

THE LEOPOLD WRITING PROGRAM

2021 ALDO LEOPOLD WRITING CONTEST AWARD WINNER



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HONORABLE MENTION Grades 10-12

Lessons Learned While Staying Home

During the year of 2020, we were forced to stay home to keep one another safe from COVID-19. Most learned a few lessons from staying home, and I took part of New Mexico's unique earth-giving traits by planting, or attempting to plant bell peppers. After reading *A Sand County Almanac* by Aldo Leopold, I reflected on the topic for this essay, and thought about my attempts at planting for an autumn harvest.

I learned some lessons from staying home – new skills like slowing down, and then observing the world around me. Aldo Leopold writes in some of his essays about the months and their seasons; he described his observations of the animals and his own activities. I saw the months change this year, and took a deeper look at what

occurred in those months. I observed in the summer that the rain called out wildlife like the reptiles, insects, and at the right time, animals that hid in the wilderness. More recently in New Mexico and most western states, there has been a drought which has caused great concern among those who live in the region, causing many to go back to dry-farming and leading to more animals trying to find water sources.

I also learned to appreciate the New Mexico environment as compared to the forested land in California that led to tragic wildfires. It caught my attention that Leopold wrote about how Native Americans used to have controlled fires to fertilize the land, and prevent fuel to collect. He wrote about the Native American's worldview that the land, animals, waters, and humans were in close relationship with one another. In another essay, he wrote about early settlers killing off predators, but that disrupted the environment's system. It seems that current humans need to acknowledge that we share this land with plants and animals. Staying home allowed me to appreciate my environment and my connection to it.

One day, I decided to grow bell peppers. I had the seeds, and I was not “a god or a poet,” but I had “a shovel,” and curiosity. I noticed that the land was very dry, and I had to add to the natural soil to give the plants a chance to grow. I was excited when I saw the plant's green stem grow inch by inch, but my inexperience led to the plant's growth to only four inches. I made mistakes – I planted too late, I drowned one of the bell peppers, and I am sure an experienced farmer might list so much more. Honestly, I was disappointed, but the mistakes allowed me to observe and learn. I sought answers about soil, the time to water, identifying weeds, and keeping animals away. Even though my first “crop” did not happen, I found that it might be in my blood to plant.

I read about invasive plants and animals that can destroy an environment. Eventually, I identified some invasive trees near my home that took much of the water that the animals and plants need. Leopold asks readers to look carefully at the natural environment as it is, and to be cautious of adding new plants or animals. I noticed the Russian Olive trees that have grown in many places in New Mexico and it takes so much of the water sources that I noticed are not replenished quickly.

In conclusion, had there not been a stay at home order, I probably would not have considered planting bell peppers. I would not have taken a serious look at other plants, invasive plants, that could steal the water from my bell peppers. After reading Aldo Leopold's, *A Sand County Almanac*, I felt more aware of my surroundings. I had become more observant like Leopold – watching the land, the sun, the water, the animals, and the plants. It seemed I took for granted the beauty and rugged terrain of New Mexico in my constant movement from place to place, while planting allowed me to observe, prepare, and reflect for an autumn harvest.