

2021 International Essay Contest for Young People

[Youth Category – 1st Prize]

Learning from the land: What is life and how to live

(Original)

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September 2020. I walked alongside the Red River, breathing in the crisp autumn air, drowning myself in the sounds of flowing water. From far away, I could see red ribbons being tied to the side of the Norwood Bridge, so bloody red that they blended in with the red hues of the maple trees forest on the riverbank. Each ribbon represented an Indigenous girl or woman who had gone missing or been murdered. *What is life when for hundreds of years and going, Indigenous lives have*



been taken away at the hands of colonial settlers, who also murder the bison, kill the forest, and poison the land? Are the lives of Mother Earth and her more-than-human creations not as worthy as human lives? I believe, for as long as we dwell on our colonial, Western-centric understanding of life and human-nature relations, we continue investing in colonial habits of knowing and being, which exploit the environment under the name of development. And so, I turn to the land to learn about what life is and how to live.

I once met an Anishinaabe Elder who taught me to learn about the meaning and purpose of life from the land. Mother Earth teaches us *life is a circle*. Humans are a part of this circle of life—being interconnected to other creations. Life, from this perspective, centers on building reciprocal and respectful relationships between humans and humans as well as humans and nature. Our existence is inseparable from the philosophies embedded in places where the land, the water, and our identities and histories intersect.

When I looked at the red maple trees, the trees taught me that *life is about building community together*. As my eyes lingered on the green lichens and orange polypore

growing on the tree trunks, I was reminded human survival hinges upon our relationships with one another and with nature. In the middle of the climate crisis, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the rise of hate crimes against Asian Americans in the U.S., I've seen members of black, Indigenous, communities of colour standing in solidarity with one another, working together to dismantle oppressive systems. Instead of fighting one another to gain limited resources, we disrupt the current unjust societal structures and violent cultures to (re)imagine futures of peace.

When I stood on the bank of the Red River, the land taught me *life is about connecting the past, the present, and the future*. As a temporary resident in Winnipeg, Canada, I am living on the original lands of Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene people, and on the homeland of the Métis Nation. This land carries stories of Indigenous Peoples who have resided here for thousands of years before the arrival of European colonial settlers. On this land, Indigenous Peoples have been living in harmony with the environment. On this land, the lives of many Indigenous Peoples and more-than-human creations were taken away by the colonial settlers whose worldview about life was so narrow that nothing mattered but white men and their wealth and power. On this land, the work of truth and reconciliation has begun to move communities toward relationship-building and peacebuilding. On this land, there are not only pains and traumas but also healing and hopes.

The Western educational systems teach us that life is a characteristic of living organisms with biological processes, but Indigenous Peoples in Canada believe the soil, the water, the rocks, the trees, and other more-than-human creations are also living creations with spirits. This worldview fundamentally changes human-nature relations. If we perceive humans as superior creatures, everything is seen as resources to serve human development. However, if we see humans as parts of the circle of life where everything is connected, we learn to respect all lives and the diversity of lives. We must shift our understanding of development from being a never-ending process of wealth accumulation to a continual process of sustainable peacebuilding.

So yes, life is hard. So yes, life is paradoxical. However, let's stand in solidarity to acknowledge our harms of the past and work together to dismantle the current oppressive societal structures. We are building peaceful, equitable, and sustainable futures for generations to come.