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HONORABLE MENTION Grades 10-12

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Answers from an Ant

Ants are tiny yet wise, and united they thrive. Through the underground palaces that they build, they wind their way in an organized caravan where each ant has a precise mission. Ants march with their feet lightly brushing the land, weaving their empires into the grains of the sand. They live on this complex Earth, which gladly hosts and nurtures them. To the Earth, humanity and a colony of ants look the same, simply like miniscule dots on the surface.

Being fortunate to live in Santa Fe, New Mexico, I have the opportunity to explore the outdoors and gifts of Earth in our backyard. Whether I walk or rest on a rock, I see ants at work. I marvel at how they take what the Earth has gifted to them, and they piece it together in sandcastles, magnificent considering their size. How can such tiny creatures create something so big? The answer lies in collective work and a shared dream. The gifts of the Earth are invaluable, yet humans tend to take them for granted, not always participating in the gift exchange. As Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, our societies only ask, “What more can we take from the Earth?”. Instead, we should ask ourselves: What more can we give back? The answer to this question is to start like an ant. I believe that my “ant-sized” contributions are essential for the success of my community’s efforts in giving back the gifts of the Earth, by being disciplined, aware of the treasures around, and respectful of its life.

In my yard alongside the ant hills, I delight in the beauty that Earth is presenting. I replace and replenish what I can in an effort to maintain the natural gifts that surround me. One of my greatest pleasures is building birdhouses in the spring with my sister to replace the old ones on the fencing posts and taking fascination with new life. Through this work, I feel part of life’s cycle. When outside, I revel in the sun bouncing off of the branches and tree leaves, while watching for signs of distress. I ensure that the trees and the plants are not suffering from the lack of water in our drought-stricken climate. These are my tiny offerings to the Earth. If each one of us would believe in the great results that even the smallest contributions have on a whole, our collective work would be geared towards success in building an inheritance of gifts for generations to come.

In Santa Fe, as our community grows, I witness many trees being taken down by bulldozers, dirt being moved around, and communities of prairie dogs disappearing, making room for new constructions. While development is needed, there should be an effort to preserve the natural habitat, and not to disturb the Earth to its core. We should keep in mind that the land was gifted to both us and all the other creatures on it. When developing land, we must think about how to replenish the gifts that were taken away. Development should be done with awareness

of the value of protection, and a sense that land isn't merely a commodity which we own, as Aldo Leopold suggests. Only then might we be able to successfully bring with us the gifts of ants, trees, and prairie dogs into our futures. In cultivating awareness for protection of the land, each individual in society must refine their values and commit to the same ideals of respecting and preserving. Only through the extension of our concept of community to encompass the land, as Aldo Leopold suggests in *The Land Ethic*, might we be able to have "respect for [our] fellow members, and also respect for the community as such" (Leopold 204). People often think that their contribution against the absence of many will not do anything, but this ideology is just a justification to do nothing at all. We should take from the example of ants and start small. Any little gift is precious to Earth, and to us, in our continual gift exchange.