economy, which is completely incompatible with the reciprocal, gift-based relationships I've described. I am inspired by Charles Eisenstein's description of a “worldwide archipelago of land-based

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<sup>61</sup> Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze, “Using Emergence to Take Social Innovations to Scale,” *Margaret J. Wheatley* (blog), 2006, <https://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/emergence.html>.

institutions of learning...sanctuaries of alternative technologies of earth, mind, matter, and body that are marginal or absent within conventional universities.”<sup>62</sup> Realizing the vision of education that I have shared will involve not just transforming our existing education institutions, but also supporting the emergence of educational organizations outside the current system.

## Conclusion

I wrote in the introduction that I envisioned the three concepts I have reviewed here - emergence theory, Indigenous education systems, and gift economies - as three separate strands of thread. I have attempted to practice ethical citation by tracing back along these threads to name the authors who have guided me to and through these concepts. I have spun a yarn from these three lineages of thought, telling a story of an education system where the understanding that *knowledge is a gift* reverberates through a beautifully complex web of decolonial relationships that center gratitude, reciprocity, and self-determination.

I offer this story as a gift to anyone reading this. It is an incomplete gift, a gift I am still in the process of giving. But I truly believe that it has a place in our work of weaving a better world, and I look forward to seeing what you create with it.

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<sup>62</sup> Charles Eisenstein, “Institutes for Technologies of Reunion,” *Charles Eisenstein* (blog), April 2017, <https://charleseisenstein.org/essays/institutes-for-technologies-of-reunion/>.



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## Part II: Letters of Gratitude

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (author)	35
Dr. Moore (WWU teacher)	39
Robin Kimmerer (author)	43
David Rossiter (WWU teacher)	47
Michael Feerer (director of Whatcom Million Trees Project)	50
Scott Linneman (director of WWU Honors Program)	53
Nick Stanger (WWU teacher)	57
Dr. Baker (WWU teacher)	62
Mo Wells (WWU teacher)	67
Zander Albertson (WWU teacher)	71
Dr. Goldman (WWU teacher)	76
Natalie Baloy (capstone advisor)	82

## Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (author)

Dear Leanne Betasamosake Simpson,

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. My name is Tegan Keyes. I am a daughter and sister of a family that originally came to the United States from northwestern Europe. My family's home is in Seattle, Washington, but I am writing this from Bellingham, where I study at Western Washington University on the traditional territory of the Lhaq'temish Nation and Nooksack Tribe. I went to college because I wanted to learn how to protect the land and waters of the Salish Sea region where I have grown up, but it is also the place where I first became aware of myself as a white settler and started engaging with the concepts of settler-colonialism, decolonization, and resurgence.

I took a class on decolonization this fall, where we read excerpts of *As We Have Always Done*. The book has been incredibly impactful to me, and my intention with this letter was to reach out and express my gratitude for everything I have learned from it. I feel a little awkward thanking you because I know that the book was not written for me – as you say in the final chapter, there is little room for white people in resurgence and you are interested in looking beyond white allies in your work to build constellations of co-resistance. But I felt it was important to at least offer my gratitude for how much it has changed my thinking, with the understanding that you are free to choose whether or not to accept it.

I have been thinking through how to express that gratitude for the seven months since I was introduced to *As We Have Always Done*. I was hesitant to start this letter because I kept worrying that I'd misunderstood your arguments or that my motivation for reaching out was in the wrong place. I delayed writing in favor of reading more of your work, as if I could reach a magical stopping point where I had educated myself enough to write confidently and prove that I was genuine in my gratitude.

It is now spring, and I have accepted that this letter will be at best a partial account of how I have been impacted by your writing. I have a lot more to learn, and it will take time to process what I have already read of your writing and allow that brilliance to fully saturate my understanding of the world. I see this letter not as an end point to my engagement with your work, but as a snapshot of a much longer, cyclical process of learning and reflection and action.

...

I wanted to name a section of *As We Have Always Done* that has been particularly impactful to me – the essay “Land as Pedagogy.” At the time I read this, I had been back in school for less

than a month after the summer break where I had gone home to live with my family in Seattle. I was struggling to readjust to college life in Bellingham after months of living surrounded by the people I cared most deeply about. At home, I felt a greater sense of belonging and purpose than at college. Every action felt more meaningful - cooking dinner to feed my family, cleaning the house, going for walks to share conversation. I didn't have relationships of that depth at college, and moving back left me feeling lonely and homesick.

I enjoyed my classes, but I was also feeling frustrated by how much of my time they were taking up. I had spent the summer poking around in our garden, writing, and making art. I was engaging the gifts that I felt most called to give to the world, and feeling healthier as a result. Once Fall Quarter started, though, I struggled to find time just to exercise regularly. I knew it was a privilege to have the opportunity to go to college, and I did truly find my classes interesting, but I also resented how they monopolized my time.

Distanced from my most meaningful relationships and feeling pressured to set aside many of my interests so that I could focus on being a good student, I felt like I had lost parts of myself. I was feeling dissatisfied with the higher education system, but it was an aimless kind of dissatisfaction - I didn't know how to act on it. Reading "Land as Pedagogy" helped me to reflect on my experience of education more closely and constructively. I realized that compared to my life at home, where I was embedded in loving, reciprocal relationships and where I had a high degree of agency over how I spent my time, my college experience felt extractive and narrowing. I typically showed up to class on the first day of the quarter, spent ten weeks learning as much as possible, and then left without giving anything back. In that time, my mind was engaged but not my emotions or body or spirit.

I also realized that my experience of education was not an anomaly so much as the logical outcome of a state education institution engineered to prepare students for success in a capitalistic system. Of course such a system would treat information as a commodity to be exchanged through impersonal transactions. It would prioritize knowledge accumulation over reflection or knowledge production, and individualistic competition over collaboration. This system would not facilitate the growth of deep, intimate relationships of knowledge exchange. It would treat students as passive consumers instead of as creative agents. And because students would sense that this system was not life-sustaining and reject it, it would restrict individual freedom through a rigid, force-based structure of control. I've experienced some of the frustration of existing within this structure, but I'm certain it doesn't approach the complexity and difficulty Indigenous students face in navigating a system designed to reproduce settler-colonial and capitalistic values.

In “Land as Pedagogy,” you contrast this image of the settler education system with a description of what education looks like in a Nishnaabeg context. You describe a lifelong, learner-led process of coming into wisdom that is characterized by self-determination and consent, where knowledge is shared through intimate, reciprocal relationships. You describe a land-based approach to education that regenerates Nishnaabeg communities by producing individuals that can think and act and contribute to those communities within Nishnaabeg networks of intelligence. It is a form of education that sustains and grows life, rather than restricting it.

Reading this description felt like a gift, though I know the book was not written for me. During my time at college, I have learned to link institutions and attitudes of settler-colonialism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism to the destruction of both human and other-than-human life. I’ve learned to look at the world in terms of what needs to be refused, resisted, and ended - not what needs to be nurtured and created. But as you and Robyn Maynard discuss in your book *Rehearsals for Living*, world-ending must be accompanied by world-making – and Indigenous and Black peoples are well positioned to imagine a new world. Your description of a system of education that is based in relationality and brings forth more life is beautifully vivid and compelling. It has helped me envision the world that I want to participate in making, one that prioritizes an Indigenous future over the continuation of the settler state.

I am still thinking through how to properly receive this gift. I want to stand in solidarity with this vision of radical, resurgent education and support efforts to realize it. I also know that as a white settler, sometimes the best thing I can do is to remove myself from certain places. I don’t think it’s my place to involve myself in Indigenous learning spaces, but I do think I can contribute to decolonizing settler education institutions. I’m not sure if the settler education system can ever be fully decolonized - if it can be separated from its role in maintaining the settler state and reoriented toward revitalizing Indigenous intelligence on Indigenous terms. But I think it is worth trying, in addition to supporting education communities that arise outside of this system.

This letter is part of a larger project I designed after reading “Land as Pedagogy” that I hope can be a small intervention in that capitalistic settler education system. My initial plan was to write gratitude letters to each of my college professors. My experience of college has been difficult in some ways, but I truly have had incredible professors, and I wanted to thank them for the knowledge they have gifted me and recognize the responsibility that came with that gift. My hope was that each letter would be a small step towards reciprocity and building relationships – belatedly, given that I’m graduating this year, but better than leaving without any kind of

acknowledgement of all the time and passion and intelligence those professors have shared with me. However, the list of people I wanted to write to soon expanded beyond college professors to include all the teachers who have contributed to my learning over the last four years - inspiring artists and podcasters, family members, unofficial mentors, special places like my family's garden and the Salish Sea, and influential writers like yourself. It's a long list, and I will likely be working through it long after I graduate.

This is a very personal, contained project, so calling it decolonial or anti-colonial feels like a bit of an overstatement, since I'm not sure that it's really dismantling any settler-colonial structures. But it has opened a space within my experience of the settler education system for me to think about what an approach to education grounded in reciprocal relationships might look like and what I can do to help create it. I plan to continue exploring and pushing the boundaries of that space.

I want to thank you for your writing. It inspired me to start this project, and more generally, it has introduced me to a vision of the future that I want to help create. I am still thinking through how exactly I can serve that vision once I graduate. I have become interested in regenerative agriculture and ecological restoration this year, and I see those as potential channels for action. I also hope to apply what I have learned from your vision of radical resurgence to my creative life – to my art and writing.

I recognize this vision as a gift. I acknowledge my responsibility to receive it well, and I commit to orienting my future thought and action around it. Thank you for your generosity in sharing it with the world.

Tegan

**Dr. Moore (WWU teacher)**

Dear Dr. Moore,

Before I launch into what I can sense will be an exceptionally long letter, perhaps I should provide some context. Though it certainly doesn't feel like it, three (almost four!) years have passed since I first walked into your HNRS 103 classroom in the fall of 2019, and I will soon be graduating in the spring. Looking back on that time, I am struck by how much I have learned, and by how fortunate I have been to have had such incredible professors to guide me along that learning journey. It felt right to use my Honors Capstone project to acknowledge the gifts of time, knowledge, patience, enthusiasm, and so much more that those professors have shared with me. I've chosen to do so through these letters, which I hope will express my gratitude for those gifts and begin to reciprocate them in some small way. Writing them has been an opportunity to reflect on what it means to ground one's approach to learning in the understanding that knowledge is a gift.

I was lucky enough to take two of your classes – HNRS 103 as a freshman in 2019, and then HNRS 356: "The Landscape of the Spirit" in 2021. I've kept my notes for both and was reviewing them as I thought about what I wanted to say in this letter. It was amusing to see how my HNRS 103 notes started out so organized: a pristinely-written overview of the archaeological significance of Cātāl Hüyük arranged in a sophisticated bullet point system, with clean little boxes of additional information – a definition of "cuneiform," a note on the similarity between the Akkadian king Sargon and the story of Moses. In the pages that follow, my excitement about the class quickly overwhelmed my organizational abilities. The writing is quick and loose as I tried to capture everything we talked about, and the margins of the paper are filled with quickly jotted questions, references to chase down, and vague notes of what the lecture material reminded me of. Words are capitalized, circled, underlined, and starred as if my interest was constantly growing and demanding new levels of emphasis.

I was clearly engaged in what we were learning, which makes sense since I loved reading myths and had never gotten to study them in a class. But what I remember from that class is that the reading and writing I was doing wasn't just interesting, it felt *relevant*. I sensed that what we were learning was deeply important, even though I wasn't entirely sure why. Up to that point, I enjoyed reading myths but didn't see them as much more than an especially old kind of story. I remember being so surprised to learn about Joseph Campbell and realize that it was possible to build an entire career out of studying myths! Like fairy tales and fantasy stories, myths felt like an escape, a story that I could sink into when I needed a break from the "real world". I certainly didn't see them as at all connected to my main college mission – to major in Environmental



Sciences (later Environmental Studies) and embark on a heroic journey of saving the world from climate change.

And yet, somehow reading the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Odyssey* and *The Waste Land* felt deeply relevant to that mission. It did not feel like I was escaping from the pressure of reality to a colorful fantasy world, but rather as if the world around me was suddenly vivid with new meaning. As I journeyed through those stories, I felt like I was discovering the foundations of the world that I knew and realizing that these foundations were *alive* - not ancient, crumbling pillars but more like the deep, vibrating base note in a chord.

An example that comes into my mind is reading *The Four Quartets* for HNRS 356, in the springtime after I had moved back home for the pandemic. I had the sense before I began that this poem wasn't just alive, but that it had to be approached respectfully and patiently if it was to reveal anything of itself – that reading it from my computer screen in my room in the basement wouldn't be appropriate, somehow. I printed out the poem and took it outside, where the sky was blue and the birds were chirping and my dog was lazing in a nearby sunbeam. I read it once, trying just to catch the feeling of it, then found a recording of T.S. Eliot himself reading it and listened to that, and then read it again, and then again, with a pen in hand. I remember feeling excited, like I was going on a little quest – a hero's journey in miniature into the notoriously dense thickets of this author's work, all from my own backyard.

That excitement and sense of discovery was certainly in part due to the texts themselves, but I think – and this is why I wanted to write this letter – that much of it was also due to how you conducted the class. I reread some of my papers in preparation for writing this letter and was remembering just how much I enjoyed writing them and how proud I was of what I had written. You gave us enough encouragement and freedom to choose our own topics that I felt like I was doing truly original thinking. I want to thank you for creating that space for us to think freely about spirituality. In HNRS 356, we talked about Pema Chodron's concept of *shenpa*, or getting "hooked" on something, like a fish chasing a line. Exploring that space helped me realize that I had gotten hooked on a specific idea of what it meant to be an environmentalist that was absent of spirituality. It made me question what an environmentalism infused with sacredness might look like.

...

I've kept reading and learning since then, and I have come to value myths and poetry as a gateway to better understanding the world. I think myths contain important truths about the

sacred nature of the world – truths that have been overlooked by Western science until perhaps very recently - and how we should live in relation to it.

I am not from a religious family and prior to taking HNRS 356 had never taken the time to explore my own sense of spirituality. I certainly didn't see that kind of inner spiritual work as related to the work I wanted to do as an environmental activist. But as I continue to connect with my own sense of spirituality, it becomes easier and easier to find the sacred in the world around me, and to see the world as alive. I increasingly see that to heal ourselves and the natural systems we are embedded in, we must re-situate the sacred in the world, rather than abstracting it from all things material. It gives me so much positive energy and hope to see the world in this way – to orient my life not around avoiding the catastrophe encoded in the graphs of atmospheric carbon dioxide levels but around protecting and healing the beauty and sacredness that I see around me. One of my recently-discovered favorite authors, Charles Eisenstein, talks about the importance of holding a vision of the “more beautiful world our hearts know is possible,” arguing that spiritual work and self-transformation must accompany structural change if we are to address our ecological and social crises. As I grow more in touch with my own spirituality and with what my heart knows to be true, my faith in that vision – and in the role I have to play in achieving it - is strengthened.

...

I have been thinking a lot in the last year about gifts, and more recently about how knowledge is a kind of gift. As I said at the beginning of this letter, I wanted to use the Honors Capstone as an opportunity to look back on everything I have learned – all the gifts I have received – and express my gratitude for them. I've learned that gift-giving – at least in the communities where it is still a foundational part of social life, not just a practice relegated to major holidays – occurs in a cycle. Receiving a gift prompts gratitude and a sense of responsibility to reciprocate – giving in turn to someone else and thus circulating the gift throughout the community according to people's needs. It has made me reflect on how I can responsibly and respectfully receive this gift of knowledge, and how I will reciprocate and allow it to flow beyond myself.

Gratitude comes easily. I am so grateful for all the ways that you worked to make HNRS 103 and HNRS 356 meaningful to me, though the one that stands out particularly strongly to me now as I reflect on how uncertain I felt when I first started college is your encouragement of all my writing. Your feedback on my papers really helped boost my confidence in my abilities as a writer and thinker – rereading those comments now reminds me of how much they inspired me in my later writing projects.

Reciprocity, however, is harder. I have struggled with the question of how I can adequately reciprocate and pass on these gifts. Something that has encouraged me is a thought I had a few months ago that everything I learn – every author I read or idea I'm exposed to – is like adding a new voice to a conversation happening only in my head. Without the Honors Program, and your classes in particular, I think I would still be graduating college with a strong mental conversation, but a much more limited one. Adding voices like Joseph Campbell, Hermann Hesse, Pema Chodron, and all the others that you introduced me to has enriched that conversation and made it unique. I feel that the connections that arise from that conversation, however I choose to express them, will be genuinely important contributions to the world – gifts that I can share with other people. On our first day of HNRS 356, we talked about man as “homo textor,” a weaver of stories. I think that I have something to contribute to that work of weaving, and I want to thank you for helping me along the path to discovering it.

Sincerely,

Tegan

**Robin Kimmerer (author)**

Dear Robin Kimmerer,

My name is Tegan Keyes. I am from Seattle, Washington, where I grew up in an old gray house surrounded by lavender and maple trees. I am a daughter and a sister to a family that loves books and puzzles and tea, and with whom I have explored and come to love the gray beaches and green forests of the Salish Sea region. I attend Western Washington University in Bellingham, where I first learned to recognize myself as a white settler on the traditional territory of the Coast Salish people.

I am writing this letter as spring is arriving in the Pacific Northwest. The rain is steady but soft, like it is coaxing the crocus and daffodils up from the ground. It felt gentle against my skin when I went out to plant some bean seeds in my parent's garden while I was visiting them in Seattle this weekend. I can only hope that the sprouts will not all be chewed down to the ground by my next visit – the snails take full and voracious advantage of my inability to regularly tend the garden during the school year.

Spring arriving doesn't just mean it is time to bring out my repurposed spice jars of last year's saved seeds, it also means that I am entering my last quarter of college before I graduate in June. This letter is part of a senior project I designed to reflect on my college experience as I prepare for that transition. I wanted to do something to acknowledge how much I have learned and the incredible professors responsible for that learning. I decided to write letters expressing my gratitude, but quickly realized that the people who I have learned from in the last four years have not just been university professors – they have also been authors, family members, other-than-human relatives, and artists. I count you as one of the teachers I have learned the most from, and my intention with this letter was to acknowledge what a gift your writing has been and to express my gratitude for it.

...

I have a clear memory of being introduced to your work. It was spring of 2021, a year after school had been moved online due to the pandemic, and I had moved back home to Seattle. I learned from the professor of my introductory Environmental Studies class that you were giving a virtual presentation called "The Honorable Harvest," and decided to attend. I remember afterward that I asked my family for your book *Braiding Sweetgrass* for my birthday, which was later that month.

I think I started reading it right away, there on the big blue couch in our living room, but my clearest memory is of a few weeks later, when we visited my grandmother's house on Orcas Island. It was a sunny weekend, and I took *Braiding Sweetgrass* up past the overgrown garden to the field that is more moss than grass and lay down to read. I could hear the ocean waves and the warbling of the ravens in the woods, the occasional *whoosh* sound as they flapped from one tall Douglas-fir tree to another. The light was sliding everywhere like honey and everything felt slow and sun-warmed and golden. I remember bookmarking pages I liked with Starburst wrappers that my sister had discarded, and then running out of markers and going back to tear them into strips so that I had more.

...

It has been almost two years since then, and in that time, I have nearly completed the Environmental Studies major, as well as a minor in Western's Salish Sea Studies Program. This program has affirmed my love for this area while deepening my awareness of its complexities. It combines electives from the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences to teach students about the human-environment systems of the Salish Sea, covering a wide range of topics from estuarine circulation to the Trans Mountain Pipeline. It was also in one of these classes that I first heard myself described as a settler. This program has helped me to identify the ways that my thinking replicates Western, settler-colonial perspectives, and has introduced me to Indigenous thinkers who embody alternative worldviews. It has asked me to consider how I might contribute to decolonization, reconciliation, and Indigenous resurgence.

I returned to my copy of *Braiding Sweetgrass* – the pages still marked with little scraps of orange and pink - in preparation for writing this letter. I was struck by the echoing experience of rereading it – not only did each chapter recall my first time reading it in the sun beneath listening trees, but they also called up memories of the Salish Sea Studies classes I have taken since. I hadn't recognized how closely the book's themes (reciprocity, respect for our other-than-human relations and teachers, the sacred aliveness of the world - and the limitations of Western ideas of nature, culture, and restoration that do not honor these) connected to the concepts I encountered in those classes. Rereading *Braiding Sweetgrass* was a spiraling and cyclical experience – a return to your familiar language but with a deepened understanding, enriched by the voices of other Indigenous thinkers I had been introduced to in the time since I first read the book.

In retrospect, I am so grateful for that beautifully coincidental timing – that I read your book just before starting the Salish Sea Studies program. I am grateful that when I was sitting in class discussions that forced me to confront the reality of my own participation in colonial systems, or when I was wading through dense publications that challenged my Western ways of thinking

about the world while using intimidating words like “epistemology” and “ontology,” that there was a soft echo back to moss and the sound of waves and words that flowed into my mind with all the gentle weight and grace of poetry. I am grateful to have had *Braiding Sweetgrass* to introduce me to such challenging or sometimes uncomfortable concepts. I know that as a settler, it is not my place to ask Indigenous people to educate me, or to make that process of education easy or comfortable. That is part of why I think of *Braiding Sweetgrass* as a gift – I did not earn its gentle patience, but it was given anyway, in the chaotic and uncertain midst of a pandemic when I truly needed it.

...

I want to specifically name one of the chapters in *Braiding Sweetgrass* that was particularly impactful to me - the essay “The Gift of Strawberries.” I likely would not be doing this project without it. This, and your essay “The Serviceberry: An Economy of Abundance” in *Emergence Magazine*, introduced me to gift thinking. It was at once a comfortably familiar and totally new concept – I hadn’t heard anyone describe the relationship between humans and the world as one of gifting, in which we have an ethical obligation to receive the world’s gifts with gratitude, respect, and reciprocity, and yet it resonated deeply with me. These essays led me to Lewis Hyde’s book *The Gift*, and then to Charles Eisenstein’s *Sacred Economics*. I found myself trying to think in terms of gifts, to recognize when I was receiving a gift and to reflect on how I could use my own gifts to reciprocate.

The reason I started this project of writing gratitude letters to my teachers is that I was able to recognize the teachings I had received (and the patience and enthusiasm with which they were delivered) as gifts. Unfortunately, the conventional college system in my experience does not make very much space for honoring teachings as gifts through gratitude or reciprocity. I show up to class at the beginning of the quarter, learn as much as I can for ten weeks, and then leave. If I can manage it during the harried rush of finals week, I might send a brief thank-you email or draw them a small card. But there is not time to deeply reflect on what I have learned and appreciate the gift it represents, nor to fully express my gratitude – soon a new quarter starts, and my attention is drawn elsewhere. My hope for this project was to take back some of that time.

...

I would not have been able to critique my experience of education in this way if I hadn’t read *Braiding Sweetgrass*. This book, and the others that it inspired me to read, made visible to me the capitalistic nature of my education experience – the ways that I had devoted myself to extracting knowledge, creating a false sense of time and energy scarcity that prevented me from

doing the seemingly less “productive” or “valuable” work of building relationships with my professors. It also suggested an alternative to this approach to education, one based in a mindset of abundance, relationships, and gifts.

I hope to embody that alternative in these letters, by taking the time to honor the gifts of knowledge I have received. It has been a joyful and humbling experience, and a challenging one as well. It has prompted me to ask myself difficult questions – is simply thanking a giver of knowledge enough? How else can a gift of knowledge be reciprocated? What can I possibly give in return?

*Braiding Sweetgrass* is helping me navigate these questions. When I feel helpless or uncertain about how I can properly receive the gifts of my teachers or the world in general, it reminds me that I have meaningful gifts to give in return – that I am capable of reciprocity. As I approach graduation, it has made me think deeply about what my gifts are and how I can turn them in service of my community and the wider world after leaving college. It has made me think about what it looks like to use *all* my gifts in symbiotic symphony. Throughout college, I have felt the pressure to sideline my creative interests to pursue the Environmental Studies major, and have struggled with the feeling that I must choose one interest or the other, that there is not time to nurture and express all the gifts I feel called to give.

*Braiding Sweetgrass* is a beautiful combination of your own diverse gifts – a synthesis of botany and poetry, a deeply inspiring example of what it looks like to use one’s gifts fully to meaningfully contribute to the world. It continues to help me be a better giver and receiver, a better relation, and a better guest on this land that is not mine. I want to thank you for this gift. I promise to do my best to listen to its teachings - to recognize that the gifts of the world are everywhere around me, in classrooms and the pages of books and in a small handful of beans on a rainy day. And to respond with all the love and gratitude that I have to give in return.

Tegan

**David Rossiter (WWU teacher)**

Dear Dave,

The following letter will completely disregard all the things we talked about in ENVS 319: Research and Writing. I don't have a systematic argument, I have given up on making each paragraph read like a mini essay, and I make no promises to manage my comma splices. But hopefully it will still do an adequate job of conveying what I want to express, which is a very heartfelt thank you for the two classes I have taken with you – ENVS 319 this fall and ENVS 444: “Colonial Landscapes in the Pacific Northwest” in the spring of last year.

I started this project of writing thank-you letters to my teachers in the fall – around the same time that I was writing about land-based education for my ENVS 319 final and reading the essay *Land as Pedagogy* by Leanne Simpson for a separate class. Both these classes made me think critically about my own experience of education. I had already been reflecting on my time at Western (imminent graduation provokes all kinds of deep thoughts, apparently) and feeling amazed and humbled by how many incredible professors I have had and how much I have learned. Reading about these land-based Indigenous systems of education – particularly how they are rooted in deep, reciprocal relationships of knowledge exchange – made me consider the ways that my own approach to education has been extractive. I typically show up to class at the start of each quarter, learn as much as I can, and then leave. It made me realize that I haven't done a lot to express my gratitude to my teachers and reciprocate some of the time and energy and care they have invested in my learning.

This project (my capstone for the Honors Program) is a belated attempt to correct that. I have spent the last six months writing letters, not just to professors, but to everyone who has been a teacher to me in the last four years – authors and family members and even special places. My hope is to recognize that the knowledge I have received from these teachers is a gift that I am grateful for, and to express my responsibility to use that gift well in the future.

I wanted to write you a letter because the classes I have taken with you have been truly impactful. I am thinking of ENVS 444 in particular – ENVS 319 certainly helped me become a better writer, and I appreciate the energy and patience with which you approached such an early-morning class, but ENVS 444 stands out to me as one of the most important college classes I have taken. At the time I was enrolled, I had taken a few classes within the Salish Sea Studies minor that had addressed settler-colonialism in the Salish Sea region, but I had not had the chance to engage with the concept of colonialism in detail. Your class was incredibly well-timed because I took it last spring and then each quarter of this academic year I have ended up in classes that require a solid understanding of settler-colonialism – a class on



decolonization in the fall, a class on reconciliation in the winter (specifically in the northern Salish Sea, so I was feeling especially grateful to have benefitted from your familiarity with settler-colonialism in B.C.), and now a class on Indigenous feminisms.

ENVS 444 prepared me very well for these classes. It helped me to understand settler colonialism as a series of processes of dispossession, erasure, and genocide that may have shifted over time but still persist today, rather than a historical event. It made me aware that I am not innocent in these processes – that colonialism is sustained not just by governments or militaries, but by all settlers. It made me more mindful of how I unknowingly replicate “buried epistemologies” (thank you, Bruce Willems-Braun, for such a vividly descriptive term!) in my thinking by drawing on narratives and categories that I assume to be commonsense or politically pure but are in fact informed by colonial practices.

I still have a lot to learn, but these readings gave me a very solid foundation to build on. Looking back on my notes, I am struck by how much we covered in class. I’m also remembering a conversation I had with my grandfather the summer after our class. We somehow got on the topic of Indigenous land claims and treaties, and I don’t recall exactly what I said, but I remember that he was surprised by how much I knew – as was I! I didn’t know I could hold an in-depth conversation like that, and it made me realize just how much I had learned.

ENVS 444 not only taught me a lot about the history and theory of settler-colonialism in B.C. and Washington, it also helped me become more confident using academic language to talk about colonialism. I have a much better understanding of terms like “discourse,” “representation,” “decolonization,” and “epistemology,” and this in turn has made scholarly articles more accessible and has improved my ability to continue learning. I am particularly grateful that we covered one of Taiiike Alfred’s articles, because it introduced me to the term “resurgence.” This article prepared me for reading Leanne Simpson’s *As We Have Always Done* in class this year. It has become one of the most influential books I have read, but I think I would have struggled to understand it without having taken ENVS 444.

This class was definitely a challenge, but I learned a great deal. I appreciate your patience and encouragement as we were grappling with the readings – you made me feel much more confident in my ability to read and discuss complex scholarly work. I also hope you don’t mind me saying that you were a good model for how to talk about colonialism as a settler person – I always felt like you were very open about your positionality, and thoughtful about how you spoke. There’s a small moment that has stuck in my memory of one of our lectures where you accidentally used the past tense in reference to an Indigenous nation and immediately corrected yourself and took the time to explain to us why that was problematic. Seeing the care

and thought that you put into speaking in class helped me appreciate the responsibility I have as a settler to be attentive to how I am speaking and what narratives I am replicating.

I am committed to carrying this learning beyond college and continuing to build on it and act on it. I've been asked so many times in the last few months what I will be doing after I graduate, and I always feel awkward saying something like "supporting decolonization" because the obvious response is "how?" and I don't have an answer to that yet. But it is true that I want whatever I end up doing after graduation to be oriented around becoming a better ally and accomplice, participating meaningfully in reconciliation and decolonization, and supporting Indigenous resurgence. I am grateful to have been introduced to these projects in a way that made me aware of my own responsibility, and I feel hopeful that I have something to contribute to them. I don't know exactly how I will act on that responsibility, but I think my experience of ENV5 444 and the related classes I have taken will help me figure it out.

Thank you,

Tegan

**Michael Feerer (director of Whatcom Million Trees Project)**

Dear Michael,

I started mentally composing this letter the day after our Earth Day work party but to be honest, I was feeling so absolutely exhausted and sore (so many hours of raking and shoveling and lifting heavy things!) that it's taken me a few days to actually start writing it out.

I can't quite believe we actually got everything done! I was expecting that it would take both work parties just to get all the plants in the ground. But somehow we got all 1000ish seedlings planted and mulched, the deer fence built, and a whole lot of nonnatives removed from around the site in just a day.

A few hours after we'd wrapped up the second work party, it started raining outside. I was thinking about the rain soaking down to the roots of all the little trees we had planted, easing away the transplant stress, and I just felt this wave of gratitude – to the rain for its perfect timing, to all the volunteers, and of course to everyone who has been involved in planning this event. It's been amazing to get to work more closely with WMTP and you in particular on the interpretive sign, and I'm so appreciative of all the support you've shown this project.

Gratitude has definitely been a theme of the last few months as I prepare to graduate in June. This letter is part of a senior project I designed to act on that gratitude by writing thank-you letters to the people who have contributed to my learning. That includes my professors, but also influential authors, family members, and other people who I wanted to recognize as teachers.

I wanted to thank you, not only for your involvement in the mini-forest project, but also because WMTP helped me get interested in restoration work even before I'd started the LEAD internship. The first WMTP work party I attended was in early April of 2022, at Cordata Park. I had gone to one other restoration work party – potting plants with the CoB Parks Volunteer Program – but this was the first one where I was actually out working at a site, removing blackberries and planting trees and mulching.

I had started looking for volunteering opportunities as a way to get out of my apartment. I was still adjusting to life in Bellingham after moving home to Seattle during the pandemic. I didn't know many people in my classes, and I was missing home - I hadn't found any reasons to enjoy being in Bellingham aside from the fact that I had to be there to attend class.

Attending WMTP work parties – even though it was just a few hours every Saturday – really helped me feel a little more rooted (tree pun!) in Bellingham, like I had a life there outside of

school. Taking the bus to various parks helped me build a mental map of the city, and meeting the other volunteers made me feel like part of the community. Doing hands-on restoration work balanced out all the theoretical work I was doing in my Environmental Studies classes. And somehow the Million-Trees magic kept every Saturday morning sunny!

I've learned so much about ecological restoration through these work parties – not just the physical work of identifying a tree's root collar and making mulch donut rings and digging out blackberries, but the organizational aspect as well. Knowing how to manage volunteers, to give clear instructions while keeping things fun, to get people excited about the work, to stage a worksite efficiently - this takes a lot of skill. But with that skill, we can mobilize so much capability and enthusiasm from within our communities and get so much important work done. I've seen how effective good organization can be at WMTP and LEAD work parties, where we can remove massive amounts of nonnatives – or plant 1000 trees – in just a few hours.

Watching you and Jim and the rest of the WMTP team during your work parties helped prepare me for the leadership aspect of my work at LEAD (which happened to be the part I felt the most uncertain about when I applied to the internship). You have been models for how to give planting demonstrations, how to communicate with volunteers, and so much more.

I think I've said this to you in an email before but I'm going to repeat it: I believe that restoration is about restoring relationships. I initially read that in Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*, but after this year, I have experienced it personally. My involvement in restoration has emerged from and has been made positive and impactful by the relationships I've formed – with the plants I have been working with and the land I have been working on, with the rest of the LEAD team, and with all of our partners, including WMTP. These relationships are empowering - they have motivated my interest in restoration and grown my potential to do impactful restoration work into real capability. The result is that I have been able to participate in a project that I care deeply about and absolutely could not have done on my own.

I want to support other people in developing relationships like this, through which their personal commitment to doing healing, restorative work – in ecosystems or communities or wherever they feel called – spirals out into something impactful and amazing. I think that growing these relationships is how we create a truly transformative local restoration movement. WMTP is already contributing to that movement, and I think that I have a role to play as well, even if I don't know yet exactly what it is. I am hopeful, though, that there will be opportunities for us to contribute together.

Thank you again, for supporting and inspiring me to do this work,

Tegan

**Scott Linneman (director of WWU Honors Program)**

Dear Dr. Linneman,

I'm writing this on a rainy-turned-muggy late April afternoon. It's been a tired sort of day – I am definitely starting to feel the senior-year Spring Quarter fatigue, which makes it a little difficult to get in a good headspace to write these letters. But I have found that while they can be challenging to start, working on them becomes energizing once I've figured out what I want to say. And I have been thinking about what I want to say in this one for almost two weeks, since my last visit to your office hours, so I'm glad to be writing it now – it's a gentle, slow kind of work and it feels restorative after a long week.

When we talked during my visit, I explained that this project involved writing gratitude letters to my college teachers – professors as well as the authors and family members and others who have contributed to my learning journey these last four years. While I have not had the privilege of taking one of your classes, I wanted to write to you anyway in recognition of your role in shaping the Honors Program, since it has been such a meaningful part of my academic experience. Dr. Goldman sometimes mentions the questions you and the other Honors staff are dealing with regarding the program – like how to encourage students to reflect on the First-Year Sequence after their freshman year, or how to make sure the seminars taught by faculty from outside Honors are consistent with the program's vision. It has made me realize that there is a great deal of consideration and planning going on behind the scenes of Honors that has structured my experience of the program in ways I didn't initially acknowledge or appreciate.

So I wanted to reach out, because that experience has been so important to my broader college journey. I've had the opportunity to explore so many fascinating topics – spirituality and sociology, republicanism and the role of trees in religion, Persian poetry and political polarization surrounding climate change. These classes exposed me to information I wouldn't have encountered (at least, not in such detail) in my regular Environmental Studies classes. But beyond that, they also encouraged me to practice a different approach to learning than I was used to, one that felt more meaningful to me.

When I first started at Western, I assumed that the Honors Program would basically be an extension of the advanced program I'd been in during high school. The classes would be rigorous and competitive, the students would be rational and critical. I hadn't particularly enjoyed that approach to learning, but I had assumed that was just the academic way to engage with knowledge – to look for flaws and biases. I've come to value critical thinking as an important skill, but there's a difference between critically thinking about a text and reading that

text with the intention of disagreeing, as I assumed I had to do in order to be considered a successful and productive student.

The Honors Program encouraged me to approach knowledge in a different way – to learn by connecting instead of just critiquing. When I looked back on the titles of my Honors classes in preparation for writing this letter, they sounded wildly disjointed. But I think that is the value of the Honors Program – it introduces you to a diverse range of topics and encourages you to find the relationships between them. One of my favorite parts of the program has been finding the connections, the places of overlap and agreement and conflict, between my Honors classes and the classes I have taken outside the program.

It has made me realize how much I enjoy learning in this way – by looking for connections instead of just poking around for weaknesses. I love the moments of synchronicity when a concept I've just learned about in one class is mentioned in another, or even better, when I can personally identify a connection between two totally different classes. I love the feeling of stitching together different concepts into a broader theory (I have yet to arrive at the answer to Life, the Universe, and Everything, but I will let you know if I do!). It makes me feel like there is space for autonomy and creativity in my learning experience.

Given that making connections is my preferred approach to learning, I suppose it makes sense that I'm a fan of using metaphors in my writing. I've been trying to come up with an appropriate metaphor for my experience of the Honors Program. I was thinking about how the First-Year Sequence of classes is called "Navigating the Human Experience," and it reminded me of something Dr. Goldman wrote in response to one of my assignments in HNRS 104 – that "The human experience is always a work in progress. Each of our authors turns it over and over before their eyes, examining its infinite facets."

I like the idea of the human experience as a diamond, and of my classes in the Honors Program as illuminating that diamond from different angles, or perhaps even cutting new facets so that each student's attention is reflected in new and increasingly brilliant ways. This metaphor also reminds me of how much skill it takes to visualize and create those facets so that the jewel can reflect light in the best way. It makes me appreciate how you and the rest of the Honors staff have carefully designed the First-Year Sequence to precisely cut into the subject matter so that it reveals more of itself.

This also brings to mind a slightly different image – the Buddhist concept of Indra's Net, a metaphor that I have spent a lot of time with and am still working to understand. Indra's Net extends infinitely in all directions, and at each node of the net is a jewel that reflects every

other jewel (and every other jewel's reflections). The net symbolizes the universe, where each individual or phenomenon is a particular jewel connected to all the others. It is a metaphor for interbeing – each jewel is a particular being, and yet it is also the whole because its reflections contain the entire universe.

I like to think that my classes in the Honors Program have prepared me to navigate this universe of interbeing by encouraging me to think relationally. Identifying the connections between those classes, the ways that each reflected the others, felt like exploring a mental net. Each class pulled at different and unique parts of the net, but in doing so set the entire creation vibrating, creating a learning experience that was rich and resonant.

This metaphor also reminds me that I am part of the net – I am human, and my emotions and complexity and messiness are linked to the universe that I am learning about. It isn't possible for me to distance myself and be a perfectly rational, detached observer. I think that recognizing this has given me permission to engage more fully with my classes. The result is that the papers and projects I have produced for Honors feel more authentic to myself. I am proud of what I have done in my four years in this program – including this capstone project.

I managed to dig up my old application to the WWU Honors Program – written all the way back in March 2018. In it, I write that I am interested in the Honors Program because I want to continue learning but also apply what I have learned. I end by saying that “I am particularly excited about the Senior Capstone Project, because it seems to give the student a great deal of freedom in choosing their topic, but also is careful to provide them with the resources and advisors they need.”

And indeed it has! This project has been such an incredible experience – a chance to explore my interest in relationality and to actually practice it through writing these letters. It is very different from anything I have done in school, but I have felt supported throughout – by Natalie Baloy (my advisor), by Dr. Goldman, by my family, and by you. I know that my visits to your office hours have been infrequent, but each time you have been enthusiastic and encouraging about this project and it has meant a great deal to me.

I think it takes trust to assign a project this open-ended – trust that students will make good use of this opportunity to be creative and thoughtful and will design a project that they are truly passionate about. I'm grateful that you and the other Honors staff trusted that I would find my way to a meaningful project that was relevant to my experience of Honors and my major. It has allowed me to do something I consider very important but wouldn't otherwise have the time for – expressing my gratitude to the people who have shaped my educational experience, who



have gifted me with so much knowledge. Not only has the process of creating this project been joyful, but I think it will also help me graduate college feeling more settled – like a very drawn-out closing ceremony.

When we last met for office hours, you said that your main job as the Director of the Honors Program is to keep everyone happy – Honors faculty, staff, and students. You said it in a joking way, but I think it reflects how thoughtful you are about your work. My experience of Honors would have been very different if it were not under the guidance of someone who prioritized the happiness of everyone participating in it. I hope that this letter can convey how incredibly grateful I am for your care and commitment to this program.

Thank you,

Tegan

**Nick Stanger (WWU teacher)**

Dear Nick,

I'm writing this the day after our thirteen-hour odyssey from the Magical Dome in qathet to the REI parking lot, though it will likely be many weeks or even months before I send it, in part because the post-travel fatigue is catching up to me and I'm sure anything I write will require significant editing to be coherent.

In this moment, I'm feeling a strange combination of dazed and unexpectedly jittery. I will be perfectly honest – when you said at the beginning of the trip that you hoped it would be rejuvenating, I was doubtful. I had decided to attend because I had a sense that the trip would be meaningful, but the kind of meaning that takes hard, emotionally draining work to uncover. The thought of spending three nights in a small space with a group of people who I didn't know very well at the time, all while reflecting on the meaning of reconciliation and how I could engage with it as a white settler, did not sound relaxing.

And yet, this morning I do feel rejuvenated – tired, definitely, but also somehow energized and in need of something to do. I recognize that restless, buzzy feeling from whenever school lets out for a long break, and I finally have time to do all the things – art and music and reading and gardening and more – that I don't get as much time for when I have classes. It's a feeling of being awake and wanting to make the most of the moment and also being a little at a loss of what to do first. I'm sure it will fade a bit as the fatigue of several nights of not-quite-enough sleep catches up to me and the reality of end-of-quarter school deadlines looms, but I'm hoping it doesn't go away completely and that I can hold onto it long enough to act on it.

But for now, I'm sitting in the library on a perfectly normal Bellingham Tuesday and struggling to settle back in. We were only gone for four days, but school is feeling especially abstract and removed from the real world in comparison to the excitement of actually engaging with a community and a new landscape. I don't know what to do with all my proud "I just did something that felt truly meaningful" energy. It's hard to explain. We don't have class today, but I kind of wish that we did – I want to see everyone again and ask if they're feeling the same way. I want to go back to Powell River and visit that amazing fiber studio where Dr. B bought her coat and ask if they're in need of another pair of hands. I actually spent ten minutes trying to work out on Google Maps how long it would take to get to qathet by bus (A long time. I might have to revisit the self-imposed ban on driving if I ever want to make that trip again.)

I remember laughing at the online insurance forms we had to fill out before the trip because one of them mentioned something about how WWU Education Abroad would offer returning students help “re-entering” the United States after their trip, and I thought the idea that I’d need help transitioning back to normal life after four days in Canada was funny. Turns out it feels like a bigger transition than I expected! I feel all shaken up – the metaphor I’ve arrived at is of a jar of soil and water that’s been stirred around to suspend all the particles inside, so that they can sink into measurable layers of sand, silt, and clay.

As you told me on the way back to Bellingham, reflecting on experiences like this trip can be an extended process. It could take a long time to render this trip into intelligible layers and understand what it means to me. But right now, one reaction I can already feel settling out and deepening the more I reflect on it is gratitude for this whole experience. This trip has been an exercise in all the ways I can feel gratitude – to the other students whose humor and openness made the Dome’s tiny physical space feel comfortable and fun, to SALI and C/AM for supporting the trip, to Tai and Emma for sharing their time and knowledge with us, to the land for holding and teaching us for those four days.

And of course to Erik – I was surprised by the intensity of emotion I felt during the morning of the sweat lodge. I was feeling some uncertainty and apprehension when we first arrived, since I had no idea what to expect, and then there was a moment when we settled inside the lodge and he closed the door that I felt claustrophobic and nervous – I could hear eight people breathing in the dark around me and feel cedar branches pressing into my back and head and the air was warm and heavy and difficult to breathe at first.

But when we started sharing prayers, those feelings shifted. I felt grief welling up and was surprised to realize I was crying – I hadn’t realized that I had been carrying those feelings with me. With that came a kind of joy at the vulnerability everyone around me was sharing and the way that it invited honesty from me as well. And over it all, a wave of gratitude to Erik for welcoming us and guiding us so patiently and gently through that experience when I know he talked in our class about how draining that kind of work could be. I remember waiting around the fire afterward, wondering how we could possibly reciprocate that kind of gift.

The sweat lodge made me feel grateful in a sudden, almost overwhelming way – I’d never experienced generosity quite like that. My gratitude towards you for making this trip possible hasn’t hit me all at once quite like that - instead it has grown slowly, deepening as I become more aware of everything you did to make this trip a space for us to learn and try new things and make new connections. You have worked in so many ways to create this experience, from the upfront work of booking ferry tickets and finding accommodations to leading reflections

about our activities and checking in on everyone's blood sugar levels during the trip itself. The more I reflect, the more I appreciate how much this trip asked of you.

I felt this strongly as we were driving back to Bellingham – I remember thinking that I was excited to go home to Seattle (I had made plans to visit the next weekend) and tell my family about the trip and get some rest. It made me realize for the first time that leading this trip meant that you also had to spend time away from your family and that you might be just as tired and ready to be home as the rest of us even though you hadn't said anything about it. You continued to be upbeat and patient as we drove and ferried and drove and ferried and drove some more towards the border and Bellingham, even inviting Dr. B and Zoë and I to play music in your car. Sharing my music tastes with other people sometimes makes me nervous because it can feel very personal, but I was having fun listening to everyone's choices and playing my own.

I was thinking as we drove through Vancouver about the vulnerability it takes to share music – to share anything about yourself – with other people. It made me realize just how much you had shared with all of us throughout the trip. Not just your weekend time, but your contacts in Powell River, your knowledge of plants (and birds and moss and salmon and more), your stories, your enthusiasm, and so much more.

I don't know whether that openness comes easily to you or feels familiar thanks to your experience leading field schools. But as a decidedly introverted person, I know that if I was in your position, it would take a lot of hard work and care to be so generous with my energy. "Generous" really does feel like the best word to use – this whole trip has been such a gift that I feel so grateful and lucky to have experienced. I'm feeling humbled and a little in awe of how beautifully it came together – how it emerged!

I didn't really understand what you meant when you assured us before we left that it was okay that we didn't have every hour of the trip scheduled, that it would "emerge" in the moment. The funny thing is that I've actually become interested in the concept of emergence just in the last few months, after reading adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy* and Margaret Wheatley's *Leadership and the New Science* and Leanne Simpson's *As We Have Always Done* and *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*. I have read a lot about it, but haven't really begun to look for it in my own life. When you talked about this trip as emergent, I didn't have any sense of what that would look or feel like. It's been really special to be able to experience it.

Something I've learned in all my reading is that relationships are key for emergent processes to take place, for complexity and organization and resilience to arise. Relationships link individuals into networks, evoking new capacities – creating a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

A moment of honesty: I am very, very good at talking about how important relationships are to individual and community well-being, but I find it very difficult to actually act on this and cultivate deep and meaningful relationships in my own life. I've gotten good at making friendly acquaintances (kind of a necessary skill in college, when you're thrown into a new set of classes every few months and expected to get along well enough with everyone for discussions and projects), but it takes a lot of energy to move past that and I sometimes struggle to find the motivation to expend that energy. After all, I'm usually pretty happy on my own – art and reading and all my other favorite things can be done alone. I'm really close with my family, and that usually feels like enough. Everyone talks about how college is the time to “find your people” but I'd kind of given up on that sometime during the pandemic.

My point is that I haven't been working very hard to make connections with people while at college. But I saw how our trip emerged – and that it emerged out of relationships. Relationships with the community members we were meeting, obviously, like Erik and Tai, but also with each other. Cooking together and sharing car rides and sitting around the fire, all with the common goal of deepening our relationship to place: those little connections wove together into a nest to contain this experience and give it space to emerge as it did.

It was a joy to experience those moments, and it has absolutely made me rethink some of my assumptions about the importance of relationships to my own well-being. It's also made me recognize the importance of relationships in doing reconciliation work, and how as a settler wanting to engage in reconciliation, I have a responsibility not only to build relationships with Indigenous communities, but also with other settlers, with my other-than-human relations, and with the land itself.

I also recognize that it took a lot of faith on your part to trust that we would meaningfully engage in relationships with the people we met in qathet as well as with each other - that the trip would emerge as it did. And you have maintained that faith in us – today was our last in-person day of SALI 390 (it's been a few weeks since I started this letter), and at the end of class you told us that wherever our paths lead after the quarter ends, you believe that we are capable of contributing meaningfully to reconciliation.

That genuinely means a great deal to me. I worry sometimes (especially recently, as I think about what I will do after graduating this spring) that I don't know how to engage with reconciliation and decolonization outside of an academic context. I've gotten good at writing essays and reading books that use intimidating words like “epistemology,” but I haven't had a lot of experience outside of this trip in actually going out and engaging with Indigenous

communities and building the kinds of relationships necessary to do reconciliation work meaningfully. To know that you think we are capable of doing this, that we have something to contribute, gives me a lot of confidence. Thank you for this gift, and for all the others.

Tegan

**Dr. Baker (WWU teacher)**

Dear Dr. B,

I am writing this the day after our Winter 2023 SALI 490 class traveled to Sumas to learn about the Trans Mountain Pipeline. We gathered in the newly rebuilt sanctuary of a church where, fourteen months ago, floodwater began to rise for the first time in over a century, and we talked about the pipeline, the border, and the law.

Afterwards, my small group of four drove up the street, veered right before we reached the multi-lane red checkpoint marking the crossing into Canada, and drove parallel to the border until we crossed the Sumas River, then just a small creek in a deep ditch. It took a few moments to find the marker for the Trans Mountain Pipeline because we were distracted by speculating if the large white truck parked in a nearby driveway was the border patrol – no obvious indicators of law enforcement, but two long antennas on either side – and debating with apprehensive laughter what we would say to them if they were.

We didn't spend a particularly long time looking at the marker once we found it – we were running late to get back to campus and the white truck, border patrol or not, was conspicuous. But throughout that evening and today, I keep thinking about how at that moment, standing at the side of the road in the cold sunlight of a clear winter morning, there was oil flowing beneath my feet. Somewhere, underneath the asphalt road and the flat farmland stretching out on either side of us into two separate countries, there was a white pipe twenty inches wide funneling crude oil smoothly across an invisible line that cars less than five miles away were lined up to cross.

That thought makes me feel uncomfortable. I was trying to think of how to describe it and the first thing that came to mind was that it was like being told that I had some kind of infection – that something in my body that I was not qualified to treat or even identify was moving to cause harm. I didn't expect to feel so strongly – I've known that the Trans Mountain Pipeline exists since I took SALI 201 over a year ago. I've seen the smoke from the Anacortes refinery on the way to the ferry terminal. But that sense of *personal* discomfort – not just abstract indignance at the fossil fuel economy, or anger on behalf of the Indigenous communities whose lands it threatens, or grief for the many forms of plant and animal life it impacts – was new. It was urgent. It was unsettling.

I say this because I think it is a good illustration of how I have benefitted from the classes I have taken with you – FAIR 368: "Decolonization Across the Medicine Line" in the fall of 2022 and then two versions of SALI 490. These classes have made settler-colonialism and extractive

capitalism apparent and urgent to me – but they have also made real the possibility of decolonization and Indigenous resurgence. They have helped me develop an intellectual understanding of how settler-colonialism is perpetuated and resisted, but more importantly, they have engaged me emotionally. In FAIR 368, we worked together to define terms such as “decolonization,” “Indigenous,” “settler-colonialism,” and “sovereignty.” These exercises helped me use those terms more deliberately and critically, but it was our written reflections and papers that made them relevant and real to me. Writing the midterm assignment where we imagined what it would be like to be colonized was a powerfully emotional and compelling experience.

I think part of what made these classes so impactful and inspired me to engage with settler-colonialism not as an abstract concept but as an urgent reality was that you invited so many Indigenous voices of the Salish Sea and beyond into the classroom to speak. I am grateful for the exposure to these perspectives. Something I’ve been thinking about recently is how limited academia can be in what it considers intelligence, often devoting its focus to written scholarly work like peer-reviewed articles and devaluing intelligence that is orally transmitted rather than recorded, emotional or spiritual rather than intellectual, and embodied rather than observed. The result, in my experience, is that school becomes a space that feels detached - it is difficult to connect it to the real world or engage with it any way other than intellectually. Hearing from the guests you invited into our classes like Laural Ballew, Mo Wells, and Anna Cook (given my interest in food sovereignty, I was particularly excited to learn from her) was a welcome chance to learn from people whose intelligence was rooted in place and real, lived experience.

I am also grateful to have been introduced to so many new perspectives through our class readings, voices like Thomas King, Glen Coulthard, and of course Leanne Simpson. The introduction to Leanne Simpson alone would merit a thank-you letter! I have revisited *As We Have Always Done* and read *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back* and *Rehearsals for Living* since our class, and I have learned so much. In fact, this letter likely would not exist if not for her. Reading *Land as Pedagogy* in FAIR 368, I was struck by her description of Nishnaabeg education systems where knowledge flows through intimate relationships between a learner and their teacher, whether that be another human, an other-than-human relation, or the land itself. These relationships are characterized by respect, reciprocity, consent and self-determination. There is no coercion, hierarchy, or authoritarianism; no standard curriculum, graduation, or grading.

It made me reflect on how different my experience as an undergraduate at Western has been. There are many ways that Western is steeped in a settler-colonial approach to education, but what stood out most to me is how it discourages the kinds of lasting, reciprocal relationships



between learners and teachers that Simpson describes. I enroll in a class at the beginning of the quarter, spend ten weeks absorbing as much as I can, and then I leave. Perhaps if I am lucky, I will have that professor for another class so that we can continue building our relationship, but that is hardly guaranteed.

This reminds me of when we talked in class about gift economies, where gifts are exchanged in a context of intimate and lasting reciprocal relationships, not the fleeting and impersonal transactions through which commodities are bought and sold. Compared to the education system that Simpson describes, my approach to learning feels extractive, and my interactions with many of my teachers feel shallow and short-lived. Simpson might argue that this is because the point of Western education is to prepare students for success in a capitalistic society.

Before reading *Land as Pedagogy*, I wouldn't have thought to critique this aspect of the settler education system. Simpson's writing has made me question whether I could treat the teachings I have received in my time at Western as gifts, instead of extracting them and moving on.

As we read in Robin Kimmerer's essay *The Serviceberry*, receiving a gift generates gratitude, and an obligation to reciprocate. Often we think of an obligation as a burden, but the word comes from *ligare*, "to bind." To be under an obligation to someone is to be bound to them, to be in relationship with them. Accepting something as a gift, rather than a commodity that we immediately repay with money, is to accept a relationship with the giver. In time, we act on our sense of obligation by giving our own gifts – sometimes directly to the person we initially received from and sometimes to someone else in the community.

So what can I do to reciprocate the teachings I have received while at Western? Just expressing my gratitude for what I have received doesn't really seem like enough, but I think it's a start. This letter is one of several that I am writing to my teachers to thank them for their gifts. I hope it indicates to you that I value the knowledge you have given me highly. I am struggling to think of how to reciprocate it, but I can promise to respect it by using it well. It is the nature of gifts to circulate, rather than to be hoarded, and so I promise to respect this knowledge by letting it flow out through and beyond me, by using it to guide my involvement with decolonization.

In thinking about what this involvement might look like, I am returning to our trip to Sumas and reflecting on the idea of a flood. There are so many origin stories about massive floods washing the world clean, allowing something new to begin. Sometimes I imagine decolonization as a flood, washing away all the years of accumulated injustice and trauma and grief – and my own personal guilt and complicity – and allowing us to start over anew. But the truth is that recovering from a flood, as we saw at Sumas, is messy. It is not a fresh start. We must decide

what structures can be saved, which to repair, which to rebuild completely new. Injustice, suffering, and borders are not always washed away. It takes a lot of hard work by dedicated people, and it takes places like the church we visited. As the pastor explained, the church was more than a sanctuary where people could escape the rising water. It became a resource center from which community-led recovery action radiated outward in the aftermath of the flooding.

I am interested in the potential of education institutions like Western to become resource centers that organize knowledge and people to facilitate decolonization and a recovery from settler-colonialism. (I'm mixing up my own metaphors here – I've just suggested that both decolonization and settler-colonialism are like a flood. I suppose that both undermine existing structures, so maybe it's not too terribly inaccurate.) In these resource centers, education would function like a gift economy. Instead of a rigid division between the people who teach and the people who learn, a network of knowledge exchange relationships would emerge in which everyone – students, teachers, and outside community members – participated in both giving and receiving gifts of knowledge. The resulting knowledge base would become a resource flowing out of the institution through place-based projects that made real, tangible contributions to decolonization and resurgence in the local community.

I do not know exactly where my path will lead after graduation and whether I will be able to contribute to realizing this vision of a decolonized education system. But I can promise that whatever I do will be oriented around my goal to contribute meaningfully to reconciliation and decolonization, and to support Indigenous resurgence. I am committing to that now. This year I've participated in several ecological restoration projects, and while I do not feel that my involvement so far has been sufficiently decolonial, I do see many opportunities to be a better ally and accomplice within this field. Not only does ecological restoration do the important physical work of healing landscapes from colonial damage, it is also a gateway to productive conversations about land and an opportunity for education and reflection. I would personally like to see more intersection between ecological restoration and food sovereignty efforts in Bellingham, since I see these as overlapping projects.

I've known since I learned about climate change in middle school that whatever I ended up doing in the future had to contribute to environmental healing in some way. The details of what that would look like were unclear, but since then I've been aware of my responsibility to the earth - and aware that I would not be satisfied with my life if I did not honor it. That is how I feel about decolonization – it was barely on my awareness before I started the Salish Sea Studies program, but I believe now that I can contribute meaningfully. It may take me some time to figure out how, but I am confident that what I have learned in your classes will help me immensely, and for that I am grateful.

Tegan

**Mo Wells (WWU teacher)**

Dear Mo,

This is the fourteenth of these letters that I've written, but it's been a unique challenge because everything I want to write about is still so fresh. In all the other letters I've written to professors, authors, and other people I consider teachers, some time has passed since I took their class or read their book or had some other kind of learning experience with them. That time has allowed me to reflect on what I have learned and how I can express my gratitude for it.

But I'm still very much in your class - this afternoon we discussed Joshua Whitehead's book and I'll be spending tomorrow poking at my outline for our final paper. (A quick update on where I'm at in that process: I've rewritten the outline several times and reminded myself that the laws of literary physics state that a five-page single-spaced outline cannot fit in an eight-page double-spaced paper. And I have reread the articles I am planning to use and had a moment of doubt over whether I actually understood any of them – especially Joanne Barker's article on confluence. But I'm doing my best to understand, because I love the idea of using water as a metaphor for knowledge and I want to see where I can take it.)

Speaking of which, I wanted to share an image I've had on my mind for the past few months thanks to a class I'm taking on soil science, of my thinking process as a floodplain. There's the flat expanse along the river channel that is constantly changing as the river meanders and floods and recedes with the seasons. Soil development there is minimal – there's not enough time for plants to grow or for any of the other processes that contribute to soil formation to take place before the next flood wipes the area clean. And then on either side there's an ascending series of terraces, the remnants of ancient floodplains. The terrace farthest and highest from the river is the oldest – sometimes it has been so long since that area has been flooded that it is fully forested, the soil deep and rich and well developed.

I find myself returning to this mental image because it helps me organize my thoughts. It helps me identify the beliefs that are well-developed, like the soil on those old terraces, where water-as-knowledge still actively flows through the trees and air and ground, but in a way that contributes to soil development instead of eroding everything. Those are the beliefs I feel more prepared to share with others. And then there are the floodplain thoughts that are still new and shifting, that could be washed away completely by a surge of new information. Identifying them this way helps me feel more open to learning things that change my perspective.

That was a bit of a tangent, but I wanted to share it because it reflects how I feel about writing this letter - everything I want to say is new and fluid, which makes the act of writing it down a

little intimidating. And because I love metaphors and making connections between classes and thought you might appreciate a pedagogical perspective on Barker's article on knowledge flow.

I have been thinking about flows of knowledge for most of this year, though I didn't have the language to describe it that way until reading Barker's article. This letter – along with the one I wrote to Leanne Simpson that you generously read - is part of my capstone project for the Honors Program. I wanted to reach out to my teachers to recognize and express my gratitude for the gifts of knowledge and time and care that they have shared with me in the last four years. It has been an opportunity to think about what it means to stand in a current of knowledge and receive it well – how gifts like this can be respected and reciprocated.

Since starting your class, however, I have been thinking more about what it means not just to receive, but to create knowledge. Leanne Simpson talks about this in "Land as Pedagogy" – the difference between consuming and producing knowledge. She is writing specifically about Indigenous systems of intelligence, where individuals are considered cultural producers who replicate Indigeneity, not passive consumers of information. I am still thinking through how I can learn from her writing with humility and with an understanding that it was not written for me. So far, reading her descriptions of how knowledge flows in Indigenous systems has made me reflect more critically on how I think about knowledge production - in particular, how I have limited my understanding of this concept to intellectual activities. I had not considered that producing knowledge could be a creative, whole-body act.

This was a bit baffling to realize, because I do a lot of creative things that I feel engage me holistically and that I consider meaningful forms of expression. And yet, I don't think I've credited them as a form of knowledge production. I've never looked at the poems I write or the art I make (or the emotions I feel, or the physical activities I engage in, or really most of the things I do outside of school) as a type of intelligence.

Our class has helped me think about what it means to produce knowledge in a way that draws on all aspects of oneself – mind, heart, body, and spirit. And it has been so well timed, because this year – and this quarter in particular - I have really struggled with the way that school does not engage me holistically. I have had moments of frustration where I have felt like I must choose between completing my schoolwork and caring for my heart and body and spirit – frustration at myself, for not being able to find a healthy balance, and frustration at the school system in general for not making space for me to show up as my complete self.

This has made me think about what kinds of spaces I need to seek out after graduation where I can produce knowledge in a way that engages my whole self. I think it is part of my

responsibility – to my family, to my community, to myself – to figure out how to bring all four aspects of myself into balance and to claim my power as a knowledge producer on behalf of the people I care about and the things I believe in. I don't know exactly what I'm doing after graduation, so I don't have a specific vision of how I will work to fulfill this responsibility. But I have identified a few general commitments and I wanted to include those in this letter because sharing them makes me accountable to them.

Firstly, I think being a knowledge producer means being embedded in relationships – as Leanne Simpson writes, knowledge flows through relationships. Producing knowledge is a process of learning and reflecting and sharing, and those don't happen in isolation. As someone who is pretty comfortable with – and sometimes even partial to – solitude, that has taken me a while to understand. If I am going to keep learning, it is best done in relationship with others so that our currents of knowledge can flow towards and through and away from each other, creating moments of solidarity and productive disagreement.

I want to seek out reciprocal, consent-based relationships of knowledge exchange where everyone involved has room to show up as their complete selves, to engage and take care of their hearts and minds and bodies and spirits. I think that includes relationships with the Indigenous nations on whose traditional territory I am living, with the land itself and the other beings we share it with, and with other settlers – settler allies with whom I can coordinate my involvement in decolonial work, and also those who don't understand or don't support that work. If there are opportunities where it makes sense for me to take on some of the burden of educating – of doing that introductory-level teaching that you've said is so exhausting to be repeatedly tasked with – then I want to take them. And lastly, I think part of this learning journey is about coming into better relationship with myself – bringing all the parts of me into balance, developing the gifts I have to contribute to the world, learning to recognize and value my own intelligence so that I can share it beyond me.

If I want to participate in these kinds of learning and teaching relationships, I would like to work on communicating my ideas. This is something our class has made me aware of – I feel comfortable with writing, but I sometimes struggle to express what I'm thinking in speech. I feel like conversations and class discussions move faster than I can think and decide how to articulate my thinking. But I want to get better at expressing what I am thinking – and doing so in language that is accessible. I've been thinking recently about how I can translate our class discussions on the complex, scholarly work we've been reading into something I can talk about with my family and friends. I'm increasingly realizing what a valuable experience it is to participate in the kinds of conversations we've had in class about our readings.

We've talked in class about what a privilege it is to have experiences like this – to have the time and resources and energy to show up to this space of collective learning and discussion. As you once said, though we can potentially invoke a lot of intelligence from individuals, people are often operating under a scarcity (or at least a perceived scarcity) of time. Spaces of discussion and critical reflection and knowledge production like our class are not accessible to everyone

That makes me feel incredibly lucky, but it also makes me think about how I can create spaces in my own life that invite other people to take time to learn and produce and share knowledge. Maybe it isn't just my responsibility to continue my own learning, but also to encourage other people in their learning journeys – to remind them that they have brilliance, to listen to them, maybe to share some of my own knowledge. There's a passage in *Emergent Strategy* by adrienne maree brown that I think about a lot: she describes one of her friends, who calls himself a dressing room where people can try on their authentic, whole selves without judgment. I would like to be the kind of person with whom other people feel comfortable embodying the fullness of their brilliance.

When I went to the Vine Deloria, Jr. Indigenous Studies Symposium a few weeks ago, one of the women introducing the event talked about how we all have a part of our brain that is focused on survival, and that though that part of our brain is necessary and keeps us alive, it can also distract us. She said that she and the other coordinators of the symposium would take care of the audience so that we could turn off that part of our brain and listen with our full attention. I am still thinking about how I can practice care and warmth and listening to create spaces of safety like this, spaces that are expansive enough not only for my wholeness, but for the other people around me to be whole as well.

Our class has helped me think through all this and shape these commitments, so that while I may not be graduating with a clear direction, I do have a lot of intention to guide me. You have worked hard to make a space that encouraged these kinds of reflections, that encouraged me to carry what we discussed in class out with me and to hold it up to my own life. I am so grateful for the ways you have supported me in my thinking this quarter. You have helped me feel more confident that I have brilliance – and have inspired me to keep adding to and exploring that brilliance in the future. Thank you for everything.

Tegan

## Zander Albertson (WWU teacher)

Dear Zander,

I'm writing this on a very cold, very gray February afternoon. According to the Canvas archives, exactly one year ago the HNRS 354: "Why We Disagree About Climate Change" class was reading "Clumsy Solutions for a Complex World: The Case of Climate Change" by Verweij et al. (2006). It's a fitting time to be writing this letter, since I've recently done some reading that has helped me deepen my thinking on clumsy solutions. I was hoping to share some of those thoughts with you.

But first, some context. The Honors Program requires students to complete a capstone project, and I wanted to use mine to reach out and thank all the people I have learned from while at college. I have spent a lot of time thinking about gifts, and how my teachers have been "givers" – of time, of knowledge, of patience and so much more. It felt right to use this project to attempt to express my gratitude for those gifts through these letters.

HNRS 354 is high on the list of influential classes that I think merit a thank-you letter! It was an amazing opportunity to dive deeper into topics that my ENVS classes only had time to briefly touch on, and I learned so much from all the reading and discussions. Not only did you put together an organized, thought-provoking set of readings, you also approached teaching the class with such enthusiasm, kindness, and humor – so many gifts beyond just the course material. I felt so much gratitude as I was reflecting on that class in preparation for writing this letter.

(Here I'm feeling guilty for not mentioning the second class I took with you, ENVS 332: The Pacific Northwest - Society and Environment. I learned so much from this class as well, and you brought such positive energy to it despite the fact that it was a morning class located in the basement of the Communications building. However, I think given my background of growing up in Seattle surrounded by like-minded people and then attending the environmentalist echo-chamber that Western can often be, I needed HNRS 354 more to challenge my thinking on climate change and help me identify – and critique – many of my own assumptions and values.)

...

So back to the clumsy solutions (yes, I promise this relates in a roundabout way to the theme of gratitude and gifts!). I recently read a book by Margaret Wheatley called *Leadership and the New Science* (if you haven't read it, I would strongly recommend it, and if you have, I would welcome any critiques on the following interpretation of it!). In this book, Wheatley questions



what human systems would look like if we had a different understanding of organization – one based not on a Newtonian view of the world but on recent insights from quantum physics, biology, and chaos theory.

In the Newtonian worldview, events happen because random forces act on inert masses. To manage these events, we treat the world as a machine, breaking systems down to their components so that we can learn enough about how they work to engineer them. It is an approach characterized by control, separation, materialism, logic, and reductionism.

This sounds a lot like the conventional approach to policy-making to me! Identifying the problem, breaking it down to understand it, exerting force in proportion to the magnitude of the problem to generate a solution. But as we talked about in class, many problems – like climate change - are “wicked” and can’t be addressed in this way. They cannot be solved or even defined, they are each unique, and they are interconnected with many other wicked problems. They defy our attempts to categorize, to dissect, and to control.

Wheatley proposes emergence as a better approach to human organization than the Newtonian machine approach. She doesn’t specifically address how this relates to policy-making, but I think a lot of her insights could apply to how we deal with wicked problems like climate change.

I’m struggling to synthesize an entire book into a few paragraphs, but Wheatley defines emergent organization as a feature of living systems, where order “emerges” over time through the interactions of interdependent parts instead of being imposed in a fixed form by an authority. Emergent organizations are dynamic, constantly evolving and adapting in a way that appears random but maintains identity. They are better understood as a creative process than a stable structure. They cannot be reduced or engineered – to generate an emergent organization, one cannot impose a predetermined structure, but rather must create the conditions for an unspecified structure to emerge.

Wheatley identifies three conditions necessary to set the process of emergent organization in motion: relationships, a flow of information, and a sense of identity. Relationships between individuals within a system act as a channel for information to flow like energy, prompting growth and adaptation. When there is a strong sense of organizational identity – a clear set of values or governing principles – individuals have a reference point for how to adapt in the face of this new information, allowing change to occur while maintaining the system’s integrity. Wheatley emphasizes the importance of individual autonomy in systems like this – the principles or values that characterize the organization’s identity must be broad enough to allow each participant creative freedom in how they interpret information.

I see a lot of similarities between the idea of emergent organization and the concept of clumsy solutions to wicked problems, particularly the focus on process over product. In class, we discussed how climate change – like all wicked problems - will never be “solved,” we’ll just get better or worse at managing it. In other words, our climate policies should not be striving for an impossible product – a solution to climate change that imposes a stable climate state on the world. Rather, our climate policies should facilitate an ongoing process through which humans are organized to creatively manage and adapt to climate change over time.

While I was reading through my class notes on the Verweij (2006) reading, I found an annotation I’d written that reads “clumsy solutions are about *process* (procedural justice) as much as policy *product*.” Clumsy solutions are the result of a long process of communication, where the plurality of perspectives on climate change are voiced and listened to, and where the inevitable conflict between these perspectives is channeled into healthy debate. The policies that emerge from this are snapshots of an ongoing process of managing climate change by building relationships and facilitating information sharing (Wheatley’s first two conditions for emergent organization). I think this raises the question: how can we achieve the third condition for emergent organization – a sense of identity – in our clumsy responses to climate change?

We talked in class about how effective policies shouldn’t require consensus on what climate change is or how to address it to be successful. I certainly understand the merit of policies like this, but I’m still interested in whether there is anything we can build consensus around to achieve something like Wheatley’s idea of organizational identity. I’m interested in the idea that we could build consensus around the process by which we develop clumsy solutions, if not the policies that are the products of that process. Can we mutually consent to a process of productive dialogue characterized by curiosity, respect, listening, and inclusion? Can these become the guiding values – the identity – around which we organize our individual responses to new information and new perspectives?

...

Maybe that’s a bit idealistic, but it’s helped me develop my personal vision for how we collectively respond to climate change. I find it interesting to think of Climate Change (not just the physical reality, but the idea and all the human interpretations and actions that have arisen in response to it) as an organization slowly emerging over decades. At its worst, this organization doesn’t resemble Wheatley’s description of emergence at all – it is fragmented into isolated echo chambers of opposing perspectives that only interact to disparage each other’s views. Information flows stagnate in the absence of healthy debate and a willingness to hear

others' opinions. There appear to be no shared values, nothing we can agree on as an organizing principle.

But at its best, I think this organization could satisfy Wheatley's conditions for emergence - relationships, information flows, and identity. People have autonomy in how they interpret climate change and are free to disagree with each other, but they are linked to those they disagree with by relationships through which information - opposing understandings of climate change - can flow and interact. The overarching value of productive, respectful dialogue encourages people to listen to those opposing perspectives. The policy products of this organizing process are clumsy solutions - creative combinations of different perspectives that each contain important insights about climate change but would be incomplete on their own.

Wheatley returns to the metaphor of a fractal a lot - a simple overarching equation allowed to develop randomly and feed back on itself, leading to a complex, organized form. I wonder what kind of complexity and order could emerge if everyone was operating on the same basic guidelines of mutual respect and dialogue? It's an inspiring thought, and it has helped me think about the kind of role I want to have in the climate change conversation - as someone who upholds those principles and encourages them in other people.

...

I promised that this letter would relate to gratitude in a roundabout way and so far all I've done is ramble about the importance of building relationships with people you disagree with and of listening to other perspectives with respect and curiosity. Truly groundbreaking stuff!

Here is the connection: this class has helped me develop the capacity to do all of those things. It has given me the conceptual framework for understanding why this work is important and the motivation to engage in it. It has validated the slow, small, sometimes seemingly insignificant acts of listening and relationship building in a fast-paced capitalist culture that prioritizes quick and tangible products. It has been, and will continue to be, so influential in how I engage with other people (in relation to climate change and just in general).

I'm so grateful for everything I learned in this class, and for how much patience and enthusiasm you showed in teaching it. I've been thinking a lot lately about reciprocity and wondering how a gift of knowledge can be reciprocated. I'm still not sure, but I hoped that through this letter I could take some of what we learned in class and return it to you with a slightly different perspective, if only to show that it is still very much on my mind.

One last insight from Margaret Wheatley's book: she argues that one of the tasks of a leader in an emergent organization is to clearly communicate the organization's identity or guiding values to everyone involved, then step back to allow participants to develop independently, trusting that their development will be compatible with those values. Thanks to this class, I feel much more confident in my ability to take on a leadership role – not in the traditional, authoritative sense, but as someone whose words and actions communicate the importance of dialogue, of listening, and of relationships to other people. I look forward to carrying and growing these skills beyond college, and I am so grateful for all your support in getting to this point.

Tegan

## Dr. Goldman (WWU teacher)

Dear Dr. Goldman,

This letter has come together in fits and starts over the course of a month, but I'm writing this particular section on a sunny mid-March afternoon just before spring break. I will be going home to Seattle, where the cherry blossoms around our house and our neighbor's daffodils will be just starting to bloom. I'm thinking about how I want to mark the equinox – maybe by revisiting Hafez's poetry in *Faces of Love*?

My metaphor-loving brain is happy to be writing this letter in the spring, since it has bloomed out from our conversations back in Honors 104 (Winter 2020) and Honors 105 (Spring 2020), conversations that lay dormant in my class notes until I unearthed them earlier this month. I see those discussions and the knowledge I gained from them as a gift. I hope to express my gratitude for that gift and perhaps begin to reciprocate it by taking some time to reflect on what I learned in light of the more recent reading I have done.

...

I've been thinking about something you said to me during office hours a few months ago: that humans need to know that they are contributing to the well-being of their community. I had just finished reading *As We Have Always Done* by Indigenous writer Leanne Simpson, and this reminded me of a particular passage where she writes that the goal of Nishnaabeg communities is "the re-creation of beings that continually live lives promoting the continuous rebirth of life itself" (p.158). I like how these two statements circle together - that individual well-being comes from contributing to community well-being, and that when communities are well they produce individuals who live in a way that regenerates life and the community.

I'm interested in the idea that individuals have a responsibility to live this way - to contribute to the regeneration and well-being of the community, which in turn contributes to their personal well-being. I remember talking in Honors 104 about the responsibilities individuals have to their community - particularly in the United States, where "we the people" are meant to be sovereign. Before taking that class, I hadn't considered that I might have responsibilities to my community or to the republic in the same way that I felt responsible to my family. I especially hadn't considered that fulfilling these responsibilities could contribute to my own well-being. Too often in the U.S. we treat responsibilities like burdens and define liberty as freedom from responsibilities.

In their book *Rehearsals for Living*, Leanne Simpson and Robyn Maynard discuss the relationship between freedom and responsibilities. Maynard argues that the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests in Canada revealed two different visions of freedom. The first is highly individualistic – the freedom to evade responsibilities to the collective (for example, by refusing to follow safety precautions to keep everyone healthy). The second is relational – freedom to work towards collective safety and well-being (for example, through protests and strikes).

I am interested in the idea that freedom can mean the ability to fulfill our responsibilities to our community in a way that also contributes to our personal well-being. This is consistent with our conversation in Honors 104 about how “we the people” need to exercise our democratic power instead of avoiding it in the name of personal freedom, or else it will condense among powerful elites and we will lose our liberty for real.

Leanne Simpson expands on the relationship between freedom and responsibility in her books *As We Have Always Done* and *Dancing On Our Turtle’s Back*. She writes that in Nishnaabeg society, individuals are expected to conduct themselves in a way that benefits the community but also honors their identity and talents. In other words, there is not one single way of fulfilling one’s responsibility to the community. Individuals are free – indeed, are expected - to do the work of finding and honing the unique gifts through which they will contribute to the community, resulting in a diversity of talents.

I like this idea of freedom as the ability to develop the unique gifts through which one will fulfill their responsibility to their community. It has made me reflect on how I can act on my responsibility to my community after graduation - what gifts I have to contribute. Charles Eisenstein (another author I’ve recently discovered) writes that human civilization is transitioning to an age of “Interbeing” in which every individual has a unique and necessary gift to offer in service of their community – not just humanity, but the entire community of life. The world needs to receive those gifts to be well, just as we need to give them to be well.

What I take from this is that asking “what are my gifts?” is a deceptively deep question. Gifts are something sacred - something tied to your sense of self. Discovering your gifts is a process of discovering your authentic self and assigning it worth - recognizing that you have unique gifts that are worth contributing to the world. We talked about this in class, that you need to love yourself and have a sense of self-worth before you can reach out to others in your community.

Unfortunately, developing that kind of self-love and the confidence that you have gifts to contribute to the well-being of the community is difficult in a culture such as ours. Leanne Simpson says that in Nishnaabeg society, the role of the community is to support individuals in

developing their gifts – to abide by an ethic of non-interference as the individual is discovering themselves and to accept them once they assert their identity, whatever it is. Our dominant culture, however, discourages individuals from discovering, valuing, and expressing their true gifts in a multitude of ways. As we talked about in Honors 104, our self-love is challenged by the cultural belief that humans are selfish knaves living in an impersonal universe where our lives are essentially meaningless. Furthermore, we live in a society that prioritizes economic values and rationality, and therefore will only value gifts that contribute to wealth accumulation or generate “objective” truths. If the truths we feel called to express through our gifts come in a different form, they go unheard by the broader culture and we are shamed for wasting our time on such “unproductive” talents.

I’ve personally experienced this cultural pressure to develop productive talents with my art. This has made it hard to justify spending time on art when I have supposedly more important responsibilities like schoolwork. I remember feeling so encouraged when you said you would accept artwork for our final project in Honors 104 and our weekly reflections in Honors 105 – that art was a legitimate way of expressing our thoughts. I also remember sending you an email asking whether you thought art was a valid way of responding to the world. You responded that though our current culture may not assign worth to all of our talents, that does not mean that they are without value, and that developing my artistic abilities would never be a waste of time. That reassurance has meant so much to me. I always felt that making art was essential to my well-being, but this helped me see that the art I create could contribute to the well-being of my community as well - that it was a gift I could give that those around me might actually need.

I do still get nervous sharing my art sometimes. I think that this hesitation to share our gifts – to ask ourselves why we should contribute them in service of a community that might not even value them – is common. It stems from a very valid concern that our gifts will be rejected, and that our vulnerability in expressing them will get us hurt.

But I have learned to see in that nervousness the echoes of the very cultural assumptions that create such a threatening environment and stifle the expression of our true gifts in the first place. Because what I am really asking myself is “What if my efforts go unrewarded? What if I give up something of myself for the good of the community and am left with nothing in return?” This assumes that the good of the community is not the same as my personal good – that more for the community is less for me, as if hoarding my gifts might make me happier, more secure, more successful. It is the voice of a fearful, isolated individual in a capitalist world characterized by competition and scarcity.

I am still working on how to overcome this internalized individualism and give to a community that so often frustrates, disappoints, and saddens me (I'm using "community" in a broad sense - my local community does not discourage me like the United States does). I am looking for a way to think about my identity – what it means to be my authentic self – that breaks down this perceived separation between myself and my community that stagnates my generosity.

One resource I have found is a passage in *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back* where Leanne Simpson explains that in a Nishnaabeg understanding, concepts like "territory" and "boundary" are characterized by relationships and responsibilities. As someone moves away from the center of their familiar territory, their knowledge and relationships to the land weaken until they arrive at the boundary; the blurry, fluid space between nations. In this space, it is essential to commit to maintaining peaceful and healthy relationships with one's neighbors, relationships characterized by clear communication rather than rigid enforcement and exclusion.

I think this is such an interesting concept, and I have been wondering if it can be scaled down to the individual level – if I can think of my identity as a territory. When I fall into individualistic, fear-based thinking, it is like putting up a wall around the edges of that territory, closing myself off by hardening the border. But what if I instead saw that space – in all its physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual dimensions – as a zone at whose edges my influence and presence wanes and other identities overlap and intersect with mine?

I think that this blurring of identities happens all the time in real life. It happens when someone else's laughter makes me smile, it happens when I breathe air into my lungs, it happens when I feel love for the people or places around me. It also happens when someone's tears make me cry, when I become sick, and when my grief for something that has happened on the other side of the world makes it hard to function. It is a loss of control, but what if I responded to that loss not with fear but with the awareness that in these moments, I am experiencing a boundary, a metaphorical shared territory? And that I have a responsibility to practice good relations with all the others who share that space so that we can negotiate management of it.

The fearful voice in my brain is uncomfortable at the thought that I am not sovereign over every aspect of my identity, that there are places best understood as under shared governance. But at the same time, I think it is a beautiful idea. It dispels the illusion that we have complete control over ourselves, that we could escape being hurt and disappointed by the world if we close ourselves off from it. It clears a path for being more open and generous with our gifts.

I am not saying that we should resign ourselves to inevitable hurt and disappointment. Just because we can't fully escape these doesn't mean we must passively accept them. If anything, I



think this idea of self as territory bounded by a zone of shared governance between oneself and the world is empowering. In this view, when the world rejects or devalues our contributions, the hurt and disappointment we feel is not a failure of our emotional defenses, an intrusion past our borders. The community with whom we share governance over aspects of our identity has abused its power, and it is our chance to step up as co-managers of that boundary space and assert our right to be ourselves and express the gifts we believe we are meant to express.

How are we to do this? I am reminded of our discussion in Honors 104 on Martin Luther King Jr.'s idea that we have a responsibility to disobey unjust laws openly and out of love. I wonder how we might disobey the "laws" with which our dominant culture tries to govern our identities – and what it looks like to do this openly and lovingly rather than by withdrawing and hardening the border of our selves. I am also reminded of what Grace Lee Boggs writes in *The Next American Revolution* about loving America enough to change it, and how revolutions are built on love. And I am aware of the fact that as a white settler and not a member of the many communities on whose exploitation, dispossession, and disappearance our dominant culture is built, it is very easy for me to gush about love and shared governance. I definitely have more thinking to do about how I can uphold my civic responsibilities and act with love towards the republic in a way that doesn't also uphold the injustices that republic is founded on.

So what does it mean to lovingly disobey attempts to police my identity and my gifts? To me, it means not just expressing my gifts in spite of this policing but doing so in a way that invites others to express their gifts too. It means becoming the loving and supportive community Leanne Simpson describes, where individuals can explore their gifts and identities without interference. adrienne maree brown writes in *Emergent Strategy* that she wants to be like a dressing room where people can try on their authentic selves without boundaries or judgment. I want to be the kind of person whose presence creates a comfortable space for other people to be themselves, explore themselves, and change themselves as they feel called to do.

I think this requires a lot of compassion, and good faith. "Good faith" – this remains one of the most impactful concepts I've gathered from your classes. I have thought a lot about what it means – what it requires of us – to have good faith in people. As you said in class, it means giving people the benefit of the doubt instead of rejecting them outright. It also means having the humility to recognize that our own perspective is limited, and that there is value in listening to others. When we project that humility and compassion and good faith into the world, people will feel more comfortable bringing their authentic selves forward and sharing their gifts.

I reread my Honors 104 and Honors 105 essays and a lot of them conclude with similar messages to this – that we just have to listen better, that we just have to communicate more,

that we just need to cultivate better relationships with each other. I remember writing those and feeling like those conclusions were a bit simplistic – that I was basically just saying people should be nicer to each other. Wasn't there more we could do?

I'm sure there's a whole conversation to be had there about internalized patriarchy and the devaluing of emotional and relational work, but in short, I am realizing that to truly exercise good faith in people and act with compassion and humility is really not an easy task. It takes conscious work to resist the many ways that our culture attempts to govern our identity and how we relate to other people. One of my notes from an Honors 104 class discussion reads "The greatest tragedy of human life is that we don't have the money/ time to give everything/ everyone the 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup>/100<sup>th</sup> chances it deserves." Our dominant culture does not give us that time – instead, it tells us that time is scarce and therefore we must work harder and faster and accumulate more and more in a frenzy that gnaws at our emotional resources. To give second and third and hundredth chances in this context, to slowly build relationships, to hold time and space for people to arrive at their authenticity, and to practice good faith is an act of resistance.

...

This brings me back around to my original intention in writing this letter – to engage in a small act of resistance by taking time (out of finals week, no less!) to express gratitude. I didn't expect it to turn into an essay deconstructing our society! Clearly your classes have given me a lot to think about. I remember having no idea what to expect when I walked into Honors 104, except for a vague apprehension because the syllabus had said the class was on "republicanism" (which I wouldn't have been able to define), and because the required textbooks all had the kind of drab covers that I associated with long words and convoluted sentences (Montesquieu's "Selected Political Writings" is possibly the dullest-looking book I own). I did not expect that I would learn as much as I did, or that it would be as impactful as it has been.

I want to thank you for everything you taught us, but more importantly, for the patience and humor and compassion with which you taught. I was initially going to say that our class felt like one of adrienne maree brown's "dressing rooms" for people's authentic selves, but I don't think it would be quite accurate to say that I felt comfortable showing up as myself, because I really didn't know who that was. What would be accurate to say is that our class made me want to find out. Your encouragement of us and your own authenticity and vulnerability made me want to understand better who I was, and the readings and discussions gave me the concepts to continue that work of self-reflection even after the class itself had ended.

Tegan

**Natalie Baloy (capstone advisor)**

Dear Natalie,

I'm writing this the day after the Student Celebration you hosted at your house. It is a sunny, blustery Saturday afternoon. I spent the morning at a work party pulling Scotch broom and hauling buckets of mulch and chatting with the other volunteers, and now I'm feeling pleasantly tired. It's a relief to settle down at my apartment to work on this letter.

It's a pretty nice space for a first apartment - close to campus, quiet-ish now that the neighbors with the barking dogs have moved out, clean in a very neutral and white-walled way. It faces east towards Happy Valley so the morning sun comes in the windows. And yet (I hope that after reading so many of these letters you can trust that I am meandering towards a point), after nearly two years of living here, it still has the feeling of a hotel room. Somewhere you might stay over a long vacation, but not quite a home.

I've spent a lot of time since moving here thinking about why I feel this way – what is missing from this space. The best word I have come up with is “warmth.” When I visit home (my parent's home, in Seattle) it always feels warm and welcoming. I don't know how much of that is because my family is there and how much is because of the physical space – the familiar books on the shelves, the plants on the windowsills, the pile of shoes at the door – but it feels comfortable and home-like in a way my apartment does not.

I didn't appreciate that until I moved out for the first time during freshman year. Compared to that home space, my dorm room with its weirdly tacky white paint, greenish overhead light, and the bulletin board full of thumbtack holes from previous residents felt cold. I remember making a halfhearted attempt to make it more comfortable. I covered up the bulletin board with drawings my sister mailed to me, lined up the little crochet cacti I had made on top of the desk, spread a colorful quilt on the bed and unpacked my art stuff – watercolors and sketchbooks and a basket of yarn. It worked fine for sleeping and studying, but it certainly didn't feel like home.

And then the pandemic hit a few months later, and I moved back to Seattle. It was amazing in so many ways, even though the world felt uncertain and unsafe and full of moments of stress and sadness that welled up unexpectedly. I loved being back at home with my family, all of us going out for walks every evening and sharing tea. I even loved cleaning the house every Friday – the familiar routine of dusting the frames of old pictures my sister and I had drawn, vacuuming the carpets our dog shed on with single-minded determination, occasionally snagging the mop on familiar nails that worked their way up out of the wood floors no matter how often we

hammered them back down. I liked the feeling of being able to support my family in a way I couldn't do from a distance, to contribute to the maintenance of our space.

After almost a year and a half at home, re-moving out to return to in-person schooling felt like a major transition. I ended up in the apartment I'm living in now. It's certainly more spacious than my freshman year dorm, and less mildew-y, but it still lacks that feeling of "home."

Part of that is undoubtedly my fault, because I haven't really put the effort into settling in here. I haven't done very much decorating and I don't refer to it as "home" when I talk about it. I don't invite people over often and I get uncomfortable when I do, because it doesn't really feel like my space to offer up. I think it's partly because I just don't know how to make somewhere feel like a home. I've never had to do that before – we've lived in the same house in Seattle all my life. I don't have the experience of settling in somewhere new, particularly without the people I am closest to, whose presence makes our house in Seattle the warm and loving space it is.

I don't know if you've gotten a chance to read Leanne Simpson and Robyn Maynard's new book *Rehearsals for Living*, but there is a part in it where Simpson references an episode of the podcast "Millennials are Killing Capitalism" where scholar/professor/poet Fred Moten says that "home is where you give home away." Moten describes his experience growing up in a Black community where his home was a space of hospitality and constant visitors, and contrasts it to the white, capitalist notion of home as a private castle to be enclosed and enforced. Simpson discusses how hospitality (to both human and other-than-human relations) and sharing is also central in Indigenous households. Visiting is a central practice for strengthening relationships and for sharing knowledge.

I was a little surprised by how much this concept appealed to me, given that I'm an introvert and I depend on having places where I can be alone without worrying about interruption. But I've also spent the last two years living in a space where I am alone most of the time and have struggled to make it feel like home. It has made me realize that home, for me, is a relational space. Each act of care and love between my family and I (and sometimes care means giving people space to be alone when they need it) weaves together into a nest that holds all of us.

I'm accustomed to practicing caretaking and sharing within my own family, but I don't quite have the experience Simpson and Moten describe of constantly giving home away to others. I'm not used to seeing home as a place of hospitality – where those practices are extended out to visitors. But reading this book made me want to try. I would like to learn how to create spaces where I am comfortable being alone but also comfortable sharing with others. I am interested in the potential of these home-spaces to be places of knowledge sharing, as Simpson describes.

Places where visitors feel encouraged by the warmth and safety of the physical space and the hospitality of their hosts to share their thoughts openly, allowing knowledge to flow.

I want to learn how to be a good host in this way, to create spaces that I can share with others that encourage them to share in turn, so that we can grow our relationship and learn from each other. I think that will be especially important once I have graduated and am no longer spending so much of my time in academic spaces explicitly intended for teaching and learning. If I want to continue my learning journey – and I absolutely do - I will need to find and make spaces where I can share and receive knowledge from others.

I wanted to share these thoughts with you because I feel like I have learned a lot from you about how to practice sharing and hospitality – particularly hospitality that facilitates learning. The Student Celebration you hosted last night is just one example of that. I am so appreciative of your generosity to share your home with us for the evening – it was wonderful to meet your family (including the furred and feathered members!) as well as the other students you are working with, and to spend time talking all together in such a warm and comfortable and beautifully plant-filled space.

I see that generosity in how you teach as well. You create a welcoming space for students visiting your classroom in so many ways – through humor and offers of tea and personal stories that encourage others to engage more fully and share more of themselves in return. SALI 201 called on parts of my identity that I wasn't used to bringing into class – my family history during our discussion of “ancestral waters,” my interest in creative writing and fiber art for the Species Story and Story Map assignments – but I always felt comfortable and even eager to share those because I felt like they would be respected.

SALI 201 was also one of the first in-person classes that I took after a year of online school from Seattle, and it was very different from any other class I had taken. It meant a lot to feel like it was a space where I could safely explore unfamiliar and sometimes uncomfortable topics that made me confront my positionality as a white settler. My point is that I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to learn in a space shaped by your empathy and generosity, especially at a time when I had just left home (again) and was struggling to adjust.

It has been a joy to take other classes with you since then and to work with you on this project. Since reading *Rehearsals for Living*, I have been thinking about how these letters relate to the concepts of home and hospitality. I see them as an opportunity to create spaces of gratitude and reciprocity in an academic landscape that doesn't always leave room for these practices. They are a comfortable space where I can “host” readers, inviting them in to share my feelings

and nourish my relationships with them – a little different from the physical, in-person hospitality of opening your home to someone, but if we’ve learned anything during the pandemic, it’s how to stay connected remotely, right?

I am so appreciative of how you have supported me in this project and reminded me that this practice of gratitude and sharing and vulnerability is valuable. There have been several times in the past few months where I have found myself falling back into the Western, capitalist mindset that devalues emotional, relationship-building work like this. I have caught myself explaining this project to family and friends and trying to make it sound much more academic and impersonal sounding (“it’s a critique of the modern educational system,” “it’s a discussion on educational reform”), shying away from the simple truth – that I am saying “thank you.” You have consistently reminded me that this is a worthwhile practice and have helped me navigate how to do it in an academic space where it sometimes feels uncomfortable to be so emotionally open.

It's been a few weeks since I started this letter, but I just discovered something that I had to add. I was reviewing my notes from SALI 201, and I realized that it was in that class – in the last week of Fall Quarter of 2021 - that I first read Robin Kimmerer’s essay on gift thinking, “The Serviceberry.” I had already read her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, but that essay was what really sparked my interest in gift economies. I remember that after I read it, I asked for one of the books it referenced (*Sacred Economics* by Charles Eisenstein) for Christmas that year. Those two texts inspired me to try to recognize the gifts I receive from the world around me and to consciously practice gratitude. Without having read them, I’m not sure I would have had the idea for this project. What a beautiful, circular moment to now be working on it with you!

Thank you for all the gifts that you have shared with me,

Tegan

## Appendix I

I wanted a visual representation of the letter-writing portion of this project that I could keep to remind myself to maintain this gratitude practice into the future. I created this fall tree design because when I first had the idea to write letters of gratitude to my teachers, I imagined the letters as leaves that the tree returns to the soil after a long growing season.

