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Grade 8

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Cultivating the Land Ethic: Lessons From the Cucumber Patch

From a kingdom of moist darkness, the sprout erupts from nowhere. Nonexistent the day before, the seedling now hopefully extends its head towards the golden sunlight, vulnerable in its emerald promise. Later, I learned that the simple elegance before me held the laws of life I couldn't learn from any textbook. Ultimately, the process of tending to my cucumber plants provided an education in integrity, stability, and beauty that extended far past my backyard.

I took the first step in my education by planting cucumber seeds, an act that would reveal the integrity of Aldo Leopold's land-community. As I nurtured my plants weeks later, I realized there was a wholeness to what was growing. My cucumbers were composed of a living, independent system made up of an unseen network—a vast community of interconnected microbes and nutrients that had to be unimpaired so that my cucumbers could survive. Aldo Leopold analogized this wholeness by claiming that we should work to keep every "cog and wheel" of the natural system, because the mechanism as a whole was good. This focus on the foundational health of my cucumbers taught me that integrity is essential for the plants' well-being; if the system failed, my cucumbers would fail.

And for a time, my cucumbers did fail, their vibrant, velvet leaves wilting and fading before becoming brittle parchment. My system's tested integrity revealed that its stability is a fragile balancing act. I realized that a careful investigation—not a superficial glance—was required to diagnose the problem. This deep study mirrored Joy Harjo's insight: "It's possible to understand the world from studying a leaf." Harjo claims that localized yet intense studies reveal the interconnectedness of the universe, which is more valuable than "travelling the whole globe" inattentively, asserting that the quality of the examination is more important than the quantity of experiences. This proved true when I noticed the white webs of mildew on my leaves. My plants' recovery taught me concepts of biology and ecology that I would have missed with a generalized approach. This understanding of stability made my cucumbers more than a hobby; their teachings transcended simple practicality.

The ecological knowledge I gained from my cucumbers began to dictate an ethical responsibility. As I held my first cucumber up to the light, I reveled in the humble yet beautiful fruit that my system's integrity and stability cultivated into existence. While the cucumber was misshapen, I realized that the beauty of my system had a meaning regardless of the final product; my cucumbers' form and function symbolized something that went beyond the need for food and entertainment. This experience with my system led to my rejection of the short-sighted question: "What good is it?" The true worth of my cucumbers was their role as living citizens of the land, not in their service to humankind.

The lessons I learned from my cucumbers helped me develop a personal code of ethics. Deep understanding is achieved through paying attention to nature to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the land. In the integrity and stability of the system, I learned to view my plants not as property, but as a respected member of a system whose beauty required my consideration to grow. This is the core of the Land Ethic: our respect for ourselves is tied to our respect for the system of life. I know now that the greatest lessons are not found in distant cities, but in the whispered wisdom of a single cucumber leaf.