

ROOTING IN PLACE: CULTIVATING A RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE  
THROUGH CONNECTING TO EARTH-BASED ANCESTRAL PRACTICES

by

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## ABSTRACT

### Rooting in Place: Cultivating a Relationship with Nature Through Connecting to Earth-Based Ancestral Practices

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Although most Americans believe that climate change is real, fewer believe that it is currently affecting them. Understanding how Americans can develop a greater connection to nature is not only important for fostering greater advocacy for solutions to stop climate change, but also for helping its citizens to notice the changes to the environment happening around them. However, most research into connection with nature focuses on recreation in nature or environmental education initiatives. This research fills a gap in the literature by exploring a pathway to connection that is rarely studied. Relying on interviews with women who are actively learning about their ancestral, earth-based traditions, this research looks at how connecting to ancestral practices impacts the connection one feels with nature as a citizen of a land in which they are not indigenous, in this case white, American women of NW European descent. Semi-structured interviews were performed and were analyzed qualitatively. Four main themes emerged: 1) the formation of both inner and outer connections with nature, including animism; 2) the importance of community in learning about ancestral practices and fostering environmental actions; 3) the desire to share what they have learned with friends and family; and 4) religion as a hinderance to connection with nature. The types of nature connection were then analyzed using leverage points theory to determine if the connections made had the potential to lead to change on a societal level. Further research is needed to determine the role communities play in forming connections with nature, how other non-indigenous populations connect to nature through their own ancestral traditions, how sharing these traditions with children affects their connection with nature, and how the length of time studying ancestral traditions impacts nature connections.

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## CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

### **Background**

For over 10,000 years, possibly over 20,000 years according to some recent archaeological findings, Indigenous peoples have lived on the land that is now known as the United States (Bennett et al., 2021). During their long history here, the original inhabitants of this land have learned how to live on and with the land. They developed myths, traditions, and rituals to preserve the knowledge they gained and pass it on to the next generation along with a respect for the land and pathways to forming reciprocal relationships with the land.

However, because of settler colonialism, many inhabitants of the US have no ancestors that have lived in connection to this land for thousands of years nor have they developed reciprocal relationships with this land. And it shows. Environmental degradation can be found across the United States today – from brownfields and Superfund sites to water polluted from farming and mining, to air pollution from petrochemical plants and the burning of fossil fuels. This environmental destruction has occurred under the leadership of Americans with European ancestry, and today European Americans still hold most of the power in the government and most of the leadership positions in the private sector.

If European Americans had a relationship and respect for the lands that make up the United States, would the destruction stop? Would climate change be addressed more quickly and with greater resources? How can European Americans develop reciprocal relationships with the lands where they now live? Indigenous people have deep ties to this land that cannot be quickly replicated, nor can European Americans appropriate the traditional ecological knowledge of

tribes and Alaska Natives to form reciprocal relationships to the land. What options exist for European Americans to form an attachment to and respect for this land?

One possible solution for European Americans, or any citizen not indigenous to the lands of the US, is to connect to their own ancestral wisdom and knowledge. Europeans have ancestral rituals and traditions that predate Christianity's influence over the region and are rooted in the lands of their indigeneity. Most of these rituals and traditions, often referred to as paganism, were passed down orally and therefore much of the information about their early practice has been lost. The spread of Christianity through the region also diminished the practice of these traditions as Christianity coopted many pagan practices in the hopes of encouraging Europeans to adopt a Christian worldview (Hutton 1996). From the knowledge that has been preserved about pagan rituals and traditions, we know that although these practices vary from one place to another, they share similarities: connecting people to their ancestors, celebrating the harvests and seasons, and having elements of animism.

European Americans who immigrated to the land now known as the United States have mostly left behind the practice of ancestral traditions and rituals that are tied to their European ancestors. However, pockets of European Americans do practice their ancestral traditions. Others continue to learn more about them. My research seeks to understand how connecting to these ancestral rituals and traditions might provide a way for European Americans to form reciprocal relationships and connections with nature in their new homelands in the United States. To accomplish this goal, I attended Nourishing Kin gatherings from June 2022 until March 2023 and then interviewed other women who had also attended these gatherings.

## *Nourishing Kin*

Nourishing Kin is a collective of women and femmes of Northwestern European descent that hold gatherings every six to eight weeks to celebrate the sabbats, or festivals, of the pagan Wheel of the Year. The group is facilitated by four women who organize the events, lead discussions about ancestral practices, and teach about and demonstrate ancestral crafts, rituals, and traditions. Some of the traditions we engaged with during the gatherings included dancing around the maypole, making flower crowns and besoms (brooms), taking a cold plunge, crafting Brigit's crosses, eating hot cross buns, carving rutabagas and turnips, and creating torches out of sticks, beeswax, and herbs. We also lit fires, danced and sang, shared communal meals, discussed the seasons of the year and their influence on the lives of our ancestors, and listened to the stories and myths of Northwestern Europe. The gatherings took place mostly outdoors during spring, summer, and fall in and around the Salt Lake valley in Northern Utah. During the cold winter months – mainly the celebrations of Yule (December) and Imbolc (February) – gatherings were held indoors at the house of one of the members of the collective with a small portion of time spent outside in their backyard.

Nourishing Kin was formed as a way for the women of Northwestern European diaspora to connect to their ancestral wisdom with the hope of restoring reciprocal relationships with the land, and ancestors, and community. The women who created the group wanted to address the consequences of culture loss, which include the loss of a sense of belonging, responsibility, and skills, that come with separation from the lands of one's ancestors, and they wanted to do it in a way that is culturally sensitive and non-appropriative. These gatherings also support women in the deconstruction of the white supremacy, colonization, and anthropocentrism in themselves so they can build healthy communities and relationships. The intention behind this collective is to

“cultivate confident community members who embrace the roles and responsibilities of humble students of the land, ancestors, and community” (Nourishing Kin, 2024, 8<sup>th</sup> slide in 2/15/24 post).

### **Significance of Research**

The authors of *The Nature of Americans National Report* (Case et al., 2017) found that Americans have lost a close connection to nature, while recent polling by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs found that Americans experience less concern about how climate change impacts them now than they did three years ago (AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2022). Finding ways to reconnect people to nature has the potential to reverse this decrease in concern about the effects of climate change, lead to increased action to mitigate climate change, and improve the current and future health of the earth and its inhabitants (Bratman et al., 2012; Capaldi, Dopko, & Zelenski, 2014; Liu et al., 2022; Pereira and Forster, 2015; Scannell and Gifford, 2013; Zylstra et al., 2014). Studies have shown that connection to nature increases the likelihood of pro-environmental behavior, therefore identifying ways to connect people to nature is extremely important to lessening the impacts of climate change and decreasing environmental destruction (Dong et al., 2020; Geng et al., 2015; Mackay & Schmitt, 2019; Mayer & Franz, 2004; Nesbit, Zelenski, & Murphy, 2009; Schultz, 2001; Whitburn, Linklater, & Abrahamse, 2019). Several research projects have examined various environmental education programs and recreational activities that foster a connection to nature (Baird et al., 2022; Barthel et al., 2018; Collado, Staats, & Corraliza, 2013; Kane & Kane, 2011; Otto & Pensini, 2017; Tonge et al., 2015; Whitburn, Linklater, & Milfont, 2018). My research can advance the scholarship concerning human connection to nature through studying one possible

way of reconnecting European Americans to place and nature that has received less attention – through learning about and participating in earth-based ancestral practices and rituals.

### **Statement of Positionality**

My research involves interviewing women who are actively learning more about their European ancestors and their rituals and celebrations through participation in Nourishing Kin circles. These women all live in Utah and have some connection to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (a.k.a. Mormons) - either as former members of the church (most women) or currently active members of the church. The majority are white European-American women although some are women of color with European and non-European ancestry. This group consists of a wide range of ages. I share most of these identities also – I am a white, European woman, a former member of the Mormon church, and a participant in the Nourishing Kin circles; however, I do not live in Utah. Although a few women of color with non-European ancestry participate in this group, I am not studying the ancestral practices of their non-European ancestors. At the same time, I recognize that my experiences as a white woman with European ancestry will be different than theirs as women of color with European ancestry.

## CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Introduction**

This research explores one possible way that European Americans can form an attachment to their new homelands and develop respect and care for the land they now occupy – connecting with their own ancestral wisdom and traditions. In this literature review, I will first discuss the earth-based rituals and traditions that are associated with the pagan Wheel of the Year. I will then discuss the theories surrounding ritual and the role it plays in our lives. Rituals and ceremonies have been used throughout human history to pass down knowledge and to teach people how to interact with one another and their environment (Stephenson, 2015). Rituals can also change and be adapted over time as new information is learned and needs to be passed down or as people move from one area to another (Bell, 2009). Ritual is also a way to make a place sacred (Kimmerer, 2015). Connecting to ancestral rituals and traditions can therefore provide a roadmap to creating rituals and traditions that connect European Americans to their new land and help them to develop a reciprocal relationship with it.

Next, I will talk about the different types of connections that humans form with nature, what types of activities foster the formation of those connections, and how connections with nature impact pro-environmental behaviors. I will then move into a review of the literature on using leverage points theory in a sustainability context. I will end my literature review with a brief discussion of how ancestral traditions, ritual, connections with nature and leverage points theory intersect – how rituals, learned from ancestral traditions, can be used to form connections with nature and create a culture of care for the environment.

## Wheel of the Year

“They do not think it in keeping with the divine majesty to confine gods within walls or to portray them in the likeness of any human countenance. Their holy places are woods and groves, and they apply the names of deities to that hidden presence which is only seen by the eye.”

-Tacitus, Roman historian describing pre-Christian European animistic cultures

The Wheel of the Year (WOY), as practiced today, is a modern construct inspired by the earth-based Pagan festivals of the Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and Germanic cultures found in the British Isles and NW Europe (Scandinavia, Denmark, and Northern Germany) (Duckett, 2010). Paganism refers to a “nature-venerating religion” that seeks to live in harmony with the rhythm of the seasons and consists of the following characteristics: 1) polytheism; 2) nature is a “manifestation of divinity”, not a fallen creation; 3) the recognition of a divine feminine in addition to or instead of a male deity (Jones & Pennick, 1995, p. 2). Therefore, the WOY is made up of celebrations that marked the changing seasons and cycles of the year. It consists of eight festivals: four solar festivals that fall near the solstices and equinoxes and four cross-quarter day fire festivals that fall in between the solstices and equinoxes (Table 1).



**Table 1.**

*The festivals or Sabbats of the Wheel of the Year*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Festival</b>	<b>Event</b>
31 October	Samhain/All Hallows Eve	Fire festival/cross quarter day
21 December	Yule/Midwinter	Solstice
1 February	Imbolc/Candlemas	Fire festival/cross quarter day
21 March	Ostara/spring	Equinox
1 May	Beltane/May Day	Fire festival/cross quarter day
21 June	Midsummer	Solstice
1 August	Lughnasadh/Lammas	Fire festival/cross quarter day
21 September	Mabon/Michaelmas	Equinox

*Note.* The festivals or Sabbats of the Wheel of the Year (Cornish, 2024, p. 47), where the festivals are organized according to the date hosted and the event type annually.

Jacob Grimm is credited with first suggesting the modern-day Wheel of the Year in 1835 in his book *Teutonic Mythology*, while Ross Nichols, a practitioner of modern Druidry, and Gerald Gardner, a modern Wiccan, collaborated to create the form of the wheel currently used among modern Pagans or Neopagans (Mark, 2019; Starza, 2023). However, finding written sources that describe the specific festivals and traditions of the pre-Christian Pagans is difficult because they preferred “the oral transmission of ancestral wisdom and vision through stories and songs” and because Christianity has sought to repress pagan traditions for close to two thousand years (Metzner, 1994, p. 93). Therefore, no evidence exists to suggest that all eight festivals or Sabbats of the WOY were celebrated by any one group of ancient peoples and historical evidence for some of the festivals’ existence among pre-Christian Pagan cultures are scant (Duckett, 2010; Hutton, 1996). Instead, the WOY is an amalgamation of different festivals once

celebrated by different groups of people across NW Europe and the British Isles at some point in history.

Although the evidence for specific festivals is difficult to find, archaeologists have affirmed that old European cultures celebrated the seasons and cycles of nature:

*In Neolithic Europe and Asia Minor – in the era between 7000 B.C. and 3000 B.C. – religion focused on the wheel of life and its cyclical turning. This is the geographic sphere and the time frame I refer to as Old Europe. In Old Europe, the focus of religion encompassed birth, nurturing, growth, death, and regeneration, as well as crop cultivation and the raising of animals. The people of this era pondered untamed natural forces, as well as wild plant and animal cycles, and they worshipped goddesses, or a goddess, in many forms. (Gimbutas, 1999, p. 3)*

Below, I will briefly describe each festival on the WOY. Although evidence points to the Wheel of the Year beginning with Samhain in Northern Europe (Jones & Pennick, 1995), I will begin my discussion with the festival that began the Nourishing Kin gatherings – Beltane.

### *Beltane*

The earliest mention of Beltane occurs in an early medieval Irish book that mentions a fire festival that took place around the first of May or the beginning of summer (Hutton, 1996). During this festival, cattle were driven between two fires to protect them while they were out in their summer pastures. The fires were also thought to protect and bless the humans who leapt through their flames – pregnant women walked through flames to ensure a healthy delivery; girls leapt through the fires in the hopes of getting a good husband; men facing a hazardous task or going on long journeys would jump through the flames to ensure their success. In addition to the protection the flames offered, plants - like primrose, hawthorn, marshmallow, or rowan - were hung or scattered near doors to protect inhabitants from bad magic and around the cows and milk and butter making equipment for protection (Hutton, 1996).

Over the years, other traditions were incorporated into the celebration of Beltane and are still included in the festival today. The use of foliage and blossoms for protection grew into a tradition called “Garlanding”. Garlands large and small were created from leaves and blooms—the most popular being hawthorn. The garlands were used to decorate buildings, houses, and the masts of fishermen’s boats; to create a figure known as Jack-in-the-Green (see Fig. 1); and to make money for young women who would sell them to wealthier residents (Hutton, 1996; Starza, 2023). Garlands were also used to decorate the maypoles that began to be erected in towns sometime in the sixteenth century. People danced around the poles in celebration of the coming summer and warmer days. Only later, however, did the modern version of the maypole, with ribbons hanging down from the top of the pole, become the standard along with the dance around the maypole that weaves the ribbons together (Hutton, 1996).

**Figure 1.**

*Jack in the Green*



*Note.* Jack-in-the-Green at a celebration in Hastings England (photo by Hastings Traditional Jack in the Green Charity).

*Litha (Summer Solstice)*

Evidence suggests that Litha, also known as Midsummer or the summer solstice, has been celebrated since prehistoric, pre-Christian times by Europeans (Hutton, 1996). Bonfires

played an integral role in celebrating the longest day of the year. Lighting fires at this time occurred just before the season when crops were most vulnerable to blight and weather; livestock were more susceptible to disease; and increases in insect populations made humans more likely to get sick from bubonic plague, typhus, and malaria (Hutton, 1996). The fires were thought to offer purification, protection, and blessings to crops, livestock, and humans. Fires were carried around the fields and through the streets “with the belief that smoke, ashes, embers, or torches from them would bless humans, animals, and crops alike” (Hutton, 1996, p.319).

Besides bringing blessings, fires, along with plants, were used to celebrate the sun and its strength. Wheels with spokes, an ancient symbol of the sun in Europe, were lit with flames and rolled down hills (See Fig. 2) (Hutton, 1996; Jones & Pennick, 1995). These spoked wheels were historically constructed with four spokes, although in modern times the wheels sometimes consist of eight spokes to represent all the points on the WOY. If the flames were extinguished before the wheel reached the bottom of the hill, it signified that the harvest that year would be poor (Hutton, 1996). Just as at Beltane, plants that were in season, like green birch, long fennel, St. John’s Wort, and white lilies, were hung over doorways, and it was believed that plants gathered on Litha had special medicinal properties (Hutton, 1996; Starza, 2023).

**Figure 2.**

*Spoked Wheel on Fire*



*Note.* Spoked wheel on fire being rolled down a hill on Litha (photo by Arthur George).

*Lammas or Lughnasadh*

Scant evidence exists of how Lammas (Anglo-Saxons) and Lughnasadh (Celtic) were celebrated in pre-Christian times, but both are harvest festivals that occurred on August 1. The name Lammas is believed to be derived from the Anglo-Saxon word *hlaef-mass* which means ‘loaf mass’, while Lughnasadh gets its name from the Celtic deity Lugh. August 1 was the first day that grains and potatoes would be harvested from the fields, the final day of summer grazing for sheep and cattle, and the first day that sheep would be sheared (Hutton, 1996; Jones & Pennick, 1995).

Fires did not play an important role in the harvest festivals of August. Instead, grain played a crucial role in the festivities. In Ireland, Lughnasadh celebrations involved cutting the



first corn, taking it to a high place, and burying it in the ground, after which a meal made from the harvest along with foraged bilberries was shared by everyone (MacNeill, 1962). In England and Scotland, Lammas festivities included reaping the first grains and baking them into a loaf of bread that would then be broken into four pieces and spread in the four corners of a barn to prepare it for the harvest that would be stored there (Hutton, 1996). Other traditions during this time include foraging for berries and making straw figures from the stalks of wheat or other grain (See Fig. 3) (Roud, 2008).

**Figure 3.**

*Corn Dolly*



*Note.* ‘Corn Dolly’ from a Lamas celebration. (photo by Stitch Witch).

*Mabon*

Mabon is the last sabbat of the WOY and occurs around the time of the Autumn Equinox, although no ancient festival by that name exists. Instead, the name began to be used in 1970’s and comes from the Welsh deity of the same name (Starza, 2023). Although no specific festival called Mabon existed, there were harvest festivals taking place all over Northern Europe during the month of September. Harvest time in an agricultural society was one of the most important

times of the year – if they didn't harvest all they could, people in these societies risked famine and death. Harvesting the fields required lots of physical labor and hard work, so customs arose to celebrate those working hard in the fields and to lift their spirits and allow for some fun during this time of intense labor (Roud, 2008). These celebrations involved drinking, dancing, fairs, traveling musicians, and games along with harvest feasts to give thanks for the bounty of the fields and the workers who harvested the crops (Hutton, 1996). Most of the recorded knowledge about harvest festivals occurs after the introduction of Christianity, however “the feeling persists in different forms that the season belongs to older deities as well...Nobody has doubted that Manhardt was correct in his demonstration that nineteenth-century European peasant harvest rites had much in common with those of ancient antiquity” (Hutton, 1996 p. 346-47).

### *Samhain*

Samhain signified the end of summer and the beginning of the new year in medieval Ireland and occurred October 31 – November 1. At this point in the year, livestock had been brought in from the summer pastures; the grain harvest had been completed; warfare and trading had ceased; and the season of cold and confinement had begun for humans and animals (Hutton, 1996; Jones & Pennick, 1995). Although Samhain was a Celtic festival, the changing of seasons, both from winter to summer and summer to winter, across the British Isles was “regarded as a time when fairies witches were especially active, and magical devices were required to guard against them” (Hutton, 1996 p. 365).

As such, local festivities existed around this time all over the British Isles but under different names. In Wales, the night known as ‘Nos Galan Gaea’ occurred during this time and was considered the year’s most frightening night when spirits came out and certain places like



churchyards and crossroads were to be avoided because spirits were thought to hang out there (Hutton, 1996). In the Shetland Isles, they called this night ‘Hallowmas’ and thought that trolls came out at this time to destroy crops and cattle (Hutton, 1996). Bonfires were used all over Ireland, Wales, and Scotland to ward off the supernatural forces thought to exist on this night and to offer protection. Other measures of protection were employed by each individual region such as hanging a cross of sticks woven with straw over doorways in Southern Ireland; making a charm of fire, iron, and salt on the coasts of Connacht; and carrying burning peat around houses and barns on the island of South Uist (Danaher, 1972; Hutton, 1996).

However, there is much debate among scholars whether these festivals have pagan origins or whether this day had anything to do with the dead. After extensive research, Hutton (1996) concluded that “there seems to be no doubt that the opening of November was the time of a major pagan festival which was celebrated, at the very least, in all those parts of the British Isles which had a pastoral economy. At most, it may have been general among the ‘Celtic’ peoples” (p. 369-70). On the other hand, the inclusion of honoring the dead into Samhain celebrations seems to be a more modern occurrence with little evidence of ancient roots. Evidence exists that suggests that these societies did have festivals that honored the dead but not that they occurred around the first of November (Hutton, 1996).

#### *Yule or Midwinter. (Winter Solstice)*

Yule, from the Scandinavian word ‘Jule’, became associated with winter solstice celebrations in the thirteenth century (Hutton, 1996; Starza, 2023). However, evidence of pagan celebrations around the winter solstice predate this time. Ancient megalithic monuments, like Newgrange in Ireland and Stonehenge in England, were constructed in a way that aligns with the

midwinter sun and allows it to shine through certain passages (Hutton, 1996; Starza, 2023). The specifics of how the solstice might have been celebrated at these sites have been lost to time, but many modern pagans travel to these sites to watch the sunrise and set as part of their solstice celebrations.

A common thread among the pagan festivals is the use of greenery as decoration, and Yule is no different. As in other celebrations of the WOY, whatever plants are in season at the time of the festival play a part in the festivities. In winter, evergreen shrubs and plants like holly, ivy, mistletoe, and juniper are used as part of the celebrations, although in different ways. One tradition familiar to us in modern times involves making boughs of mistletoe, called a 'kissing bush', and hanging them from the ceiling (Hutton, 1996). Holly and ivy are used to decorate in the interiors of houses. In pre-modern times ivy was thought to invite abundance and love into a home, while holly was considered to bring protection and good luck, although bringing holly into the house at any other time besides midwinter was considered bad luck (Hutton, 1996; Starza, 2023). Juniper was burned in rituals, known as 'saining', to protect people and cattle from the evil thought to be loose in the darkness of winter (Hutton, 1996).

Other traditions associated with midwinter include Yule logs and wassailing. Yule logs are still used in celebrations today, but in the past, they were lit as both a practical way to bring light into the house on dark winter days and to attract prosperity in the new year. Lads would search for the largest log they could find so that the fire would last all day. When they returned, they were rewarded with all the drink they wanted. The Yule log was lit while music was playing, and a remnant of last year's log was thrown into the flames to burn along with the new log (Hutton, 1996). Another tradition that takes place at this time of year is wassailing. There are two separate activities, both involving singing, that are referred to as wassailing. One involves

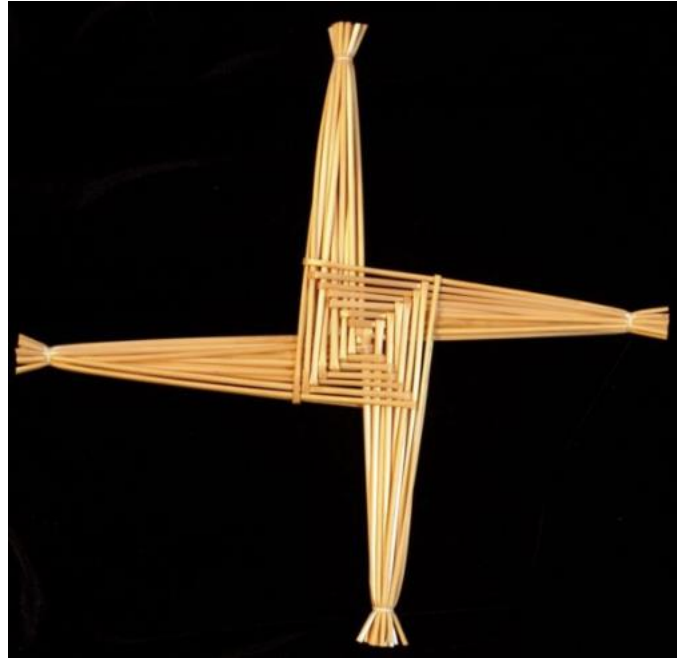
singing to the fruit trees in an orchard to encourage a good harvest in the new year, while the other centers around groups of singers who travel from house to house singing and receiving gifts of food, cider, and sometimes money in return (Hutton, 1996).

### *Imbolc*

Imbolc occurs at the beginning of February and started as a festival in pre-Christian Ireland to celebrate the first milking of the ewes at the early beginnings of spring (Hutton, 1996; Jones & Penninck, 1995). Imbolc also honors the Celtic goddess of healing, poetry, and smithcraft, Brigit. Little is known about how pre-Christian Celts celebrated this festival and early mentions of it in mediaeval literature only speak briefly of the existence of the festival but no details about what rites took place during Imbolc. However, at some point crosses, known as Brigit's crosses (see Fig. 4), and figures made from straw and rushes were used to honor Brigit and gain her favor and protection over the coming year (Hutton, 1996). Brigit's crosses hung over the door at Imbolc remain there throughout the year to protect the home and its inhabitants. They are taken down and replaced a year later on Imbolc by a newly crafted Brigit's cross (Hutton, 1996).

**Figure 4.**

*Brigit's Cross*



*Note.* Brigit's cross made from straw for Imbolc (photo by Amber Reifsteck)

*Ostara or Spring Equinox*

Ostara is celebrated around the spring equinox and occurs at a time when farmers were plowing, sowing, and caring for livestock. Ostara gets its name from the goddess Eostre. However, there is much debate around whether this goddess was actually worshipped by ancient peoples. The only mention of her is by the Venerable Bede, a monk in the eighth century, whose writings about early pagan practices have often been called into question because he openly admits that most of his conclusions are his own interpretations and not based on facts (Hutton, 1996). The name of this goddess comes from the Anglo-Saxon word 'easter', and it's likely that the word has more of an association with the season of spring itself rather than a goddess (Starza,

2023). Without this deity, there is little evidence that pre-Christian people celebrated a festival at this time. On the other hand, so few of the customs from pre-Christian times has been preserved in writing that it becomes impossible to know whether ancient peoples in NW Europe engaged in festivities around the spring equinox.

Certain symbols associated with this time of year do have roots in pagan cultures. Bunnies or hares were considered sacred in ancient British tribes and were often associated with the beginning of spring because hares were known to be extremely fertile and, therefore, they represented the bounty of springtime (Jones, 1987; Jones & Pennick, 1995). Eggs have been associated with birth, fertility, rebirth, and the essence of life itself since ancient times among people across the globe (Andrews, 2000). Coloring and decorating eggs during springtime has occurred in multiple cultures around the world for thousands of years and continues to this day (Smith & Daniel, 2000). In certain parts of the British Isles and Scandinavia, eggs are rolled down hillsides in a competition to see whose egg rolls the farthest without cracking (Hutton, 1996). Eggs are also used to make the hot cross buns (see Fig. 5) that are shared and eaten at this time of year. The cross mark on top has ancient origins tied to the religious offerings of bread which replaced earlier offerings of blood (Davidson, 1999). Other traditions happening around this time include large feasts, cleaning the home and decorating with flowers, and burying cakes in the ground to encourage a good harvest (Hutton, 1996).

**Figure 5.**

*Hot Cross Buns*



*Note.* Hot cross buns made for Ostara (photo by Kate Schat).

In the next section, I will discuss how rituals, like the one associated with the Wheel of the Year, create a sense of sacredness, strengthen communities, and attach meanings to specific places and things.

**Ritual and its role in human life**

Over the years, scholars have struggled to define exactly what ritual is. Ritual is difficult to define because it is inherently ambiguous and can take many different forms (Muir 2005). Rituals can range from consisting of mostly words to relying mostly on actions, although most fall somewhere in between (Tambiah, 1985). The cultural, archaeological, and biological records all indicate that rituals have occurred throughout time among different societies across the globe, including animal societies (Stephenson, 2015). Linguistic studies have found some equivalent to

the word ritual in a broad spectrum of cultures and societies around the world (Strausberg, 2006). On the other hand, some scholars believe that ritual doesn't exist anywhere and is instead just a scholarly invention. Catherine Bell (1992) believes ritual doesn't exist because it "is not an intrinsic, universal category or feature of human behavior" (p.141).

Many scholars, however, find the concept of ritual to be real and useful in studying human behavior. Emile Durkheim (1947) studied ritual in a religious context and saw rituals as a way to point towards things considered sacred as opposed to things considered profane. Kimmerer (2015) goes a step further in declaring that the ritual itself makes things sacred. Ritual has the power to make things sacred because it imbues meanings to places, things, words, and actions in specific contexts (Geertz, 1975; Lévi-Strauss, 1970; Muir, 2005; Tambiah, 1985; Turner, 1969). For example, as a child, when I would drink grape juice during the week, it was just ordinary juice, but when I drank grape juice on Sundays as part of communion at church, it became a representation of the blood that Christ shed so that I could be forgiven of my sins. Grape juice was transformed from something mundane into something sacred through ritual.

Others see ritual as a narrative enactment used to tell stories about ourselves, our culture, and our ancestors (Geertz, 1975; Smith, 1987; Tambiah, 1985). Rituals provide both a mirror of society as it currently is and a model of what it could become (Geertz, 1975; Muir, 2005). Driver (1998) expresses a similar sentiment of ritual being a mirror when he discusses ritual as presenting a pathway of behavior and action to take in the world. Droogers (2005), on the other hand, portrays ritual as "the playful creation of a relevant alternative reality" which has "its own parameters and invites cultural experiments" (p. 139), or in other words a model of what could be. Smith (1987) reminds us that ritual also helps us to look to the past and connects us to our ancestors as we repeat the stories and ceremonies that have been passed down through the years.

Smith (1987) observes that we “rupture” the connection to our ancestors “though the human act of forgetfulness” (p.13). Ritual fosters our relationship to ancestors by helping us to remember.

Although the definition of the term ritual varies throughout the literature, the scholars writing about ritual do agree on one thing – rituals appeal to our emotions and make us feel (Driver, 1998; Muir, 2005; Kertzer ,1988; Rappaport, 1979; Smith, 1987). Muir (2005) explains that “rituals give access to emotional states that resist expression in language” (p. 2).

Participation in rituals engenders emotional responses in part because it appeals to our senses (Muir, 2005; Kertzer, 1988). I experienced this appeal to my senses when I participated in my first Native Kin circle. We performed the ritual of dancing around the maypole as part of our celebration of Beltane. Laughter and singing rang in my ears along with the sound of my heartbeat as we circled the maypole. My eyes gazed upon the beautiful colors of the flower crowns on the heads of the other women around me weaving in and out and up and down as we braided the ribbon around the pole. I smelled the rain held in the gray clouds above us and felt the mist softly on my skin when the droplets finally fell to the earth. I can also recall the feeling of the smooth ribbon held in my hand and the dry, poky grass beneath my feet. At the end of the ritual, I had an overall feeling of joy, awe, and contentedness along with a feeling of amazement that we had actually been successful at braiding the ribbon around the pole.

Ritual can also unify a group of people as well as “provide a powerful way in which people’s social dependence can be expressed” (Durkheim, 1947). This group cohesion occurs through taking part in rituals in unison – repeating the same gestures and speaking the same words together at the same time (Durkheim, 1947). Rituals generate a feeling of union among participants by decreasing the sense of separation one feels from others (Rappaport, 1979). Gathering to perform rituals creates an opportunity for “mutual participation” not found in other



areas of modern society (Driver, 1998). Other scholars see ritual a little differently when applying it to creating group cohesion. They believe that ritual forges unity among conflict in a group – it unifies people around areas in which they have already found agreement and hones focus on the similarities of the group instead of the differences (Gluckman, 1962; Turner, 1969). In this sense, ritual’s importance in a society comes from its ability to create a feeling of cohesion even when conflicts exist (Kertzer, 1988; Muir, 2005).

Ritual surrounds us and plays a part in every human’s life. Each culture, society, and individual participate in rituals that are important to them – whether the ritual occurs every day or once in a blue moon. Humans have rituals around death, birth, marriage, national holidays, religion, anointing new leaders, how they begin the day – the list seems endless. The wide variety of rituals and their performance leads to difficulty in coming up with one universal definition. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will define ritual as collectively performed, repetitive actions (both words and deeds) that evoke emotions, transform the mundane into something sacred, and tell an ever-evolving story of ourselves and our ancestors.

### **Connectedness with Nature**

“Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect.”

- Chief Seattle

The concept of connection between humans and nature has been discussed using a variety of terms in academic literature – human-nature connectedness/connection (Ives et al., 2017; Barragon-Jason et al., 2022), connectedness/connection to/with nature (Baird et al., 2022; Gosling & Williams, 2010; Martin & Czellar, 2017; Mayer & Frantz, 2004; Pramova et al., 2021;

Richardson et al., 2019; Shultz, 2002; Tam, 2022; Zylstra et al., 2014), self-nature connection (Martin & Czellar, 2017), nature relatedness (Nisbet & Zelenski, 2013), intimacy with nature (Pyle, 2003), and nature connectedness/connection (Barragan-Jason et al., 2023; Mackay & Schmitt, 2019; Richardson et al., 2019). For my thesis, I will use the term “connectedness with nature” because the word “with” implies a two-way relationship between humans and nature whereas the word “to” indicates more of a one-way relationship. Also, when talking about “nature”, I define nature as anything in the biophysical world (e.g., flora, fauna, landforms) that is not human (Zylestra et al., 2014). Although this definition is problematic because it separates humans from the concept of nature, of which we are very much a part, in the context of discussing humanity’s disconnect from the non-human world around them, I need to make this distinction (Zylestra et al., 2014).

Understanding human connection with nature and how it develops can be difficult because it contains many dimensions. Shultz (2002) states that the “core of a connection with nature is cognitive” and that connectedness with nature “refers to the extent to which an individual includes nature within his/her cognitive representation of self” which “is a person’s thoughts and feelings about who they are” (p. 67). Other scholars add to this definition by including affective (emotional) and experiential (activities) dimensions as necessary for establishing a connection between humans and nature (Mayer & Franz, 2004; Nesbit et al., 2009; Pramova et al., 2021; Richardson et al., 2019; Zylstra et al., 2014). Affective connections include feelings of joy and awe felt when in nature or feelings of concern brought about by learning about environmental destruction. Experiential connections occur when spending time in nature doing activities like hiking, gardening, swimming in a lake, or laying in the grass.

Ives et al. (2018) identify two additional aspects of connectedness with nature (CWN) in their review of the literature on human-nature connection - material (e.g. resource extraction) and philosophical (e.g. ontological frameworks) (Table 2). Material connections include using plants and animals found in nature for human needs like harvesting flowers to make flower crowns or picking a berry from a bush and eating it. Animism, the belief that non-human beings have spirits and are kin, is an example of a philosophical CWN.

**Table 2.**

*Traits of Connectedness*

Connection	Description	Analytical scale
Material	Consumption of goods/materials from nature (e.g., food, fibre)	Can be analysed for individuals or societies. Often connected to system characteristics. Needs to be spatially explicit (e.g., material flows within or between focal landscapes)
Experiential	Direct interaction with natural environments (e.g., parks, forests). Note that qualities of connections may vary substantially	Normally measured for individuals, but can be aggregated to the societal scale
Cognitive	Knowledge or awareness of the environment and attitudes/values towards nature	Individual
Emotional	Feelings of attachment to or empathy towards nature	Individual
Philosophical	Perspective or world view on what nature is, why it matters, and how humans ought to interact with it (e.g., master, participant, steward)	Relevant to individuals, as well as to dominant views at the societal scale

*Note.* Different traits of connectedness with nature and their analytical scale (Ives et al., 2018, p. 1391).

Zylestra et al. (2014) advocate for “spirituality” or “spirit” to also be included in any conceptualizations of the connection between humans and nature. Spirituality can be difficult to define, but Zylestra et al. (2014) describe it as a feeling of “aliveness” or that which inspires us. Beringer (2003) argues that humans’ relationship to nature cannot be fully described by the traditional avenues studied by psychology – affect, behavior, and cognition. In addition to these, the element of “spirit” needs to be recognized and understood to fully understand the depth of the connection humans can have with nature (Zylestra et al., 2014).

Zylestra et al. (2014) provide a robust definition of connectedness with nature (CWN) that I will be using to guide my research. They define CWN as “a stable state of consciousness comprising symbiotic cognitive, affective, and experiential traits that reflect, through consistent attitudes and behaviors, a sustained awareness of the interrelatedness between oneself and the rest of nature” (Zylestra et al. 2014, p. 126). I will however add material, philosophical, and spirit to the list of traits that comprise development of CWN.

So how do we grow a greater connection between humans and nature? Research has shown that informing people of environmental problems or providing a single experience with nature does not lead to a long term, stable connection with nature nor does it lead to increased conservation behaviors (Lumber et al., 2017; Nisbet & Zelenski, 2013; Toomey et al., 2017; Schultz, 2011; Zylestra et al., 2014). Recreating in nature often creates only a shallow CWN if it is not accompanied with changes in awareness (Pyle, 2003; Braun & Dierkes, 2017; Williams et al., 2018). Although brief exposure to nature through going outside for a few minutes or looking at photographs of nature can lead to temporary increases in connectedness (Mayer et al., 2009; Weinstein et al., 2009; Ryan et al., 2010), “in many contexts brief contact with nature may not be a strong enough manipulation to create a sense of oneness and deep sense of identity that fully

captures nature connection” (Mackay & Schmitt, 2019 p. 7). Research by Hamman & Ivztan (2016) supports this observation - they found no significant effect on pro-environmental behavior (PEB) when they had participants spend a few minutes outside every day for a month.

However, frequent time spent outside and in nature over long periods of time may lead to a greater feeling of connectedness with nature (Nisbet & Zelenski, 2013). Simply taking walks outside versus inside creates greater environmental concern in people (Nisbet & Zelenski, 2011). Length of time spent in outdoor environmental programs has been shown to impact CWN. Longer programs can build connections with nature through multiple pathways (e.g., experiential, emotional, and cognitive) and produce more long-term results (Baird et al., 2022). In their study of long-term outdoor programs, Baird et al. (2022) found that cognitive connection (specifically changes in awareness) was the strongest predictor of future PEB. Long-term CWN develops only after long interventions, with mindfulness practices, such as meditation and walking slowly and noticing what’s around you, showing some of the clearest positive effects on CWN according to a meta-analysis by Barragan-Jason et al. (2021).

Direct contact with nature does not have to occur in wilderness areas or outdoor places away from home to develop CWN. Spending time in private outdoor areas, whether a yard or a balcony of an apartment, also allows for development of CWN and leads to pro-environmental behaviors (Liu et al., 2022). Pyle (2003, p.206) posits that “small, humble habitats, especially in urban settings, can be as important as big reserves in awakening ‘biophilia’.” Biophilia is a hypothesis developed by Wilson (1984) that suggests that humans have developed an innate affection for nature and a need for contact with nature because humans evolved in a natural habitat. This affection for nature, although complex and impacted by sociocultural differences, is proposed to emerge from a biological connection in our genes. (Kellert & Wilson, 1993).

Therefore, exposure to natural environments, from which we evolved and formed biological connections to, provide benefits to our emotional and psychological wellbeing though positively supporting recovery from stress and negative emotional states (Gaekwad et al., 2022).

Affective associations may influence connection with nature to a greater extent than just purely experiential participation in outdoor activities. Although sensory engagement is necessary for developing CWN (Capaldi et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2020; Zylestra et al., 2014) and creation of emotional connection to nature develops from direct experiences with nature through our bodies (Zylestra et al., 2014), CWN requires more than just spending time in nature (Høyem, 2020). People also “need to notice and appreciate nature to build connectedness” (Pramova et al., 2021, p. 359). For example, including affective elements in outdoor education programs promote greater connection with nature in youth (Braun & Dierkes, 2017), whereas traditional outdoor adventure programs (e.g., camps that offer activities like canoeing, ropes courses and mountain biking) lacking this affective element have not been shown to increase nature connectedness (Williams et al., 2018). Researchers noted an increase in CWN in studies during which participants thought about their feelings of connectedness with nature over several weeks. (Collado, Staats, & Corraliza, 2013; Passmore & Holder, 2017; Richardson, Cormack, Robert & Underhill, 2016). Gosling & Williams (2010) also found that “emotional association with nature leads to an expanded sense of self and greater valuing of non-human species” and pro-environmental behaviors from their research among Australian farmers (p.298). The authors found that the more connected farmers felt to nature, the more likely they were to protect and replant native vegetation on their property.

Research has also highlighted the importance of bonding with nature during childhood (Pyle, 2003; Ives et al ,2017; Hughes et al., 2018). Although little data has been collected that

explores nature connection across someone's lifespan (Hughes et al., 2018; Richardson et al., 2019), the research available shows that "deep seated environment-related attitudes are acquired during childhood and persist through adulthood" (Ives et al., 2017 p. 111). The children who develop CWN come from families who "allowed them to explore nature freely, engaged in nature experiences with them or even taught them about nature (Cheng & Monroe 2012, p. 37). Therefore, developing CWN in adults without previous nature connections may be important to increasing CWN in children (Hughes et al., 2019). Hughes et al. (2019) found that CWN declines in teenage years, reaching its lowest point at 15-16 years of age, and they suggest that focusing on increasing CWN during the late teenage years may lead to a greater increase in CWN as an adult and more pro-environmental behaviors.

Time spent in nature is also important, but access to parks and reserves is often not enough to create intimacy with nature because of fences and mandatory paths (Pyle, 2003). CWN has a "different quality" when it is developed through experiences that are unstructured, creative, playful, and/or sensory driven (Zylestra et al., 2014). Pyle (2003) argues that vacant lots become more valuable than parks and reserves for forging true connection with nature among children because they provide an opportunity for intimacy with nature as children "explore, dig, prowl, play, catch, and ultimately discover, among indigenous plants and animals" (p.208). When children lack access to land without restrictions and free time to explore nature on their own, they will fail to form bonds to a particular place and will care less about the environment around them (Pyle 2003).

Building connections between humans and nature is important is because CWN has been shown to promote pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors (Liu et al., 2022; Mayer & Franz, 2004; Martin & Czellar 2017; Nisbet et al., 2009; Tam, 2022; Mackay & Schmitt, 2019;

Barragan-Jason et al., 2021). Pro-environmental behaviors (PEB) include such activities as purchasing products in reusable containers, choosing eco-friendly products over high-performing products, willingness to pay more for eco-friendly products, and donations to environmental charities (Martin & Czellar, 2017). Barragan-Jason et al. (2023) also found a positive correlation between CWN and nature conservation, especially when greater biodiversity is present and when nature-based mindfulness is practiced. As Pyle (2003) observed “people who care, may make choices to conserve; but people who don’t know, don’t even care. What is the extinction of a condor or an albatross to a child who has never known a wren?” (p. 207).

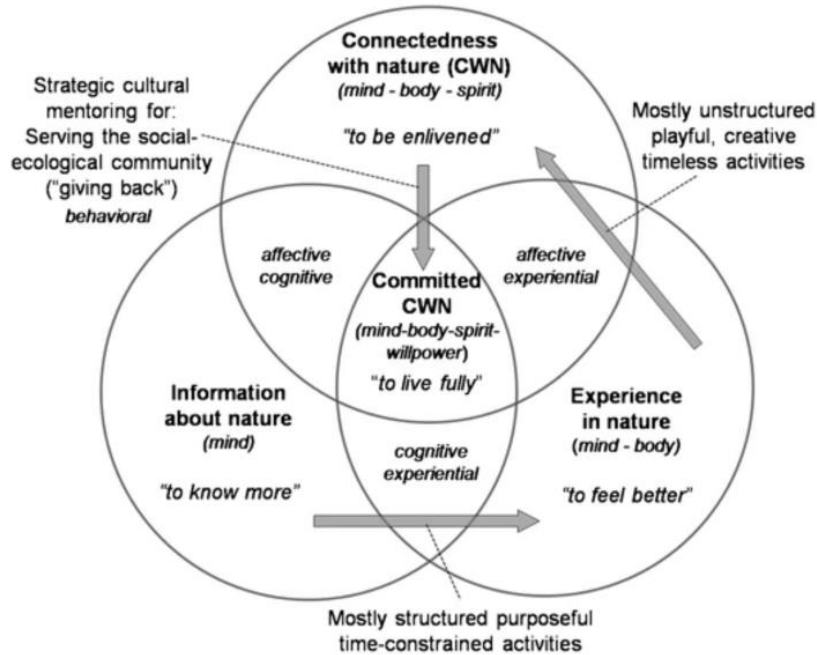
Schultz (2001) found that the degree to which one sees oneself as part of nature plays a big part in having concern for the state of the environment. The more connection one feels with nature, the more likely they are to protect it and support conservation efforts (Liu et al., 2022; Schultz, 2000; Zelenski et al., 2015). People who feel connected to nature may perceive threats to nature as more serious than those who feel disconnected from nature and therefore may be more likely to participate in PEB (Schmitt, Mackay, Droogendyk, & Payne, 2019; Schmitt, Aknin, Axsen, & Shwom, 2018). Just as important, emotional disconnection from nature can hinder efforts for conservation (Fletcher, 2016). Disconnection can lead to a “devaluation of nature, thereby legitimizing and facilitating destructive practices toward nature by individuals and societies” (Barragan-Jason et al., 2021). Although a number of studies find a correlation between CWN and PEB, few studies have looked at whether CWN causes an increase in PEB and those experiments that have looked at causation have provided mixed results (Mackay & Schmitt, 2019). However, in their meta-analysis, Mackay & Schmitt (2019) found “a small but significant effect, supporting the idea that nature connection has a causal effect on PEB”, although weaker than one might expect (p.7).



A shallow, transient connection with nature is not enough to create a populace that becomes adamant in being proactive about solving environmental problems and reversing climate change. The depth of the CWN matters, and “in many parts of the world...contemporary society lacks a widespread sense of intimacy with the living world” (Pyle, 2003, p. 207). Zylestra et al. (2014) provide a useful conceptual framework (Fig. 6) for how a deep connection to nature, which they call “Committed CWN”, forms. The key components of this conceptual framework include broad categories of how to connect with nature and which faculties they involve - *Information about nature (mind)*; *Experience in nature (mind and body)*; *Connectedness with nature (mind, body, and spirit)*; and *Committed CWN (mind, body, spirit, and willpower)*. Their framework emphasizes that “CWN requires balancing faculties of mind, body, and spirit (i.e., one’s source(s) of inspiration) to generate willpower aimed at actualizing ‘self’ and being of service to others” (Zylestra et.al, 2014 p.125). Jon Young, as quoted from personal communication in Zylestra et al. (2004), states that this deeper, committed connection to nature is best achieved in individuals “through an intentional process of being strategically mentored as part of a culturally embedded process” (p.125).

**Figure 6.**

*Conceptual framework of Committed Connectedness with Nature*



*Note.* The three-part Venn diagram represents the intersections of a person’s experience with nature, knowledge of nature, and connectedness with nature in overlapping perspectives and experiences. (Zylestra et al., 2014 p. 125).

The types of CWN previously discussed can fit into this framework. *Information about nature* describes cognitive connections. *Experience in nature* matches nicely with experiential connections but could also include material connections. Affective, philosophical, and spiritual connections fit in both the *CWN* and *Committed CWN* categories. In the next section, I will discuss further what types of nature connection have the potential to create societal change by reviewing literature that applies leverage points theory in a sustainability context.

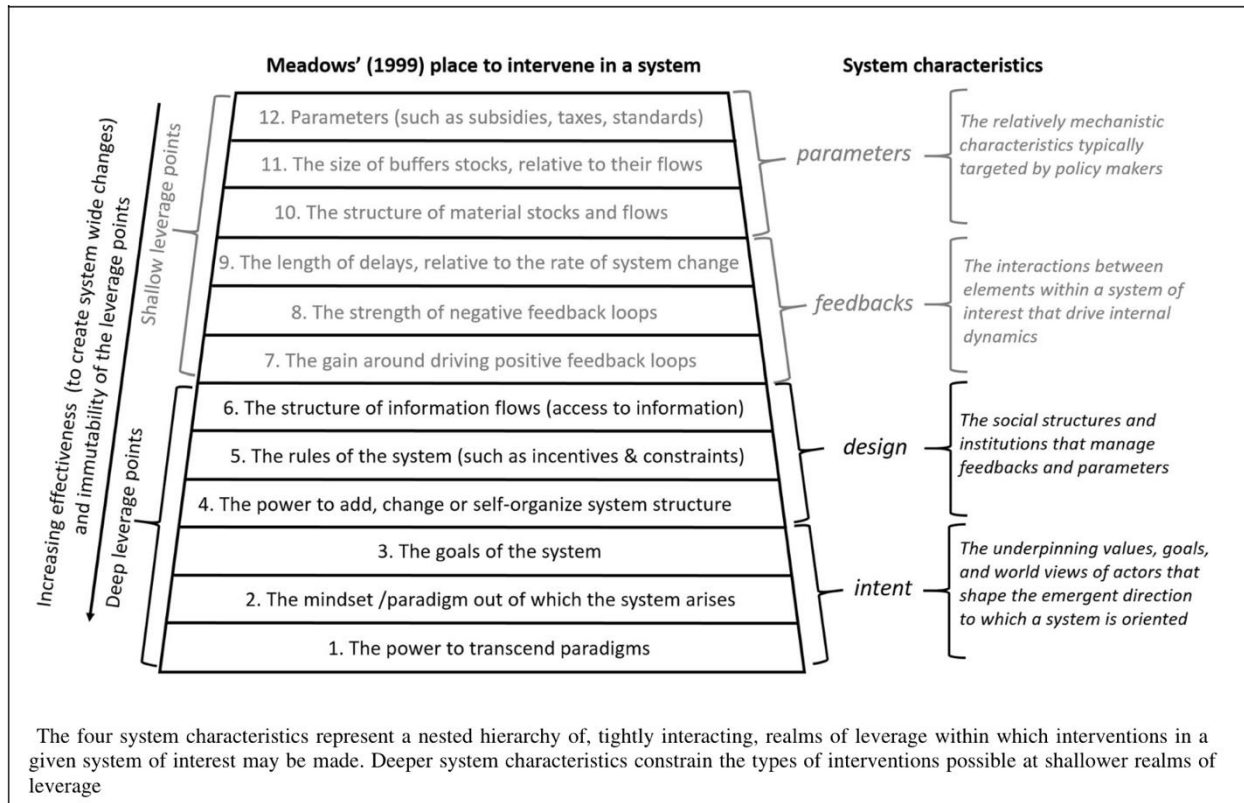
## **Leverage points**

Meadows (1999) proposed that changes in behavior in a complex system can occur when interventions are applied to certain “leverage points”. Meadows (1999) delineated twelve distinct leverage points, ranging from shallow to deep, where this change happens (see Fig. 7). Shallow leverage points refer to easily implemented interventions that create little change in a system, while deep leverage points involve harder to execute interventions that have the potential to produce transformational change (Abson et al., 2017; Meadows, 1999).

Abson et al (2017) divided these twelve leverage points into four broad types of characteristics in a system (listed in order from shallowest to deepest): parameters, feedback, design, and intent (see Fig. 7). The group of leverage points referred to as parameters contains the mechanistic characteristics of systems that policymakers typically focus on to try to change systems such as taxes, subsidies, and the structure of material stocks and flows. The feedback group includes points that target the interactions between elements of a system that affect internal dynamics. The leverage points housed in the design group address the social structures and institutions that govern the access of information, rules (such as incentives and constraints), and power in a system. The intent group consists of points that deal with the underlying goals and values that shape the emergent direction of a system and the world view from which they emerge (Abson et al., 2017).

**Figure 7.**

*Donella Meadows' Twelve Leverage Points*



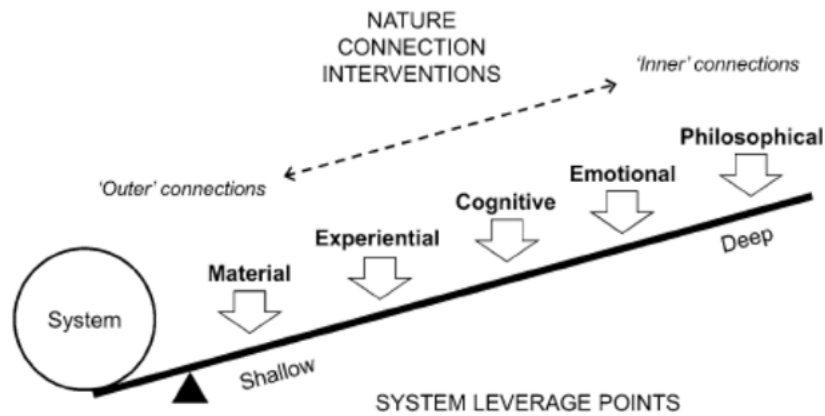
*Note.* Abson et al.'s (2017, p. 32) four characteristics of a system derived from Meadows' (1999) twelve leverage points.

Ives et al. (2018) took the idea of leverage points and applied it to a sustainability context (see Fig. 8). They performed a meta-analysis of connection with nature (CWN) literature and determined that there were five overall categories of nature connection – material, experiential, cognitive, emotional, and philosophical. Although “outer” connections, such as material and experiential, play a role in connection with nature and are crucial to system change, they play more of a supportive role because they address the parameters and feedback of a system rather

than the design, goals, and values of a system. Ives et al. (2018) determined that “internally-defined connections”, such as emotional responses to nature and philosophical perspectives, will more likely foster a societal shift towards greater sustainability because they “influence the underlying goals and values embodied in a system” and the design of the system itself (p. 1393). Therefore, deep leverage points for system change include the “inner” connections humans have with nature since they address the design, goals, and values of a system and are more effective at altering overall system behavior. Shallow leverage points include “outer” connections because changing the parameters of a system is limited by the design and goals of a system and as a result are less effective at changing the overall behavior of a system (Ives et al., 2018). Although not included in this model of leverage points, Ives et al. (2018) hypothesized that spirituality and religion might function as a deep leverage point since they have the potential to change people’s worldviews and values. However, this area is under-researched, and more studies need to be performed to determine whether spirituality can influence sustainability behaviors.

**Figure 8.**

*System Leverage Points for Nature Connection Interventions*

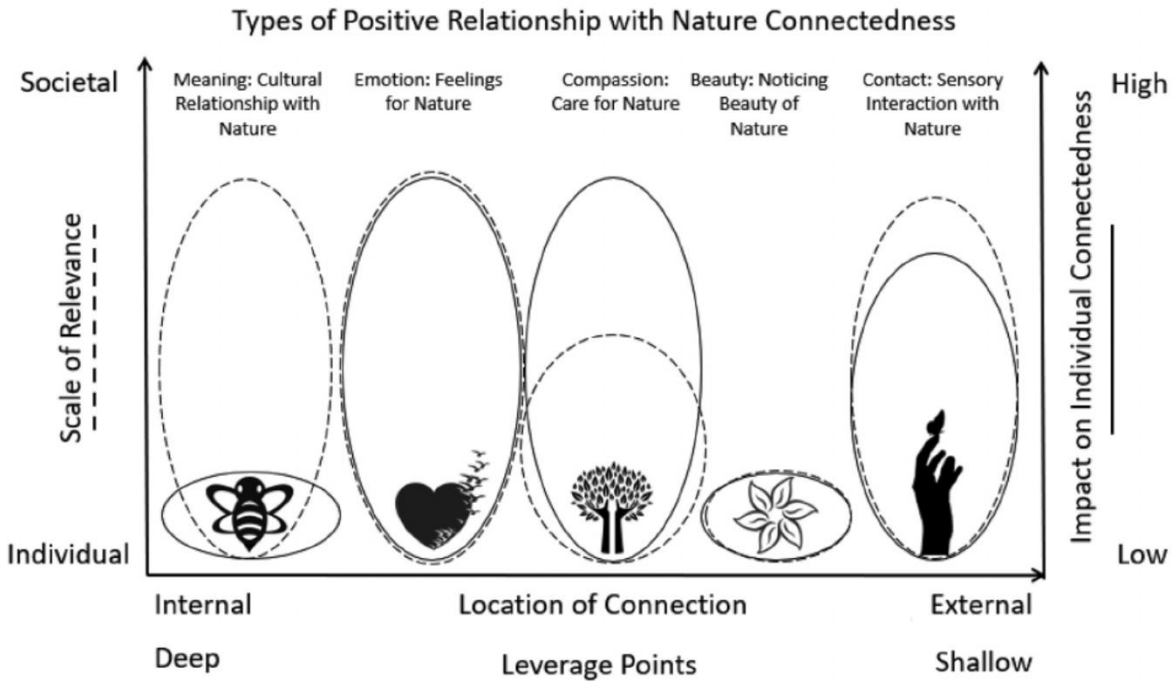


*Note.* Mechanisms of system change through interventions to connect humans with nature (Ives et al., 2018, p. 1393).

Richardson et al. (2020) provide a slightly different framework to describe the relationship between pathways to CWN and leverage points theory (see Fig. 9). They used the five “pathways to nature connectedness” - contact through the senses, emotion, beauty, meaning, and compassion - presented by Lumber et al. (2017) to describe which types of nature connection interventions have the greatest potential for transformational systemic change.

**Figure 9.**

*Pathways to Nature Connectedness*



*Note.* Pathways to Nature Connectedness and their scale of relevance and leverage. The solid ovals represent the statistical importance of each pathway on individual nature connectedness as calculated by Lumber et al. (2017). The dashed ovals represent the proposed scale of relevance as presented by Richardson et al. (2020, p.393).

Richardson et al. (2020) presented the pathways of meaning and emotion as deep leverage points, although Lumber et al. (2017) found that the meaning pathways had less influence on CWN than the other pathways to nature connection. They hypothesized that meaning showed less influence on CWN because in modern society “nature means less and less in people’s lives” (p. 394). However, they still believed in meaning as a deep leverage point because culture influences a society’s values and goals. The cultural representations of nature in a society influences individual connections with nature, whether for ill or good (Kenter et al., 2015). Compassion is presented in the middle between deep and shallow leverage points because other changes will likely need to occur first, like increasing CWN through meaning and emotion

before, compassion can become sustainable long term because it requires a personal commitment to acting (Richardson et al., 2020). Beauty was considered more of a shallow leverage point because it does not have much of a direct effect on CWN, but it does work well together with other pathways to increase CWN (Lumber et al., 2017; Richardson et al., 2015). The authors presented contact as a shallow leverage point because contact does not always lead to an increase in CWN (Shultz and Tabanico, 2007; Williams et al., 2018). Nature needs to be experienced in the “right way” to increase CWN. This includes activities that foster sensory experiences and evoke emotions rather than centering on physical activity or just information sharing alone (Richardson et al., 2020). Richardson et al. (2020) suggested that these “pathways to nature connectedness” should be considered when designing interventions such as cultural events, nature experiences, environmental education, policy planning, and public relations campaigns to encourage more pro-environmental behaviors. Knowledge of how these different leverage points interact with and influence one another and bring about system change is necessary in order to know which interventions will be most effective at transforming systems to halt environmental degradation and adapt to changing environmental conditions (Riechers et al., 2021, Richardson et al., 2020).

I plan to use the frameworks developed by both Ives et al. (2018) and Richardson et al. (2020) to analyze the activities that took place during the Native Kin circles. I believe the two can be used together because I do not believe that either framework contradicts the other. In both frameworks, meaning/philosophical and emotion are considered the deepest leverage points. Although the leverage points directly in the middle, cognitive and compassion, do have different meanings, they can both be points in the middle because neither has an equivalent on the other scale that is located in a different place as a leverage point, so no conflict exists when placing



both points in the middle. The only place where the two diagrams do not line up exactly is where the shallow leverage points occur. Ives et al. (2018) placed material as the shallowest leverage point and experiential as the next to shallowest point. However, Richardson et al. (2020) placed contact as the shallowest leverage point and beauty as the next to shallowest point. For the purposes of this research, I will agree with Ives et al. that experiential connections, and therefore contact on the other scale, should be the next to shallowest leverage points and therefore material and beauty will occupy the shallowest leverage points. I feel comfortable in doing this because the research by Richardson et al. (2020) determined that contact had both had both a greater statistical importance in individual nature connections and a greater scale of relevance on a societal level. Therefore, I do not think it is a stretch to choose to place beauty below contact as the shallowest leverage point so that the two frameworks are in more alignment with each other.

### **The Intersection: Wheel of the Year Rituals, Nature Connections, and Societal Change**

As discussed above, “inner” connections with nature have the greatest potential to bring about change on a systemic level. However, all types of nature connection, both “inner” and “outer”, interact with one another to create the deep and lasting bond with nature that leads to greater beneficial environmental action in a society. The rituals performed as part of Wheel of the Year (WOY) celebrations have the potential to foster the creation of both “inner” and “outer” CWN (See Table 3). Therefore, they can also cultivate the deep, committed CWN needed to create meaningful environmental changes in society. In fact, since these rituals mainly take place outside and celebrate the seasons of nature, they have an added benefit of also promoting spiritual connections to nature. Rituals nurture spiritual CWN because they make places, in this case nature, sacred through imbuing meaning to places and actions (Geertz, 1975; Kimmerer, 2015; Muir, 2005; Tambiah, 1985; Turner, 1969). Spiritual connections are theorized to be deep

leverage points (Ives et al., 2018) and WOY activities provide a pathway to this type of connection that is not necessarily inherit to activities like recreating in nature and environmental education. In the Results section, I will go into more detail about the types of the CWN formed by the women I interviewed as they began learning about their NW European ancestral traditions and participating in gatherings centered on the Wheel of the Year. But first, I will describe the methods I used to collect and analyze my interview data.

**Table 3.**

*Ancestral Practices and Nature Connection*

<b><u>Types of nature connection</u></b>	<b><u>Ancestral practices that foster this type of connection</u></b>
1. Material	Making flower crowns, making besoms with sticks and grass, making torches with beeswax and herbs
2. Beauty	Viewing the mountains, clouds, trees, birds, etc. around you
3. Experiential/Contact	Feeling the sun and wind on your skin, dancing around the maypole, building a fire
4. Cognitive	Learning about seasonal changes and the activities that your ancestors would have been involved in during that season
5. Compassion	Wanting to protect the places where rituals occur because rituals make places sacred
6. Emotional	Feeling awe just being in nature, feeling joy while dancing around the maypole and making flower crowns, feelings of gratitude for the bounty nature provides during harvest time
7. Philosophical/meaning	Animism – singing to apple orchards to encourage a good harvest, believing certain plants have protective powers, understanding how your life depends on nature producing a good harvest

*Note.* Types of nature connection and ancestral practices that support their formation.

## CHAPTER III. METHODS

The goal of this research is to determine how studying one's earth-based ancestral traditions impacts one's connection with nature through analyzing data from interviews with individuals actively learning about their ancestral traditions. Before beginning the process of interviewing Nourishing Kin participants, my recruitment approach and questions were approved by the Evergreen Institutional Review Board. Below, I will first describe how I recruited the individuals that I interviewed, and then I give some background information about the interviewees themselves. Next, I discuss the interview protocol, including the interview instrument itself and how I carried out the interviews. Finally, I explain how I analyzed the interview data by coding the narratives from the interviews and identifying themes.

### **Recruitment**

All the interviewees were recruited from the group of individuals who participated in Nourishing Kin gatherings from April 2022 until March 2023. I recruited from this group because I knew all the participants were actively learning about their ancestral practices since that was the focus of the gatherings themselves. I also participated in these gatherings during this timeframe, and therefore I knew and had developed relationships with each of the interviewees.

My recruitment process was straightforward. At the next to last gathering of the year, with permission from the hosts of the event, I explained the research I was undertaking to the individuals present, asked for volunteers to be interviewed, and then instructed anyone interested to let me know in person or through email. I also asked the hosts to include my contact information in the post-gathering email they send out after every event for anyone interested who

was not able to or did not want to express that interest in person at the event. Only one interviewee contacted me through email expressing an interest in being interviewed while everyone else told me in person at the gathering. I was able to recruit enough people for interviews through this method and did not have to carry out any further recruitment efforts.

## **Participants**

Eight individuals agreed to be interviewed for my research project. All the interviewees are women who live in Utah, are former members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormon), have northwestern (NW) European ancestors (British Isles and Scandinavia), and are actively learning about their NW European earth-based ancestral practices. Although all the women live in Utah, they do not all live in the same area. The interviewees live all along the Salt Lake Valley, from Logan in the north to Provo in the south, and in the mountains to the east of Salt Lake City. They also vary in length of time out of the Mormon church – some have recently left while others have been out of the church for years. In addition, the interviewees have varying amounts of familiarity with their NW European ancestral traditions. One interviewee began learning about her ancestral practices as a teen while others only began when they started attending the Nourishing Kin gatherings. Only three of the eight participants had been learning about their ancestral traditions for more than two years.

I was specifically interested in interviewing former members of the Mormon church because I know, as a former member myself, that the church teaches its members that the earth is not their home, that the earth is just a temporary place where we prove ourselves worthy to enter heaven, which is our real home. I assumed that most, if not all, of the interviewees would not have grown up being taught that they were part of nature, and therefore would not have grown up

seeking a connection to and relationship with nature. I wanted to explore how learning about ancestral practices might help someone with no previous feelings of connectedness with nature develop a bond with nature. My assumption, for the most part, was correct. Although several interviewees expressed a love of nature as a child, only two of the eight participants expressed feeling a special connection to nature while growing up. However, these two individuals also expressed a deepening of that connection as they began to study their ancestral traditions.

### **Interview Protocol**

I performed semi-structured interviews during which I began with a list of questions to get the participants talking about their experience and then asked follow-up questions based on their answers. Therefore, each interviewee answered a set of questions that were the same for everyone along with questions that were unique to them. The topics covered by initial list of questions included 1) general background information about their European ancestry and where they live now, 2) why they began studying their ancestral traditions and the length of time over which the studying had occurred, 3) what they had previously been taught about nature and their role in it, and 4) how their views on nature and their connection to it had changed since they began studying their ancestral traditions. (See Appendix A for the list of interview questions asked to everyone).

Each interview was held at a place of the interviewee's choosing where they would be comfortable opening up about their experience. Most interviews took place in the homes of the participants; however, one interview took place in a park and one in a conference room at the interviewee's place of employment. The interviews were recorded with my iPhone using the Otter.ai app, which also provides a transcription for the recordings. I then listened to each

interview while looking over the transcription provided by the app and made changes to the transcription, as necessary, when the app had misinterpreted what was being said. All identifiable information was changed while I edited the initial transcription, and I assigned each interviewee random initials to ensure confidentiality. I emailed the transcription of each interview to the interviewee. I asked them to look over it and let me know if anything appeared inaccurate and to inform me if there were any parts of the interview they did not want quoted in my thesis.

## **Analysis**

Before I could begin my analysis, I listened to the recording of each interview and edited the transcription generated by the Otter.ai software to accurately reflect what was said in the interview. As I went through this process, I also took notes on themes I saw emerging and identified quotes I wanted to use to represent the themes found in the interview data when reporting my results. After going through this process for all the interviews, I reread my notes to help me identify potential overarching themes and codes I might want to use in my analysis.

For the qualitative analysis of the interview data, I used the Atlas.io software to assist me in coding and finding the themes in the data. Atlas.io kept a record of each passage and what code or codes I attached to it. I began with a list of 44 different codes that I assigned to 202 passages which totaled 545 assigned codes overall.

After coding all the narratives relevant to my research question in the interviews, I began to group similar codes together. First, I wanted to determine what types of nature connection the participants had experienced during their time learning about their ancestral traditions, so I grouped codes into material, beauty, experiential/contact, cognitive, compassion, emotional, meaning, and philosophical types of nature connection based on the types of nature connection

used in the leverage points models put forth by Ives et al. (2018) and Richardson et al. (2017). I also included animism as a separate code in the connection with nature theme, even though it is not mentioned specifically as a type of nature connection in the leverage points models. I did this because I thought it was an interesting finding and every interviewee mentioned some form of animism in their interview, whether it was talking to non-human beings or considering them to have souls.

Next, I looked at the frequencies of codes not associated with a specific type of nature connection to determine other themes found in the data and grouped similar codes together. At this point, some codes were infrequently mentioned and therefore were determined to not be a major theme in the data. At this point, I identified four major themes: feelings of connectedness with nature of various types; the importance of community in learning about ancestral practices and practicing PEB; a desire to share what they are learning with their families; and religion as a hinderance to connecting with nature.

After identifying these themes, I went back through my notes and identified quotes that represented the different types of nature connection found in the data and the themes present. I also reread the passages attached to each theme and type of nature connection in Atlas.io to identify other passages that I might want to use. In the following chapter, I will present the themes and types of nature connection with the accompanying quotes.

## CHAPTER IV. RESULTS

### **Introduction**

Although the interviewees have certain similarities, like currently residing in Utah and growing up members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints but later leaving the church, each had a unique path to wanting to learn more about their ancestral practices. One interviewee began learning more about the traditions of her ancestors as a teenager while other interviewees only recently began wanting to know more about their NW European ancestral practices. One discovered that her body's desires to dive into cold waters and scream and wail in nature were similar to practices her European ancestors participated in like cold-water plunging and keening (a vocal wailing that expresses grief or sorrow). She became interested in learning more about her ancestors' practices to support her desire to become more connected to her body. Others had been followers of the facilitators of the Nourishing Kin events and were interested in joining to make friends and find others with similar interests.

No interviewees indicated that they began to learn about these ancestral traditions to cultivate a greater connection to nature. However, one major theme that emerged from the interviews was that learning about these earth-based ancestral practices had shifted how these interviewees viewed and interacted with nature. Another theme that surfaced was the importance of community for learning about and participating in both ancestral traditions and pro-environmental behaviors (PEB). Interviewees also expressed desires to share what they had learned with others. Yet another overarching theme was how religious teachings had been a hinderance to feeling connectedness with nature.



I also coded the interviews for the different types of nature connection mentioned in my literature review: material and beauty, experiential/contact, cognitive, compassion, emotional, and philosophical/meaning. One specific type of connection mentioned by everyone was animism. Many also mentioned that these ancestral practices had led to a spiritual connection to nature. Below, I will go into a more in-depth discussion of each theme using narratives found in the interviews. I have given each interviewee randomly assigned initials and removed any identifying information so that their identities will remain anonymous.

### **Connectedness with Nature**

Although some interviewees had developed a love for nature and an enjoyment of spending time outside while they were young, every interviewee expressed that learning about their earth-based ancestral practices had shifted their perspective on how they saw themselves in relation to nature and/or deepened their feeling of connectedness with nature. AB described how her views of nature have changed since she began to learn about her ancestral practices:

*But I think as I've learned more, I feel like I definitely see the Earth as a living being that I am intricately connected to, and so ultimately, the things that we do to her impacts me in every way, shape, and form. So, I think that my interaction has definitely become more like...these trees, these plants, this rock, these things are all living things and they're equally like my kin, as [much as] say you are or my family or anything like that. So definitely more of a relational thing going on.*

IJ articulated that recognizing plants as her kin and developing a relationship with them has “been a game changer for everything that [she] does”. EF also expressed how participating in Nourishing Kin events have led her to thinking of nature as kin:

*To me, Nourishing Kin allows me to actually be tied to what's going on outside. Instead of this artificial world where like it's always warm inside my house, it's like Nourishing Kin has allowed me to...I think my favorite thing is, and I don't necessarily know if this is how my ancestors' felt, but [what] I love about what we've done with Nourishing Kin is that everybody is your kin, like the tree is my kin.*

KL talked about how learning about her ancestral traditions helped her see the importance of developing a relationship with the land where she resides and the deep responsibility that comes with that relationship:

*[My ancestors] had a relationship to place and that realization, that recognition that I carry that in my body, that I carry it in my blood, in my bones, has allowed me to attempt a translation now in the place where I live... to recognize that my spirituality can be land based and therefore place specific and I can really begin to form a relationship with the place that I live in. But that also requires a responsibility from myself. So I can't just say, "Oh, I love the Earth. Oh, I love everything about the place that I live in." I can do that. But that love implies a responsibility. If I love a place, I care for the animals and the plants and the people to whom this place belongs and to who that place gives nutrients and life. And so that has really changed. I really believe that deep ancestral connection has really changed my orientation of values to something that's really more about reciprocity and caretaking and conservation in a real, actual tangible way than I had really felt before.*

Interviewees also expressed that they now have a greater respect for and understanding of the cycles of nature and can appreciate the seasons of the earth in a new way. EF discussed how connecting to ancestral practices have helped her develop a love for the present season:

*Before Nourishing Kin, I feel like I spent my whole year wanting summer. That's all I wanted. Spring was anticipation of summer's coming. And winter was just like this is horrible. And fall was like [I'm] sad that summer was over. I feel like in so many ways having these little markers of this is the season, this is the season, and to just have it all broken up and to just develop a love for whatever is happening. Of like knowing that this season, this winter is just as vital as summer and not trying to be angry at the earth or being angry at the way things are going but just trusting and respecting that cycle.*

KL talked about how she pays more attention to how the world around her is changing season to season and year to year: "I feel like I am paying more attention. Because I am looking out my window every day... I see when the seasons change. Because when I'm out in my garden every summer and every spring and every fall, I notice when there's no water to be had." CD conveyed that she also has started to pay more attention to the nature around her:

*I think the biggest thing is that now I pay closer attention. And what you pay attention to, changes your whole perspective, obviously, [and] your outlook on a lot of things and*

*relationships. So there's this tree next to my apartment complex, and I've noticed it in each season, like the leaves look really great right now and [then] it's bare. My [child] is going to be able to see the leaves come back soon, and he doesn't remember what spring is like so I don't know if he remembers the tree with leaves. But just like going out on our walks and you know, saying hi to the tree and just noticing it feels, yeah, important. And special.*

OP described how paying attention to how the earth changes as it goes through different cycles helped her have more compassion for herself and take pleasure in day-to-day life:

*I mean, I am nature but like the nature that lives outside of my body is messy. It's cyclical. It's always dying and rebirthing itself. The beings that are around me are always reflecting a great diversity of experience and also a deep interconnectedness, where all of these different parts and pieces that are seemingly separate are actually really deeply connected in in this communal way, sharing information, sharing nutrients, in a symbiosis with each other.*

*And all of those things felt so deeply nourishing to the kind of person I wanted to be and the kind of life I wanted to have. I was like, I want to have a life that can be in the mud and the blood and the flesh of everyday life; that can show up to people's pain; that can have real joy and pleasure in the day-to-day tasks that...felt like obstacles to my spirituality before. That I could bring compassion to the messy parts of myself that didn't always make sense or fit into the boxes that I had been prescribed in my religious life or just in my cultural life and my family and the culture and society that we're all living in.*

Although learning about and practicing ancestral traditions have brought a greater sense of connectedness with nature into the lives of the interviewees, it has also highlighted how modern life is disconnected from nature and land and that feeling connected to and finding time to develop a relationship with nature can be challenging. OP pointed out that the disconnection from the cycles of the earth found in modern life makes cultivating a connection to and relationship with nature challenging:

*It's really challenging, honestly. It feels like I have to, because our lives are so still disassociated from the cycles of the earth... like I've got to work every day and like kids have to go to school and our food isn't coming from our garden... it's coming from this like warehouse that's called the grocery store, but it's really just like a warehouse with fluorescent lighting, you know, it's just like...It feels like I'm having to push against so much cultural pressure. And the stress of surviving and just surviving and getting by and paying the bills and keeping up... it's very challenging. It feels like...I have to be so*

*conscious of doing it. I don't like it to be formal, but I have to be really intentional with carving out those spaces and slowly moving us away from these really unnatural rhythms of life that force us to go against what our bodies and the seasons of the earth are telling us. That's really hard.*

KL lamented that so much knowledge about the land around us has been lost; that our food system in general has become detached from place; and how that has led to an overall disconnection from nature and the land:

*Like, do you know the name of the tree in your backyard? Do you know, your closest watershed? Do you know where your water comes from? Do you know where your food comes from? Those things matter intensely, as well. And the fact that we're only like one to two generations removed from knowing what those answers are, is really shocking to me. And it also shows like the efficacy of how quickly this embodied knowledge can be lost, especially when we live in a system that's really focused on, you know, the health of the economy and the health of capitalism, rather than the health of the people who are living in these systems... I don't know the last time that I ate a meal [where] all the ingredients came from the place that I live in.*

*And...a new question that I'm asking is how does that affect my belonging and my relationship to place? The fact that I can't walk into my backyard or even onto a trail and know what food I can find on those trails, unless you know, I've like, really studied a book and really am good at foraging, like, I have no idea what foods are native to Utah, and that in and of itself too I feel like it's a huge disconnect... And I think we're so ingrained in the society that we live in now that we don't even know how disconnected we really are. Because this is the air that we breathe and the water that we live in. But if we take a moment to recognize, like, oh my god, I actually don't belong to the place that I live in. I'm actually trying to live above the land just like my theology taught me to it becomes really unsettling.*

## **Types of Nature Connection**

The interviews were also coded for the different types of nature connection that Ives et al. (2018) and Richardson et al. (2017) used in the leverage points models they put forth to describe which pathways to connectedness with nature have the most impact on sustainability issues at a systemic level. Speaking about each type of connection by itself divorced from the other types is difficult because they often overlap in the narratives presented by the interviewees. Instead, I will group the types together according to whether they are shallow, medium, or deep leverage points

and discuss the different types in these groups. Although these groupings do not eliminate all the overlap, I have found that most of the narratives can be discussed in these groups without too much overlap into the other groups.

*Shallow leverage points: Material, beauty, and experiential/contact*

The types of nature connection that Ives et al. (2018) and Richardson et al. (2017) identify as most likely having a weak effect on overall sustainability efforts at a societal level are material, beauty, and experiential/contact. Material connections involve “consumption of goods/materials from nature” (Ives et al., 2018, p.1391). Beauty as a pathway to connection refers to feeling that nature is beautiful or appreciation of the beauty one finds in the natural world (Richardson et al., 2017). Experiential/contact deals with direct interactions with nature and engaging with nature through the senses. Beauty and material connections were mentioned the least in the interviews, while experiential/contact connections were mentioned by all interviewees. IJ told of going foraging in the mountains with her kids after learning about local plants during a Nourishing Kin event and hoping that doing these activities will help her kids feel connected to nature. IJ and EF also talked about gardening as ways they feel connected to the nature around them. OP mentioned going into the mountains and rubbing snow on her face when dealing with grief. GH said that she feels connection as she dances and sings outside and eats ancestral foods. QR shared how she felt connected to nature through material and experiential means while participating in ancestral traditions:

*Crafty things have always kind of interested me, so I like that and like, knowing that perhaps someone that I was...related to hundreds of years ago also made a Brigid's cross... that makes me feel connected to them. But then also because it's using something from the earth...It's not like, I mean, paper, but if I'm putting my photos in an album, that's not really connecting me to the earth. That's something I enjoy doing, but it's not that connection. So like doing those crafts, and they're using things like flowers from the*

*earth and using it in a beautiful way, not like using it up - like using up the water or using fossil fuels or tearing down forests to build houses or whatever - we're using... things from the earth in a beautiful way and making connection. I think that kind of makes me feel more connected to the earth.*

*Medium impact leverage points: Compassion and cognitive*

The models of leverage points put forth by Ives et al. (2018) and Richardson et al. (2017) place compassion and cognitive connections in the middle in between the shallow and deep leverage points. Compassion refers to caring about and taking action to protect nature (Richardson et al., 2017), while cognitive connection deals with knowledge and awareness of the environment (Ives et al., 2018). QR discussed how, as she has learned more about the ecology of her area, she has removed her grass and planted drought-tolerant plants and plants that are beneficial to the bee population. GH talked about the importance of learning about the environment around you because “you are less inclined to destroy the things that you know and love... you can’t love what you don’t know. So, that’s perpetually the problem to address right? Our communities, our children, our selves - are we knowing, really knowing the nature and environment around us enough to love them?” EF shared how she has a greater desire to take care of the earth and has done research on how best to do that after beginning to learn about her ancestral traditions:

*I started taking a class on soil biology. I started learning about indigenous plants and changing my yard. I've changed [my yard] taking away some of the grass...just like how can I treat this land that I have right here the very best? How can I respect it and honor it? And it's like, I love it now because now I know about all the bacteria and the fungi and all these things. I'm just like there's literally an entire world underneath my feet that I never would have respected before but literally we would be dead. Like we'd be dead without them.*

IJ also expressed compassion and a desire to learn how to take care of her plant kin when describing how she gardens now that she has been learning about her ancestral traditions:

*Now I collect all of the eggshells and coffee grounds, I'm not like a super big gardener. I've never been like great at gardening...but I figure at least I know the blueberry bushes like the coffee grounds, so I'm saving my coffee grounds. I go out there and I make a ritual out of it instead of just being like, "Okay, here's your coffee grounds", and just dump them on there. But just actually saying like, "These are for you. This is my offering to you." ...just having that kind of relationship with the plants and knowing that they are kin to us has been a game changer like for everything that I do.*

OP described how practicing her ancestral earth-based traditions have led to greater feelings of compassion for the earth:

*The more I do the earth based [practices], the more I develop that relationship, the more you care, you know? It's like having a pet dog. You care the more time you spend with that puppy, and it grows up and it becomes a part of your family and your life and then it gets sick. You care; you grieve. And it's like that with a tree. The more you visit the tree; the more you talk to the tree; the more you notice the changes of the tree; the more you develop that connection; the more you care when someone comes and cuts it down. Every time I swim in the river, I care a little bit more about what's in the water. Right? When I recognize that that same water is the water that comes out of my tap and goes into my body and goes into my children's bodies... the more that I know the names of the birds, the more I care about where they live and what they eat and drink, and the way that, I mean in a very human centric way, the way that affects me too. You know, when birds are dying, I'm getting sicker. Right?*

KL discussed how she feels compelled to take action to protect a non-human member of her community under threat:

*To hear from Shoshone elder Darren Perry that he used to try to go out to Great Salt Lake and couldn't even pass the causeway because it was flooded with water is so foreign to me as someone who only moved here a couple of years ago and has never seen the lake full. And so, to have that relationship and recognize like oh my god, if I don't do something, if more people don't care, we're going to lose this, like I'm going to lose this friend that I just found. And I have to do something. I have to say something.*

*Deep leverage points: Emotional, philosophical, and meaning*

Richardson et al. (2017) and Ives et al. (2018) identified emotional, philosophical, and meaning types of nature connection as having the greatest potential to make lasting societal change according to leverage points theory. Emotional connections refer to having empathy towards nature, experiencing joy and wonder in nature or finding solace in nature when feeling sad (Richardson et al., 2017; Ives et al., 2018). EF explained how nature has comforted her and helped her through times of grief:

*So, I went to Provo Canyon, and I found this rock... I was just really drawn to this rock. So I brought the rock home, which now I would know to ask permission. And then I started learning about some of the Indian tribe relations [with the church] here in the beginnings of our state, like just how violent and how covered up it all was... So I'm trying to deal with all of my grief, and I remember this rock from Provo Canyon. And I was like this rock knows, like it was there for this horrible thing. And it was like the rock could hold my grief. And it was raining that night too. And it was just like the Earth was crying with me...there's just such a depth of connection that just wasn't available to me when my god was out there.*

When she found that her previous spiritual practices could not provide support for her while dealing with her grief and rage, OP found support in nature:

*I needed a place to be wild, with my rage, with my grief. And it felt so important, and it also felt sacred to me. And I was awakening to the fact that these parts of me could be sacred too and instead of going to the temple...I drove past the temple up into the canyon. And I started hiking up through the canyon and just started like wailing and sobbing and yelling and screaming. There was snow, and I was rubbing snow on my face and like trying to get this thing to flow out of me that I had been holding for so long. And I remember just feeling so deeply held and so deeply witnessed. And I mean this is me trying to translate that feeling into language, so it's really difficult to do because the rocks don't speak English.*

*But what came through for me was we have seen it all. We are not afraid of your rage, of your grief. No one's gonna kick you out, because if someone did something like that inside the temple, they would escort you out, right? You'd be in trouble. And the rocks were like we've seen earthquakes. We've seen floods. We've seen fires. We've seen tornados. We've seen like ecological disasters. We've watched this valley change a million times. And we are not ashamed of your shame, like trees aren't ashamed of what you know. Rocks don't hold shame. Whatever rumbling thing they want, they do. And I was allowed to rumble. I was allowed to rumble and to shake like an aspen tree and to let*



*water pour out of my eyes like the stream that was pouring down the creek and down the canyon.*

*And I could caw and flap like a bird, and that's how my rage felt in my body. It felt very like animal, very stony, very, very landslide, shimmering like a tree and it felt like she will witness this for me. And she's not going to fix it. She's not going to tell me to be quiet. She's not going to, you know, ask me to leave or punish me. She's just gonna witness me. She's going to be there and be there and be there and be there. And that was such a transformative moment. And I was like, I'm really glad I listened to that part of me that was like, no, this needs a different kind of temple. The temple of this canyon is what will hold what needs to happen here.*

Too often Western cultures teach people to be strong, not cry, and just to get over things without feeling our emotions, but, as OP found, nature doesn't judge us. Nature accepts us as we are and doesn't care if we cry and scream and express our emotions.

One particular emotion that surfaced during the interview was a feeling of gratitude towards nature. KL expressed feelings of gratitude for nature and shows empathy for nature when she states that "the land just keeps giving gifts, and I don't understand how she's so generous all the time, even as she's suffering and dying". OP described the great feeling of gratitude she feels towards the land for taking care of her when she was going through difficult situations in her life:

*I mean, for all the things my ancestors have done in this place, and all the ways I've ignored her and been complicit in it, she's been so gracious to me, so generous to me. It's just, I'm really like humbled by that. And then that feeling of deep responsibility to be in reciprocity with it just rises so naturally when you feel so deeply held and witnessed, and the wisdom and the relationship starts to grow. And you say, "How can I sit by and watch us pollute this place that so beautifully, you know, keeps us alive, [and] sustains us every day"? And so that that naturally grew out of those experiences. She just opened her arms to hold all of these really difficult things with me and then it was like, I want this river to be well; I want these trees to be well; I want this place to flow for all the living things that depend on it, including myself, you know.*

Interviewees also shared how their views of nature and what it means to them has shifted since they began to learn about their ancestral earth-based practices. Philosophical connections allude to people's perspectives and worldviews of nature, the importance of nature in one's life,

and how one should interact with nature (Ives et al., 2018). Meaning refers to the significance nature has in one's life and a feeling of purpose brought to one's life through interacting and developing a relationship with nature. Some of these shifts have been mentioned above in the Connection with Nature section, like AB and EF now seeing nature as kin and OP seeing the interconnectedness of all things and referring to herself as nature. IJ talked about how the view of her relationship with nature has changed from one of domination to one of needing to ask permission from nature before harvesting from her garden:

*I was starting to kind of piece it all together, and go I love this. I love the idea that if I'm going to plant a garden, I need to have a sense of asking permission, asking the land what it wants me to plant, not just like this is for me; I dominate this space; and I make sure that it serves me. And even just when taking the fruit or taking the vegetables from the garden that you ask permission, and you make an offering.*

KL shared how ancestral practices have brought meaning into her life and how her worldview has changed from one of being separate from the earth to one where she and everything else are interconnected now that she has begun to learn about her European ancestral practices:

*This Christian idea that we are of the world or like in the world, but not of the world. To me is such a fascinating idea because we are actually both. We are in the world and of the world, right? Every time I breathe, I'm breathing in the exhale of trees. Every time I'm eating, I'm introducing the world into my body all of the time. Every time I get sick, every time I wash my hands, every time I wipe my nose - I am taking in germs and organisms from the outside world into my gut, into my microbiome, into my immune system. And I'm also leaving skin sheds; I'm leaving fingernail; I'm leaving hair, and the eyelashes and my own breath.*

*So this idea that somehow I'm separate from the world ... This whole idea that I can somehow separate myself from the very being that allows me to live, that gives me breath and food and life is so Earth escapist that I have a difficult time reconciling the fact that I used to believe that that could even be possible, right? And so I am actually incredibly grateful to have moved into a more nuanced understanding of that Christian orientation to Apocalypticism. And really match that with something that's a little bit more ancestral in recognizing my ancestors caretaking the earth because they recognized that they were inseparable from it, and that caretaking in and of itself is a spiritual practice because it gives me life; it gives me meaning; it gives me purpose.*

Several interviewees also expressed feeling a spiritual connection to nature. I have included spiritual connections in the discussion of the emotional, philosophical, and meaning pathways of connection because spirit encompasses feelings of “aliveness”, how one sees the world and how one assigns meaning to life (Zylestra et al. 2014). EF talked about how her connection to nature has deepened as she has begun to see God in everything around her:

*There's just such a depth of connection that just wasn't available to me when my god was out there, instead of God being in everything. There's so much more connection when I can feel a sacred relationship like the temples in my backyard, like the tree is just as much God as I am or as anybody else is. It's all this beautiful, sacred thing.*

OP described how as she developed a relationship with the land, she began to see herself reflected in it and began to feel a spiritual connection:

*[What] shifted in my relationship with the land was that I began to see myself reflected in it. And I could never really fully see myself reflected in the gods I had before. I always only saw the things that couldn't be like them. That weren't enough, right? That were insufficient in some way because God was above it all and perfect. But the earth is like, like perfection is not really a thing. There's wholeness, and there's health, and there's that symbiosis and a kind of intuitive alignment with the natural cycles. And that felt like, oh, that's how my life is. And I feel really deeply held in a spiritual way, but also in a literal way.*

### *Animism*

Another theme expressed by all the interviewees was that they view nature as full of beings with intelligence and sentience and that they often talk to these non-human kin. I am discussing animism in this section because I consider animism to be a subset of philosophical connections to nature since it deals with how one perceives nature and interacts with her. CD and GH both talked about how they talk to plants and animals. EF shared how she has increased her houseplant collection since she began attending Nourishing Kin events and refers to them as her

“best friends”. She also stated, “I’m like out talking to my trees.” OP expressed that she can hear nature speaking to her and that her non-human kin have intelligence and wisdom to share:

*I started having interactions with birds and with trees and with rivers where I began to hear them speak or perceive their communications to me in ways that felt really supportive... I think these plants and animals and rocks and soil and stone, like they've been here so much longer than we have and they've learned how to be in right relationship with each other over time - over many, many, many, many, many 1000s of years. And I'm just a blip. I'm just a baby that's going to come and go while these mountains will be here for generations, right?*

*And so they, in my mind, the intelligence and the wisdom that these beings, more than human beings, around us carry is worth paying attention to. It's worth learning from. It's worth sitting with that. Like the way that they've figured out how to survive in harsh conditions; the way they've learned how to work together; the way that they've adapted and evolved over time to create sustainability and to propagate and to work in tandem with other the other living things around and that to me also feels like a really deep value that I carry as well and I'm not going to learn it from other humans. We're really shitty at that.*

KL talked about how she has begun to teach her children that non-human kin are persons and are alive:

*The language around the way that we talk about Earth and the way that we talk about the different beings that are around us - that has been a primary focus for me. So for example, the other day my daughter was talking about the fact that it's still snowing in March. And I said, “Well, it's so good because the lake she needs water”. And my daughter was like, “What do you mean ‘she’?” and I said, “Well, the lake is a person just like you are a person, and I am a person, and your friend is a person. The lake is also a person, and so we call her she.” And my daughter was like, “But she is not a person.” And I said, “Not in the same way. She doesn't have the same body as you do. She can't speak in the same way that you do. But she's alive and she cares for the birds and the brine shrimp, and the microbial lives and... lots of people, even your own ancestors, believed that the Earth is alive.” And I said, “You know how we talk about Earth as she and Earth as Mother Nature?”, and then immediately it clicked for her.*

*And so, I've also been careful too as we talk about the birds when we look outside of our window or when we talk about a plant or an insect that we find, I always try really hard to not reference those things as an “it” and always give it some kind of human pronoun. They, them, he, him, she, her...whatever seems appropriate at the time. And I'm hoping that even by just instilling that small linguistic change for them that there's something that clicks in their brain, that when they hear someone else, which undoubtedly they will, refer to nature as an “it” that something will click for them and [they'll] recognize, like wait a second, it separates me from the personhood of this other being that I am in relationship with and that there will be something off for them. I'm hopeful that that one small change will really spark a continued relationship.*

## Community and Sharing Knowledge

Every interviewee mentioned the importance of community as they practice and learn ancestral practices, learn how to care for and have a relationship with the earth, and begin to take actions that benefit the non-human kin around them. OP emphasized that she needs community support to help share these ancestral traditions with her children:

*So that's another aspect that is really challenging and I think [that's] why Nourishing Kin feels really important is that we want to build some community support around doing these [ancestral practices], again, here I am, in this very individualistic way, trying to recreate this whole thing for my children out of this deep pile of ashes of deconstruction. And trying to conjure some other kind of way. And what I really need is other people. I need other families. I need other community members and family members to show up to that with me, which is another reason why Nourishing Kin feels really important is that we're building that. And eventually these [events] will open up to people being able to bring their families to a lot of things and I really want that... I want my kids to see that.*

IJ also expressed appreciation for being able to learn from others at Nourishing Kin events so that she can share what she learns with her children:

*We went out foraging and [someone] showed us how to find things that were out there and make bundles with, and I totally, like the very next Saturday, I took my kids out there. We went out into the mountains, and I was like look for these long stalks with the yellow flowers. We're gonna pull those up everywhere we go, and we're going to take them back with us and make things with them. I would have never known how to do that or even where to look for that activity. But then that just gave me the opportunity to be like, I know exactly what I'm doing. She showed me exactly what to do. I got this, and I can bring my kids and do it with them.*

Another theme around community that came up in the interviews was that community is important for learning how to care for nature and for environmental advocacy. KL stressed the important role communities play in creating a society that not only cares for the land but cares for each other:

*This whole experience with Nourishing Kin and this whole experience with Great Salt Lake advocacy really has shown me [that] community, not even spirituality, but communities are also land based, place specific because land brings people together -*

*not just because of proximity but when we really turn toward and care for the land, we can't help but also turn toward and care for each other.*

CD discussed how she sometimes feels overwhelmed when trying to figure out ways she can take action to address a huge issue like environmental harm. Community has been vital for her in learning how she can take action to care for the earth and not feel overwhelmed:

*I see a cause, and I'm very tender hearted, so like, I don't know how to pick one or two, because I know all of them are so important. But I also know I can't do all of it. And so I ended up doing kind of nothing, but I think this experience has shown me like oh, here's some small steps you can do. Even just being more sustainable with my food, or when somebody suggested, "Oh, we can just bring our own plates to this type of thing," and like, oh, yeah, that's like a real easy little thing. So their mindset and teachings I think have definitely rubbed off on me where it's like...I am not from the valley here, but I can take care of it while I am here. Because who knows how long we'll be here... And so the idea that, you know, we might be putting down roots here, [and] even if we're not, to take care of what we can while we can. I'm still figuring out what that looks like, but I definitely feel it more strongly than I used to.*

QR shared that she appreciates the community she has found at the Nourishing Kin events because it helps her to see "that there are other people that are making efforts" and "that there are other people who care...They're trying to find ways to be better, and I can learn from them". She also finds resources for taking actions to protect the environment:

*And so like these have always been things and topics that like, "Oh, this interests me or these things concern me," but I've always kind of been like I don't know what to do. And now I'm finding resources... that are saying this is how you do it. This is who you contact. This is how you can take action. And so, I feel like where it's changed me.*

She went on to say that she learns from others in the community how to connect to nature: "It's interesting for me to see the ways that other people connect as well, especially at the summer solstice... Just seeing the way that people connected was interesting for me - to see that like, oh, that's a way I could do it as well."

GH lived in a community in one of her ancestral homelands across the Atlantic. She moved there to learn more about her ancestors and to feel closer to them. She described how

much easier it felt to live in a reciprocal relationship with nature when the whole community made an effort to live in harmony with the earth and practice ancestral traditions:

*Yes, I try to be in a reciprocal relationship with the earth. And that's something that I feel I learned the most in the town that we lived in, in England. It's a very green environmental hippie town smack in the middle of the wealthy posh Cotswolds. But it was so empowering to see community that believed in reciprocity with nature and the land, and the way that they would show up for all the land around them and the animals around them, like protests on a Saturday morning in the town to [speak out against] the badger culls that were going on in the area and things like that. Like my daughter's friend's mother, teaching her [that] we ask permission before we pick any flowers. I didn't have to worry about... how to teach [my kids] that myself but that I and my family, my children, were getting that from community. That made all the difference.*

### **Religion as a hinderance to feeling connected to nature**

All the women I interviewed grew up in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, or the Mormon church. The teachings they received at church and at home from family members left many of them feeling that they were separate from the earth and that they had no responsibility to take action to protect the environment. Whatever happened was God's will, and God would take care of everything. EF shared how a deep connection to nature wasn't available to her "when my god was out there instead of god being in everything". She then explained how she grew up being taught that humans could not harm nature because God was in charge:

*[My mom] taught me to have this idea of trusting that God would provide for nature, that like humans couldn't screw up God's plan. Like, it felt like we didn't have any responsibility because we're not really capable of messing everything up...because God's in charge of things... God's ultimately in charge, so humans aren't going to do anything that God wouldn't want them to do because God's in charge.*

AB discussed how she was taught that she should be a steward of the earth but also that she was separate from the earth:

*Well, I would say that I definitely grew up with more of a Mormon perspective like, you are, you are separate. And ultimately, your goal is to be above the earth, to ascend past your earthly form, ascend past the earth to go be part of Heaven or the Celestial Kingdom. And there's definitely a separateness. Though, I think that my family thought of the idea of stewardship... [they] took that pretty seriously - stewardship of their land, stewardship of the earth. But I think as I've learned more, I feel like I definitely see the Earth as like a living being that I am intricately connected to.*

OP talked about how she did inherit an awe and wonder about nature from her dad, but that she still felt like, “I’m a human...I’m a steward over this and I’m a higher being than the earth.” She also grew up thinking that nature was full of beautiful, but inanimate objects and that she “didn’t really have a deeper sense until later that they were sentient beings with deep wisdom.” OP then described how she never felt a responsibility to care for the earth when she was younger:

*I mean, this is a newer perspective on that, but there were hints of it at the time that we wanted calamities to be happening. We wanted calamities to happen, because it meant that God was coming; that Jesus was going to return...we expected that Jesus would return and that he would fix all of it as long as we did what the church said was good, which the Church never includes... ecological activism in the to do list... So that was my mentality. [It] was that wow, this is scary and sad that these things are happening. However, I don't have really any responsibility to it other than just to obey God and do what he says according to the leaders of the church because they were God's spokespeople. And as long as I do that, I'll be okay. And I don't have to worry about...all the suffering that it's causing or the or the destruction that it's causing. But then as that shifted for me, taking God down from the pedestal and all of that happened, it felt like whoa, what are we doing?*

KL discussed how as a child her she didn’t view herself as part of nature but instead “nature was something that I would always have to go out to”. She explains further how the teachings of her religion kept her seeing nature as something important to her experience as a human:

*It became nearly impossible for me to see the Earth as [an] important integral part of what it means to be human and what it means to be alive because I had been taught to believe that it was a temporary place for me to stay - that no matter what happened to the earth, like it would eventually also get resurrected like Jesus Christ. So,*



*it didn't matter. And I was always taught to be looking for signs of the Second Coming or looking for signs of the apocalypse.*

*And so, you know, it didn't occur to me until years later that climate change really parallels a lot of the signs of the times, right? Like people don't have enough to eat. There are plagues and diseases everywhere. There [are] unnatural disasters happening and this orientation toward Apocalypticism really blinded me to recognizing that I had a responsibility, and I had the ability to stop these things from happening. And because a lot of times Christianity views these things as a positive like "Yay, finally, Jesus is coming to save the Earth from all of its sins". And all of these, you know, patterns of climate crisis are good things because it means the Second Coming is imminent. And so a lot of people that I know just kind of throw their hands up and say climate change isn't real. It's the second coming, and we just have to be good. And wait long enough for Jesus to come. And I don't have to do anything. I don't have any responsibility to this problem. And so, in that way, the antidote, at least for me, to the apathy and the inaction around climate change, and ecological conservation, really has been animism, this belief that the other beings that I am in relationship with all of the time are actually the whole reason why I'm here.*

In the next chapter, I will continue discussing this topic of religion as a hinderance to CWN, and how, if religion is a hinderance, that means it could also be used to promote connections with nature. I will also examine the different types of nature connections formed by the interviewees in the context of leverage points theory and explore the narratives in the interviews that suggest deep connections to nature are being formed through the process of learning about ancestral traditions.

## CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter discusses the themes found in this research. First, I will discuss how the results relate to my overarching research question: How does connecting with ancestral earth-based traditions and rituals affect European-Americans' connection to nature? Next, I explain how the types of nature connection formed through learning about and practicing ancestral traditions connect to the leverage points in a sustainability context models put forth by Ives et al. (2018) and Richardson et al. (2017). I will also discuss in more detail the theme that religious beliefs can hinder a connection to nature and how connecting to ancestral practices might help those leaving a religion to find community and spiritual fulfillment outside of organized religion along with a pathway to nature connection. Finally, I will describe the limitations of the findings of this research and explore ideas for future research.

### **Discussion**

All the interviewees who participated in this research reported a shift in their perception of nature and feelings of connectedness with nature. Although some of the interviewees expressed having a love of nature from a young age, only one mentioned talking to plants as a child. None of the others mentioned speaking to the non-human world around them until after they began to study their earth-based ancestral traditions, nor did they think of inanimate, non-human beings as having souls. This connection between animism - the belief that non-human beings have souls - and learning about ancestral practices is not surprising when you consider that these ancestral practices sometimes involve talking and singing to non-human kin. GH and

OP both mentioned a tradition called wassailing in their interviews. GH spoke of wassailing as being one of her favorite ancestral traditions:

*I also love wassailing... that's the singing to and blessing of the apple orchards at the start of the new year. So, in January is when they do it... and a lot of my ancestors come from that region where it has been practiced for centuries and still is today, so I don't know if it's that or just the beauty of people gathering in community to sing to their land and trees, [it] just feels like the best summary of my hopes for community... what I wish for the world.*

After beginning to learn about their ancestral knowledge and traditions, the interviewees began to feel like they were a part of nature and started to consider nature to be their kin. Again, this is not surprising because part of all except one of the Nourishing Kin gatherings took place outside and therefore provided ample opportunity to connect with nature in a variety of ways. The opportunity for “outer connections” with nature— material, beauty, and experiential/contact — was present at each event. Material connections occurred when we used substances found in nature to create objects like flower crowns at Summer Solstice, besoms from dried plants and sticks at Mabon, and torches from beeswax, herbs, and flowers at Imbolc. Beauty surrounded us as we noticed the trees, flowers, mountains, creeks, birds, and sky around us. Experiential/contact connections were formed as we spent time feeling the warmth of the sun on our skin, the coolness of the water during a swim, and the slight scratchiness of the grass beneath our feet as we danced around the maypole.

Participants at Nourishing Kin gatherings also had opportunities to foster the “inner connections” with nature — cognitive, compassion, emotional, meaning, and philosophical. At each gathering, we discussed the cycles of nature, talked about how our ancestors’ lives were intricately tied to the rhythms of nature, conversed about ways we could advocate for and protect nature, and spent time reflecting and meditating on what we were learning and experiencing.

However, does this shift in perception of and connection with nature in individuals learning about their earth-based ancestral traditions have the potential to lead to change in sustainability interventions on a systemic level? According to leverage points theory, shallow leverage points are less likely to bring about systemic change whereas deep leverage points have the greatest potential to lead to systemic change. In a sustainability context, Ives et al. (2018) and Richardson et al. (2017) divided the different pathways to nature connection into “outer” and “inner” connections and determined that the deeper leverage points most likely to lead to change in a sustainability context consisted of the “inner” connections to nature – cognitive, compassion, emotional, meaning, and philosophical.

In responses to interview questions, “inner” connections were mentioned roughly twice as much as “outer” connections (material, beauty, and experiential/contact) (Table 4). To determine whether length of time studying traditions impacted the types of connections formed, I divided the interviewees into two groups based on whether they had been studying their ancestral traditions for less than two years or longer than two years. Both groups mentioned “inner” connections more than “outer” connections. “Inner” connections are deeper leverage points for societal change, and they were mentioned more often than the “outer” connections no matter how long someone had been studying their ancestral traditions. This suggests that connecting to earth-based ancestral traditions has the potential to connect people to nature in a way that can bring about an increase in efforts to protect the environment and lead to living in a more sustainable way on a societal level.

**Table 4.**

*Mentions of Inner vs. Outer Connections*

<b>Type of Connection</b>	<b>Learning about ancestral practices for &lt; 2 years (n=5)</b>	<b>Learning about ancestral practices for &gt; 2 years (n=3)</b>	<b>Totals</b>
<b>Inner Connections</b>	51	60	111
<b>Outer Connections</b>	26	23	49
<b>Totals</b>	77	83	160

*Note.* Mentions of Inner Connections vs. Outer Connections based on length of study about ancestral practices.

The beginnings of this societal change can be found in the interviews themselves. All but one of the interviewees mentioned sharing what they had learned about their ancestral traditions with their families and children, thereby planting the seeds of possible nature connections in them as well. KL's story of teaching her children to think of the non-human beings in nature as persons has previously been mentioned. IJ talked about how she takes what she learns at Nourishing Kin home and shares it with her kids. CD stated that she wants to share what she has learned with her child when they get older, but she has already shared some of the animism worldview with her sister's kids by inviting them to dance with trees with her. GH and OP celebrate the Sabbats on the Wheel of the Year with their families. EF invited her family over for Winter Solstice to celebrate the day together.

The interviewees also have started to take more actions on an individual and a community level to improve and protect the environment around them. At home, they do things like recycle, pick up trash in their neighborhood, plant drought resistant species and those

beneficial to bees, and limit water usage, which models to their children ways to help take care of nature. While taking these actions at home, they are also involved in efforts to make change at a societal level. Many of the women have become very active in advocacy surrounding the Great Salt Lake. They get together with other people to write letters to their state congresspeople encouraging them to create laws that will protect the lake. They dress up as kin like brine shrimp and birds to participate in protests together in support of protecting the Great Salt Lake. KL discusses how she has shifted from focusing on individual actions to protect the environment to public advocacy and creating awareness around issues and the importance of community in creating societal change:

*I've always been the person in my life who has been like, hey, everybody, make sure you recycle. Everybody, try to go plastic free. Don't get bags at the grocery store. I still do all of those things, but I've moved away from trying to do these really individual [things] like composts, making all my meals, trying to do everything plastic free, trying to do everything perfect. I've moved away from that and more into advocacy and increasing awareness and really offering my talents and my voice to specific beings that I really care about. And right now, that's Great Salt Lake because she's experiencing this huge crisis and so I feel tied and pulled to what happens with her in a way that I have never felt tied to and connected to a place before.*

*And I really believe that that's because I finally recognize that it's because of her that I'm even here, and if I want to keep being here, I have to keep taking care of her. As a citizen, I have a solemn responsibility to ensure that she has a voice, and she does. She can speak all by herself, all for her own. But lots of people have forgotten how to listen, and so I can lend a translation. I can lend a voice for her to be heard and listened to. And to know that I'm doing that in a community of other people who are also willing to do the same and want to see her live and thrive has been a whole new community forming in a different way.*

*And I think that it's that love of place and that love of someone other than ourselves or someone other than people who look like us, that really has formulated and like drawn in a close, tight knit community. And so, this whole experience with Nourishing Kin and this whole experience with Great Salt Lake advocacy really has shown me [that] community, not even spirituality, but communities are also land based, place specific because land can bring people together, not just because of proximity, but when we really turn toward and care for the land, we can't help but also turn toward and care for each other.*

While discussing how their views of and relationship to nature has changed since beginning to learn about their ancestral traditions, the interviewees also talked about how the religious teachings they received at home and at church hindered them from having a strong connection to nature. This is an important finding because 63% of Americans identify as Christian (Pew Research Center, 2021). Although the interviewees belonged to a specific sect of Christianity, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, with its own specific beliefs, some basic beliefs about the earth and human's relationship to it are shared by most, but not all, Christian religions, mainly that the earth was created for human use and humans have dominion over it. Christianity in general also teaches that the Earth is a temporary home and that the goal of human existence is to escape earth and get to heaven to live with God. The interviewees, as detailed in the results sections, shared how these beliefs led them to feel that they were separate from nature, that developing a relationship with nature wasn't important, and that they didn't have a responsibility to take care of nature because God would. Other religions besides Christianity might also have beliefs that hinder a connection with nature, but I am not familiar enough with those religions to make that determination. Even so, if other religious beliefs also impede forming relationships with nature, then it becomes even more important to figure out a way to mitigate that effect.

However, if religious beliefs can be a hinderance to developing a connection with nature and to PEB, then religion could also lead to greater connection with nature with the right teachings. Christianity teaches that all of earth is God's creation, and many Christians are already taught that they are stewards of the earth. If stewardship of the earth was emphasized more than dominion of the earth and churches shared ways that their members could be good stewards and hosted events where members could gather to advocate for environmental protection, then

Christian beliefs could become a catalyst for societal change that would address climate change and lead to greater environmental protections and living more sustainably.

At the same time, more and more Americans are exiting organized religion all together. According to research done by Pew Research Center (2021), 29% of Americans do not identify with any religion. Connecting to earth-based ancestral practices could provide a way for religious “nones” to create community that would not only address the loneliness and isolation that many people feel today (US Office of the Surgeon General, 2023) but would also provide the types of pathways to connect with nature that could lead to positive environmental changes at a societal level. Nourishing Kin gatherings are an example of this – a collective of mostly non-religious women coming together regularly to form community, learn about ancestral practices, and find ways to advocate for environmental issues.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This research took place among a very specific population. All the participants were women who currently live in Utah and were, at one point, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints but then left that church. Therefore, this research cannot be applied to the general population of the United States, but instead explores whether connecting to ancestral practices led to greater connectedness with nature among a specific group of people in a specific place. However, since this research project did find that learning about ancestral earth-based practices can lead to greater connections with nature among people living in non-ancestral lands, more research should be done to determine if members of communities not represented in this research might also gain the same benefits of CWN from practicing ancestral traditions.



Another limitation is that I was unable to assess or measure the participants' level of nature connection before they began to study their ancestral practices. I did not find out about the Nourishing Kin gatherings until about two weeks before the first event. As such, all shifts in connections with nature are self-reported. Future research should identify women who are just beginning their journey of connecting with ancestral traditions and give them an assessment of nature connection before the first gathering and after the last gathering of the Wheel of the Year celebrations, in addition to interviewing them more about their experience. I have no reason to doubt the interviewees' self-reported narratives of their experience, but it would have been nice to have a baseline assessment and to see how the connections measured by the assessment shifted for everyone over the course of the year.

Future research should be conducted among other populations not included in this research - like men, residents of other states, non-European Americans, and members of other religious affiliations - to determine if connecting to ancestral practices can lead to connectedness with nature among other groups of people. Many of the women I interviewed spoke of feeling a spiritual connection to nature, therefore more research also needs to explore spiritual connections with nature and the relationship between spiritual connections with nature and PEB. Since the interviewees mentioned sharing the ancestral traditions they have been learning with their children, another interesting avenue of research would be to compare the CWN among teens who have been taught about their ancestral earth-based practices with the CWN among teens who have not been exposed to their ancestral practices. Hughes et al. (2019) found that CWN decreases during the teen years and determining whether connecting to ancestral practices as a teen helps prevent or reduce this dip in CWN would be important in the search to find ways to preserve levels of CWN during the teen years. Future research should also use time series

analysis to determine how connections with nature change over a series of many years. Gatherings centered around the Wheel of the Year provide a perfect opportunity for this type of analysis because they occur around the same time every year. Additionally, every person interviewed mentioned the importance of community and although many studies have looked at how individuals connect with nature, more research is needed that investigates how connections with nature can be developed in community with others instead of just as individuals.

## **Conclusion**

This research explored how learning about and beginning to practice one's earth-based ancestral practices influences one's connection with nature among people, specifically of NW European descent, who no longer reside in their historical ancestral homelands. Eight women were interviewed about their experiences connecting to their ancestral traditions and how that impacted how they view nature and their relationship with it to answer this research questions: How does learning about and practicing earth-based ancestral traditions impact connectedness with nature among Americans of NW European descent?

Coding analysis was performed using Atlas.ti to help organize the interview data into overarching themes. The main themes that emerged from this analysis include 1) the importance of community in learning about ancestral traditions and supporting PEB efforts; 2) religion can be a hinderance to CWN; 3) interviewees want to share what they have learned with their family and friends; and 4) formation of both outer and inner connections with nature, including animism.

The results of this research indicate that learning about earth-based ancestral practices can lead to greater connectedness with nature through both "outer" (material, beauty,

experiential/contact) and “inner” (cognitive, compassion, emotional, meaning, and philosophical) connections. “Inner” connections to nature were mentioned more often in the interviews than “outer” connections. This is important because, according to leverage points theory, the “inner” types of connection with nature have the greatest potential to create positive environmental change on a societal level. Since connecting to ancestral practices may possibly lead to systemic change that creates better environmental outcomes and policies, more research needs to be conducted that investigates whether other communities, outside of the one represented in this research, also experience similar positive shifts in connection with nature.

The literature on nature connection indicates that many pathways to nature connection exist. However, not all connections with nature are deep enough to create the systemic changes needed to combat climate change, stop environmental destruction, and lead to more sustainable living. For people living outside of their ancestral homelands, connecting to earth-based ancestral practices provides a way to form those deep, “inner” connections with nature that lead to becoming “naturalized” to a place. As Robin Wall Kimmerer (2015) explains: “Being naturalized to a place means to live as if this is the land that feeds you, as if these are the streams from which you drink, that build your body and fill your spirit. To become naturalized is to know that your ancestors lie in the ground. Here you will give your gifts and meet your responsibilities. To become naturalized is to live as if your children’s future matters, to take care of the land as if our lives and the lives of all our relatives depend on it. Because they do.” My hope is that we can all find a way to become naturalized to place and develop a reciprocal relationship to nature and the land. Our lives and the lives of so many other non-human kin depend on it.

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## APPENDIX

### Appendix A. Semi-structured interview questions

#### Interview Protocol

##### 2-3 minute introduction

- Briefly describe the project, ask if there are questions, gain oral consent.

#### Section 1: About the interviewee

1. What part of Europe are your ancestors from?
2. Where do you currently live and how long have you lived there?
3. How long have you been actively seeking out knowledge about your European ancestral traditions?
4. What led you to participate in the Native Kin circles?

#### Section 2: Past views and feelings about nature and relationship to land

1. What were you taught at home about nature and your relationship to it while you were growing up?
2. What were you taught at school and/or church about nature and the environment while growing up?
3. How did you personally feel about nature as a young person? Did you see yourself as a part of nature or as separate?
4. How much time did you spend interacting with nature as a child and did you enjoy it?  
What types of activities did you do?



### **Section 3: Current views and feelings about nature and relationship to land**

1. How has learning about and participating in European earth-based ancestral practices impacted your views on nature and land and your relationship to it?
2. Has learning about and practicing your European ancestral traditions changed how you view your community – do you consider plant, animals, and other non-human entities as a part of your community? Do they have a soul?
3. What ancestral practices have you enjoyed learning about and participating in the most?
4. What else has contributed to any changes in how you perceive nature, your place in it, and your responsibility to it?