

# Character and . . .

## the Places of Home

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*The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.*

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# The Nurture of Nature: Developing Character Virtues

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Adam Hoffman

## Abstract

*Nature benefits individuals and societies in many tangible ways, yet the ability of nature to nurture character formation is under-examined. This paper explores the possibility that nature can teach us to care for the natural world, appreciate diversity, pursue environmental justice, and cultivate the virtues of gratitude and contentment.*

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“What in the world are utedags?” I wondered aloud. Our family had been exposed to many new practices and routines as we transitioned to life in Sweden for my sabbatical. Yet it was these “outdoor days” that my children were to be partaking in on each Tuesday at school that had me most intrigued.

Was it lost in translation, or had the teacher really just suggested that the place of learning for my children and the entire class, regardless of wind, snow, or rain, would be outside all day on each Tuesday? It turns out that each and every Tuesday, nature was to be the classroom in which the students would learn math, science, language, social studies, music, and history. What wasn’t explained to me, and something that only occurred to me as the spring semester marched on, was that nature would not only be the classroom, but also the teacher.

In my day-to-day activities I noticed school children spread out all over the town. They were riding busses, they were translating the items all around them from Swedish to English, they were picking blueberries in the forest, they were examining the cultural artifacts from people long ago gone, and some were even helping me take water samples from the local lake. In addition to meeting the normal reading, writing, and arithmetic requirements, I noticed that they were also learning



*Children learn in an outdoor classroom.*

stewardship practices in caring for the earth, examining local conservation efforts to enhance the diversity of the flora and fauna community to increase the health of the ecosystem and simply learning to be happy and content outside. In short, nature was nurturing important character virtues in these—and my—children.

Steven Bouma-Prediger, author and religion professor, describes virtue as a settled disposition to act excellently—a state of praiseworthy character developed over time—that is indispensable in allowing one to responsibly act as a keeper of the Earth (132). I wish to expand the argument to suggest that as we are kept by nature, we develop certain virtues that make us more than keepers of Earth, but also keepers of people. This paper will explore the possibility that nature can be beneficial in teaching us and our children character virtues: caring for the natural world, appreciating diversity, pursuing environmental justice, and cultivating the virtues of gratitude and contentment.

## **Caring for the Natural World**

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Care is the virtue most associated with love. People do not and cannot care or love what they do not know. Our current carefree society results from the fact that we, paradoxically, are too well connected and yet not connected well enough. The average child spends over 7 hours a day staring at a screen, spends less time outdoors than many prison inmates, and half of children do not meet the recommended standard for physical activity (Council on Communications and Media; First United Nations Congress; Eaton et al.). At no time in human history have we spent less time connecting, physically or psychologically, to

nature than the present. How can our children love nature if they do not know nature?

Society stands much to gain from a renewed connection to nature, a connection that can help us care for others. Whether that “other” is a pet, a tree, or a neighbor, nature can help us love. Compassion is a term that is often associated with care, love, empathy, and this connection between care and compassion has been noticed by many researchers. A walk on a deserted beach, through the woods on a starlit night, or on a sunny spring day can be the beginning of a life focused on care for others. Bouma-Prediger and co-author Brian J. Walsh describe compassion as what happens when “love meets suffering” (219). Nature offers everyone the ability to experience both love and suffering and is a gateway into the transition from thinking about the love and hardship of others and caring to do something about the discomfort others may be feeling.

In his memoir of falling in love with the natural world, *The Home Place*, Professor of Wildlife Ecology J. Drew Lanham describes his feelings after losing the place that he loved, his home place. “She sat by silently—tight lipped, with hands folded on her lap—as the land was torn apart by eyes turned toward quick cash. . . . Greed was the cancer that killed the Lanham Edgefield legacy. There were not plans made for anything other than getting and spending” (209, 211–12).

Our care for the land offers an opportunity to develop this important virtue by examining the choice of treating the land like a friend or treating the land like a commodity.

Care can take many forms. An important one for our investigation is the ability to act responsibly, to take actions that mitigate and lessen our impacts in attaining the things we need to survive (Bannon 262). Remaining attentive to our impact on our world around us leads to developing a caring compassion and awareness of how we can treat the land like a friend.

Areas where we can show caring compassion to our friend nature include our construction of cities, food production methods, transportation choices, and energy generation techniques. The table

below outlines choices individuals can make to build the virtue of care and show others a way towards a more holistic excellence.

## Environmental Choices Foster Caring Compassion

Areas of Opportunity	Care Building Actions
City Construction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create parks and greenspaces</li> <li>• Ban fertilizers and pesticides</li> <li>• Respect unique ecosystems</li> </ul>
Food Procurement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Embrace family farms</li> <li>• Support local and organic foods</li> <li>• Plant a garden</li> </ul>
Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilize mass transit</li> <li>• Use human-powered options</li> <li>• Fly sparingly</li> </ul>
Energy Generation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support renewable forms</li> <li>• Respect animal migration routes</li> <li>• Boycott destructive mining techniques</li> </ul>

A lack of awareness regarding the natural world and everyday life threatens to weaken our ability to care for the plants, animals, and people around us. Aldo Leopold writes, “There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace” (6). The danger in ignorance is that if a person does not know the source of their food, one cannot care or show compassion to the plants, animals, and people impacted by its production. It is not rhetorical to ask whether a strawberry picked by your neighbor is the same as a strawberry picked by a migrant worker in a third world country and shipped halfway across the world. In not knowing the source of food, a person is neglecting the responsibility of striving towards excellent character. Bouma-Prediger and Walsh term people such as this the “ecologically apathetic”—they are among the most efficient people in suppressing compassion and those that show a lessened ability to care for others (220).

In one aspect of choices in our daily life, food procurement, we see a myriad of opportunities to care for the land in ways many have not thought of. Large industrial farms often do not show the long-term caring compassion for the land needed for sustainable harvest. What interest is 10 years down the road to a company renting farmland for two years? In her entertainingly educational treatise on indigenous floral wisdom, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment Robin Kimmerer explains how we should care to engage in a reciprocity between humans and the land:

*Ask permission of the ones whose lives you seek.  
Abide by the answer.  
Never take the first. Never take the last.  
Harvest in a way that minimizes harm.  
Take only what you need and leave some for others.  
Use everything that you take.  
Take only that which is given to you.  
Share it, as the Earth has shared with you.  
Be grateful.  
Reciprocate the gift. (183)*

Although this advice from Kimmerer seems like a how-to for harvested resources, it really is a foundation for developing caring actions that aid us in becoming excellent people in all areas of our life.

One might be lulled into thinking that all this focus on nature will make us lose sight of our fellow humans. Bryan E. Bannon, a professor of environmental studies and sustainability with an interest in environmental philosophy, assures us that those fears are unfounded as he suggests that the caring responses to the environment do not preclude compassion for our fellow human beings, rather caring for nature more fully calls upon our human capacities to think creatively and critically about our responses to the world (277).

Connection to the natural world results in a decrease in uncompassionate behavior among children (Matsuoka 278) and exposure to nature has been linked to increased empathy, cooperative behavior, and generosity (Mayer and Frantz 509; Weinstein, Przybylski, et al. 1150; Chawla et al. 9). In fact, evidence shows that compassion

can be carried over from one situation to another unrelated one (Condon and DeSteno 700; Oveis et al. 625). That is, our attitude toward nature can change the way we behave towards other people. The natural world can help us care.<sup>1</sup>

The suggestion that a strong connection to the environment impacts one's ability and willingness to care for our human kin is a powerful concept, yet one that up to this point rarely has been explored in the literature. On a superficial level, it is intuitive that if you care for a banana slug or a centipede you likely will also care for your human counterparts. Digging deeper, if you show compassion and the ability to empathize with the relationships between organisms in creating healthy

and functioning ecosystems, it is likely that you will do the same in fostering diverse human assemblies. Caring compassion allows us to appreciate our fellow inhabitants of planet Earth, whether they be great, small, big, or tall.



*The natural world  
can help us care.*

## **Appreciating Diversity**

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Practicing the virtue of care is closely connected to an appreciation of diversity. Nature gives us a plethora of examples of the importance of diversity in creating healthy and resilient ecosystems. Neither a monoculture of corn nor a monoculture of people is a healthy environment. Indeed, nature is a splendid example of the value of diversity. Everywhere we look in the natural world we see plants and animals that together shape the landscape. A single urban greenspace consists of a mixture of hundreds of species of plants (Loram et al. 327).

A diverse community structure, both in terms of plants and animals, is a much more resilient community, a community better able to weather changes and external stimuli. Recent examples showing the harms of a monoculture include banana blight and infestation of the Emerald Ash Borer. In the same way that cities try to diversify their economies or landscape architects diversify their landscapes, it is clear that a diverse community is a strong community. Human monocultures often suffer the ills of group think and are less likely to consider alternative solutions to social and economic problems. Many of the external stimuli



impacting ecosystems today result from how we treat animals and plants, as we utilize resources to build cities, feed populations, move people, and generate energy through the aforementioned choices that we make.

These choices can be made to show compassion to the environment, just as they also must be made to show compassion to our peers. It is here that nature can show us a better way to operate. Consider the appreciation nature has for diversity. Regardless of one's race, gender, or sexual orientation, nature offers the same value and treats everyone equally. The sun offers the same radiative warmth to women and men alike, wild blueberries offer nourishment for black and white people alike, and the morning dove coos for straight and gay people alike.

Another location that should also be an oasis of equity are schools. In fact, there are schools that are tapping into the lessons nature can teach us, covering both standard content and, more importantly, the atypical areas of pedagogical content such as cultural competency. Nature-based preschools and kindergartens are popping up worldwide; Germany boasts over 1,500 forest kindergartens and such schools exist in 35 different states in the USA (Michek et al. 739; "Who We Are"). An area in which these schools hold the potential to best traditional schools is the intersection between environmental connectedness and social consequences. It is here that virtue development and character formation might take place at an accelerated pace (Weinstein, Balmford, et al. 1150). In connecting with nature, these schools teach appreciation and care for the diversity in plants, animals, and humans.

Lanham, who as an African American birder calls himself a rare bird, an oddity, writes,

But in all my time wandering I've yet to have a wild creature question my identity. Not a single cardinal or ovenbird has ever paused in dawn-song declaration to ask the reason for my being. White-tailed deer seem just as put off by my hunter friend's whines as they are by my blackness. Response in forests and fields are not born of any preconceived notions of what "should be." They lie only in the fact that I am. Each of us is so much more than the pigment that orders us into convenient compartments of occupation,

avocation, or behavior. It's easy to default to expectation. But nature shows me a better, wilder way. (1)

If we could adopt nature's viewpoint we would discover the value of diversity in enhancing our interactions between all beings. Applying what we learn from nature, the value of diversity, to our interactions with humans could help us all grow to be more just.

## Pursuing Environmental Justice

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One can often get some insight into the value a community places on diversity by its commitment to environmental justice. Environmental justice is a unique combination of just actions entombed in a geospatial realm in the belief that all citizens, regardless of gender, ethnicity or socioeconomic class, should equally share in the benefits of environmental amenities and the burdens of environmental health hazards (Pijawka et al. 118). Bouma-Prediger and Walsh point out that ecological destruction has a disproportionate impact on the individuals in society who are the most socioeconomically challenged (162).

Any just society must respect basic human rights, and any society's attempt to address social or environmental justice issues must also address pollution, poverty, racism, climate change, and food shortages, as they are all related to one another (Bouma-Prediger and Walsh 164). We cannot separate people from the planet or planet from the people—we are forever intertwined.


Self-awareness regarding environmental justice issues, especially the burdens of environmental health hazards, has been increasing. A recent

water crisis shows that we still have much work to do. In Flint, Michigan, one of the poorest, blackest cities in Michigan, a drinking water switch in 2014 resulted in elevated levels of lead, a neurotoxin, leaching into the drinking water. After years of denials and steadily mounting evidence, including a rise in children's blood lead levels, a

*We cannot separate people from the planet or planet from the people—we are forever intertwined.*

federal state of emergency was declared in early 2016. In the aftermath, the Michigan Civil Rights Commission report determined “The people of Flint did not enjoy the equal protection of environmental or public health laws, nor did they have a meaningful voice in the decisions” (4). Five Michigan officials were charged with involuntary manslaughter (Atkinson and Davey).

We have even more work to do in another area of environmental justice. An oft overlooked, yet just as important, aspect of environmental justice that relates to the disconnect among minorities and people in lower socioeconomic classes is access to environmental amenities. If we are true to ourselves we would surely agree that, just as safe water is a right that all people should be provided, safe access to the natural world should not be a privilege. A common misconception is that justice is accomplished by treating people equally. However, like the plants in our greenspace, that is not true. Each plant is adapted to a difference niche and accordingly needs different amounts of light, nutrients, and water so that treating a cactus like a maple tree is not helpful. Just so with people. What is needed is equitable treatment, which enables each to acquire what they need to survive and thrive.



*Equitable treatment  
enables each to acquire  
what they need to  
survive and thrive.*

Equity is the goal, but often we fall short. Research has found that ethnic minorities and socioeconomically disadvantaged people, in comparison to those more privileged in society, have access to fewer acres of parks per person, and fewer parks of quality that are well-maintained and safe (Rigolon and Németh 288). Demographic inequities, by no fault or choice of a child, severely impact the ability to connect with nature.

This disconnect has had important effects on the citizens of an area, including on their physical and mental health, and even their exposure to crime. At the Benioff Children’s Hospital in Oakland, California, Dr. Nooshin Razani is training pediatricians to write park prescriptions for young patients and their families to visit nearby parks (Seltnerich A255), while Finland public health officials now recommend that all citizens get

a minimum of 5 hours a month in the woods in order to prevent depression (Worrall). Clearly, as people are more removed from nature, it will take more of these programs to re-connect citizens with the positive outcomes of exposure to the natural world.

Another positive outcome of exposure to nature is the finding that more greenspace and vegetation is significantly associated with lower crime rates (Kuo and Sullivan 359; Weinstein, Balmford, et al. 1150; Branas et al. 1301). Especially noteworthy was that the most violent of the crimes studied, aggravated assaults, was most strongly correlated with a neighborhood's degree of greenness, while the least violent crime, theft, showed no association to amount of green space (Branas et al. 1302; Wolfe and Mennis 118).

Wolfe and Mennis suggest that the lower crime rates noted were primarily driven by two factors. The first is strengthened community cohesion as people spend more time socially interacting outdoors in greenspaces. The presence or absence of natural environments can be the difference between people interacting in shared spaces or people being less connected to each other. The second factor is that the presence of plants has a calming and therapeutic effect, which decreases actions and feelings that are precursors to violence (117–18).

Nature is inclusive, it accepts all, and if we learn from it, can help us appreciate the gift that is diversity. Appreciating the diversity in an ecosystem or city can positively change one's feelings about the ecosystem, the city, and importantly, people themselves. Famous landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted designed New York City's Central Park in response to his realization that there was an inequality in access to beautiful spaces based on a person's class. Inspired by his belief that beautiful green spaces should exist for all people to enjoy, he created Central Park, a greenspace that is the envy of many urban cities in its ability to connect urban citizens of all classes to the environment.

## **Cultivating Gratitude and Contentment**

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Our nation's collective greenspaces, the national parks, are special places that for over a century have connected people to the natural world. These gifts to all citizens have been praised as "America's best

idea” (Stegner 4), and they welcome us as Yellowstone does, proclaiming to be “for the benefit and enjoyment of all people” (*National Park Service* 4). The National Park Service was created by Congress in 1916 with an order to maintain the landscapes and wildlife “unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations” (*National Park Service* 3).

One of my favorite words in the English language is the word “awesome.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* claims the term originated



*Yellowstone National Park evokes a sense of awe.*

around 1598 and meant being “full of awe, profoundly reverential” (“Awesome”). Rather than the common connotations today of “marvelous” or “great,” I will consider the awesomeness of nature and its ability to foster the feeling of profoundly reverential awe. Natural Parks have served as a way of preserving awesome views for the enjoyment of all genders, races, and ages.

Humans have a well-developed sense of awe and an affinity for the beautiful. Growing up, we called our place “The Pretty.” It was a special area in the woods near my childhood home that connected the neighborhood kids directly to nature. Despite designing Central Park, Fredrick Law Olmsted’s “pretty” was the Yosemite Valley. It was the beautiful vista provided by the valley that drove Olmsted to urge that the California legislature protect it from development and allow millions of people today to still enjoy the same view. Natural places impact all of us. We need to facilitate stronger and longer-lasting connections with nature to help us cultivate gratitude and contentment. Natural vistas have a special ability to help us realize how special life is. To enjoy a great view is to enjoy the virtue of contentment. This leads directly to gratitude, in a well-connected cause-and-effect relationship.

Many children grow up confused between wants and needs. The material world and consumer society we live in makes it harder to see the truth that there is a large disparity between the two. The

commercialization of many religious and secular holidays and the constant barrage of advertisements that children see blur the line between necessity and luxury. Nature offers us our needs, but too often we pilfer our wants. As one becomes less mindful, focusing on wants rather than being thankful for the resources available, one moves farther away from being a complete person and exhibits decreased character-building capacity.<sup>2</sup>

It is this confusion between needs and wants that drives consumerism, which further widens the gap of contact and connection to the natural world. To care for the world, one must know the world. To care for a fellow human, one must understand that person. And without connection the capacity to care is lost. Wendell Berry argues that, “We do not understand the earth in terms either of what it offers us or of what it requires of us, and I think it is the rule that people inevitably destroy what they do not understand” (85). If we cannot facilitate the connection of our children with nature, it will lead to the continued confusion about the value in the natural world, both in terms of goods and services. Feelings of greed, lust, and the desire for more leads to consumption and destroys the natural world as well as our communities and personal relationships.



*Facilitating children's connection to nature is vital.*

The ability of nature to foster gratitude is certainly one aspect of the natural world that many people do not take time to consider. Nature acts much differently than the commodity-driven economies we're familiar with, economies critiqued by Kimmerer. “Gratitude cultivates an ethic of fullness, but the (consumer) economy needs emptiness. . . . Gratitude doesn't send you shopping to find satisfaction; it comes as a gift rather than a commodity, subverting the foundation of the whole (consumer) economy” (111). In sharp contrast, nature acts as gift economy, in which its valuables are given without an agreement for immediate or future rewards.

Marvin W. Berkowitz, co-director of the Center for Character and Citizenship at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, states that how parents raise their children is the predominant influence on a child's character formation (54). Children need to be taught how to care for the Earth and to show gratitude to the Earth. To be taught how to say thanks with their words and their actions. Most importantly children need to learn to show gratitude for needs provided by nature. Teach them to thank the apple tree when they take its fruit just as they are taught to thank their grandmother when taking a cookie from her.

Nature's rewards were described by Olmsted 150 years ago. "It is a scientific fact that the occasional contemplation of natural scenes of an impressive character . . . is favorable to the health and vigor of men and especially to the health and vigor of their intellect" (Black 32). The



*Connection to the natural world is correlated with emotional well-being and increased happiness, which lead to better and more efficient growth in moral character.*

scientific facts Olmsted mentioned certainly were more conjecture than fact at that time. Now without hyperbole it can be stated that it is a scientific fact that the connection to the natural world is favorable to the mental and physical health of men, women, and children. Only in the past few decades has science begun to

conclusively show that connection to the natural world is correlated with emotional and psychological well-being, increased innovative potential, positive life satisfaction, decreased stress, and increased happiness (Nisbet and Zelenski 7; Leong et al. 61; Capaldi, Dopko, et al. 10; Ulrich et al. 222). I argue that all these lead to better and more efficient growth in moral character.

## Conclusion

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Much of the evidence given supporting my idea that the natural world can be beneficial in teaching us and our children character virtues is based on anecdotal evidence. However, I hope it is clear that, like many

promising fields that have started with similar observations, more research will follow to explore this connection.

What *is* clear is that we cannot care for what we do not know. The natural world has shown us time and time again that increased diversity leads to a much stronger, healthier, and resilient community. It is not enough simply to reduce the burden of environmental health hazards for the socioeconomically challenged, rather we also need to facilitate the reaping of benefits of environmental amenities for all people. If we allow people to be awed by nature, they will find that nature is a gateway experience for attaining the virtues of gratitude and contentment.

My daughter, back in her school in the United States, recently had an end of the year “Fun Day” that consisted of an afternoon outside. It brought me back to the utedags they experienced in Sweden and the benefits of weekly outside days. The enhanced connection to nature aided in the development of positive character virtues for all the children. My son repeated a talk they had at his Swedish school relating the many types of trees in the forest that they could look around and see to the many types of people they could look around and see—and how a strong forest—and a strong classroom— results from diversity.



*The forest environment plays an important role in outdoor classrooms.*

The forest environment played an important role as he explained the class’s interaction with a peer. “He isn’t nice to people inside, but everyone likes him in the forest.” I’m not sure if the student in question was more positively received by

his peers due to a shift in the boy’s behavior or in the class’s response to his behavior. Regardless, nature aided in nurturing a better functioning class community and improved the character of the group. My daughter summed it up best: “It (being outside) makes you forget that you’re learning and you just get to play with your friends: people, trees, plants, and animals.” Nature is a wonderful classroom and a wonderful teacher,



nurturing virtues that make us more than keepers of Earth, but also keepers of people.

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*Dr. Adam Hoffman is an Associate Professor of Environmental Chemistry at the University of Dubuque. His background in aquatic biogeochemical cycling, passion for the environment, and desire to connect children to nature has led to an interest in the power of the out-of-doors. He directs the Chlapaty Summer Fellowship Program, aiding students in attaining their goals of graduate and/or professional school. As a member of the Wendt Advisory Board he helps promote a culture of character within the lives of the University of Dubuque's faculty, staff, and students. Upon retirement, which is still many years off, Adam plans to teach at a forest kindergarten.*

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Photos of Växjö Montessoriskola on pp. 63, 73, and 75 used with permission. Photo credit p. 72: Adam Hoffman

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, a growing body of evidence has also shown that compassion for one another and for future generations helps inspire concern for the environment. Social psychologist Stefan Pfattheicher and fellow researchers found that feelings of compassion towards people also promotes pro-environmental feelings activating the moral emotion of compassion (7).

<sup>2</sup> One large benefit in choosing pretty natural vistas over technology is the ability of nature to help us be more mindful, or aware and attune to the present. There are many ways to connect with nature, but research shows that the strongest connections are made when intentional activities involving being outdoors are done daily (Capaldi, Passmore, et al. 7). It can be as simple as a daily walk to work or school, or as involved as a trip to one of the 58 national parks. Buoyed by research that immune cell production is increased and that blood pressure is decreased, Japan has constructed 48 therapy trails to encourage the practice of forest bathing, immersing one's self in nature while mindfully engaging all five senses (Hansen et al. 851).

A common complaint leveled against millennials are that they are so engrossed in their virtual worlds that they are not engaged with the world around them. We need to help them realize the possibilities and benefits of connecting to the wilderness. A heightened sense of awareness results in an empathetic compassion useful in developing character. Barbaro and Pickett found that mindfulness has a positive connection to nature (140), adding strength to the

argument that a connection to nature impacts mindfulness should be a motivating call to arms in helping this group more completely develop character.

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