

THE LEOPOLD WRITING PROGRAM

2021 ALDOLEOPOLD WRITING CONTEST AWARD WINNER



DYLAN COMO-MOSCONI

BEST ESSAY Grades 8-9
OVERALL BEST ESSAY

From the Ground Up

Covid hit us unexpectedly, and affected each of us in so many personal ways. From my uncle who died of COVID in May of 2020 in NYC; to my father, a teacher, who had to learn to engage his first graders online; to my grandmother with Alzheimer's, whose one joy was to watch humans congregate. Everyone's life changed.

So what did we do? We found solace at home with family, and took on some serious projects, like replacing collapsed leach lines. At my house, we all learned to pitch in more, as my mother, a doctor, was highly exposed to COVID at work, and moved outside temporarily into our yurt. My sisters and I cooked a lot, and I actually became pretty good at it. They both adjusted easily as they immersed themselves in their hobbies, but I needed to find my own release.

I took to walking. As Edward Abbey said, *"Walking...stretches time and prolongs life... Walking makes the world much bigger and thus more interesting. You have time to observe the details."* And I truly did start observing new details around our property. We live on a ridge with rocky, uneven terrain. I woke up one morning to the mist of spring rains still evaporating. I loved the humidity, and walked behind the yurt. I kept walking, and in a few hours, I envisioned building a trail for us all to enjoy.

I started by clearing the small junipers and scrub oak closer to the house, not only breaking ground for the trail, but also creating a fire zone to protect our house from forest fires. I cut branches and built some berms to prevent erosion. What I didn't expect to see so quickly were all the new habitats I unknowingly created for Abert's squirrels and cottontail rabbits we had been noticing since COVID started, much more prolific without three cars starting up every morning. I even watched a red tail hawk for months, nesting in our tallest ponderosa. In this querencia, my lifestyle slowed and my strength was drawn by observing animal tracks. Their tracks reminded me that they, too, have found expansion and safety in their surroundings, with the slowing down of human footprints in their environment.

I finished the walking trail on our property in September. Now, I meander outside with purpose. My trail circles up and down hills, left and right; one full circle turns out to be about a quarter mile. It climbs past our new bee hives, and sometimes I see coyotes and the black banded tail of a running bobcat, and if I am lucky, a family of gray fox. I can spot a herd of six mule deer when I get outside early enough. I watched the incredible Perseid meteor shower in August and the Neowise comet from a sleeping bag in my yard. I finally understand Leopold's vision of a land ethic. As Leopold says, *"In June, as many as a dozen species may burst their buds on a single day. No man can heed all these anniversaries; no man can ignore all of them"*. I discover new things everytime I go outside, and I am grateful to have had the time to explore my surroundings. I now connect with trees and animals I once overlooked and took for granted. These are things I will never overlook again, and despite the sadness that COVID brought, it also has become an opportunity for reconnection to unique areas, bringing us closer kinship with our families and neighbors, and ultimately ourselves.

Works Cited

Abbey, Edward. *The Journey Home*. Plume, 1977.

Leopold, Aldo. Aldo Leopold Quotes. 21 Nov. 2017, www.aldoleopold.org/teach-learn/green-fire-film/leopold-quotes/.