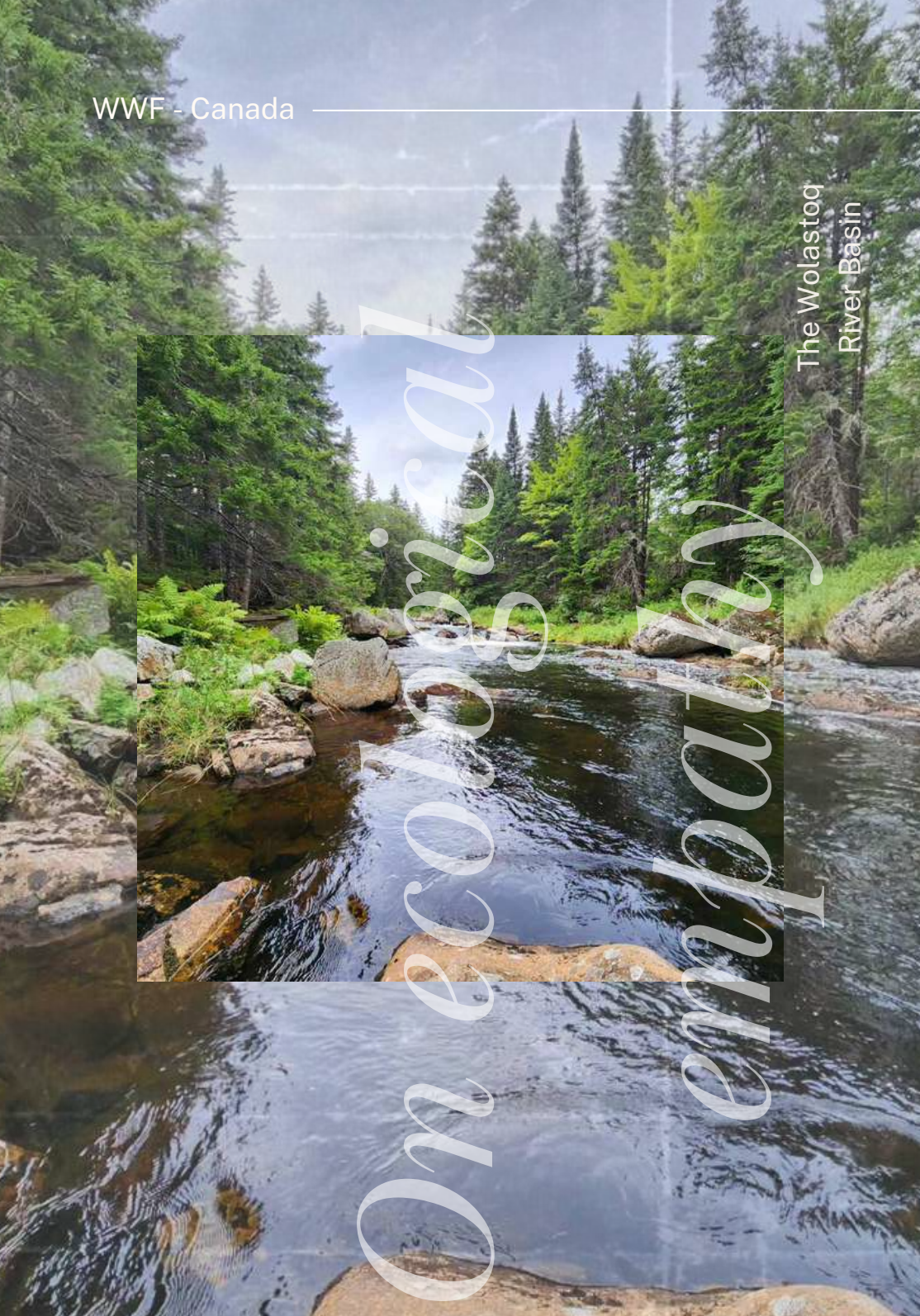
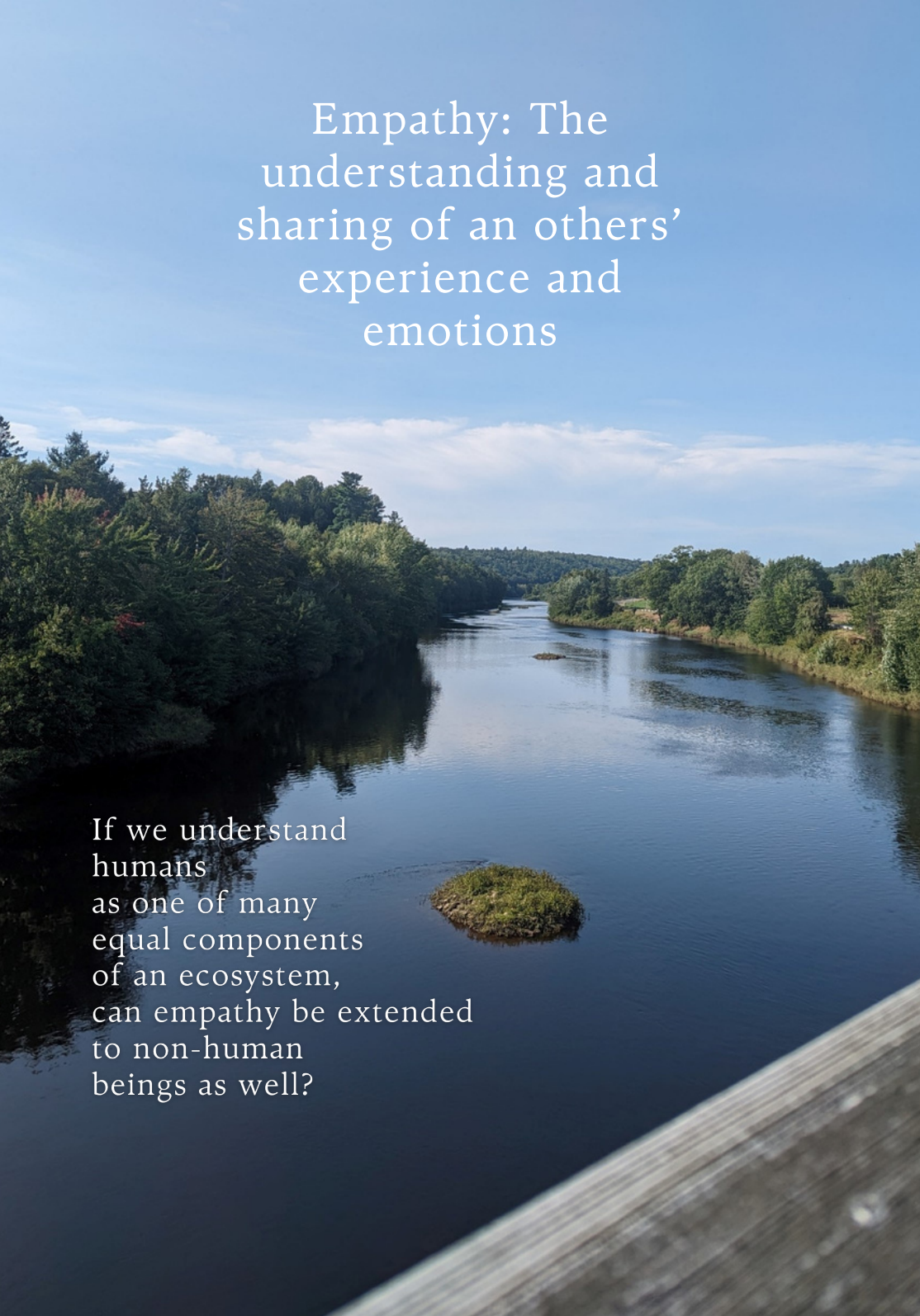


*On ecological
empathy*

The Wolastoq
River Basin



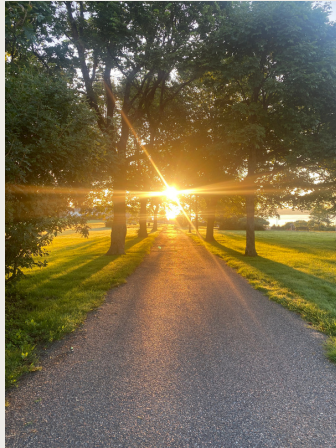


Empathy: The understanding and sharing of an others' experience and emotions

If we understand
humans
as one of many
equal components
of an ecosystem,
can empathy be extended
to non-human
beings as well?

We explored this question using photography, trying to capture knowledge about - and relationships with - the land on which we live, and the communities we are part of.

We collaborated with people working for environmental stewardship organizations, who dedicate their time to restoring, protecting, and caring for nature.



We spoke about our appreciation and gratitude for all that nature gifts us, and what we can give in return. The curiosity that drives us to learn about the world we find ourselves in, and the humility we need to cherish the unknown and the uncertain. The challenges and rewards of being a steward of nature. The memories we made and the experiences we continue to have.

But most importantly, we asked ourselves:

What does empathy mean to us?

How can we practice empathy?

Can we feel with nature,
and if so, how?

A background story:

In light of current environmental degradation, it is clear that part of humanity has forgotten that we are deeply embedded in the biosphere, which shapes our lives, yet is shaped by our activities in return. Re-connecting people to nature could be an important step towards more sustainable futures. It has been suggested that valuing nature based on the relationships we form with it, be it a sense of kinship with other living beings, expressions of care, identity, belonging or responsibility, could facilitate this re-connection.

Empathy, which is an understanding and sharing of an others' experiences and emotions, can be understood as a relational practice as well. By imagining the reality of the other, trying to see the world from their point of view, we inch closer to a mutual understanding, not dissolving the borders between self and others, but making them contiguous. While empathy is primarily studied in human interactions, it has been shown that people can extend empathy to animals and the environment as well. Indeed, it has been proposed that empathy for nature is linked to care and motivates pro-environmental behavior. To emphasize that humans are one of many equal parts of an ecosystem, we did not separate 'empathy for nature' and 'empathy for humans', but called it 'ecological empathy', empathy with all communities, with whom we share this space.

We assumed that environmental stewards would be acutely aware of their connection to nature, since they are continuously interacting with it, thus forming reciprocal relationships. We wanted to learn how they understand, feel, practice and live ecological empathy, and whether it has an influence on them regarding their stewardship practices. In the future, those findings could be applied to foster ecological empathy in people, who might lack a connection to nature.

We used photovoice, a research methodology in which participants are asked to take pictures of the phenomenon to be studied. Specifically, we asked our collaborators to capture elements of nature that they feel empathy for, and to try to take photographs from nature's perspective. Photovoice, as an arts-based method, can capture multiple ways of knowing, more intangible connections to nature, as well as emotions. The photographs formed the base of a discussion about the elements pictured in them, and added depth and details to the stories we were being told.

This magazine is a glimpse into what we have learned ...

So we as humans feel empathy towards other living beings
and I would consider nature it's own living being



I think anytime you engage with nature
particularly in hands-on ways
you're demonstrating empathy

The act of planting acorns
to help a forest regenerate
to help nature along its path
is demonstrating empathy
towards everything in the forest
and the role of oak trees for example



On a planet that is so unwell right now
I think doing this job is one of the few things that is keeping me sane
to be honest with you

that is giving me a location to transform my grief and anxiety
into positive and productive energy and action



I hope I can always call it home
I'm hoping that I can always find a way
to make a living in the region
so that I can always go
and know where to find nature

Although I can find nature anywhere
but I can't find that connection
that I find in those locations



And there's hope

there's lots of kids out there still that are connected
and I see it in the day to day

And that's where I feel ...
sometimes that's where I feel the most reward



I bike over this bridge all the time

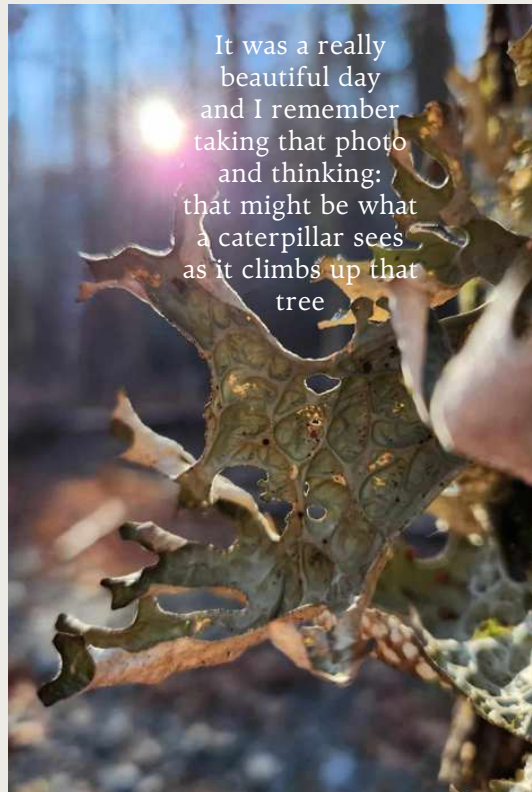
And so now and then I'll stop and snap a
picture and actually pay attention to it

I think it's a reminder to just stop and
take a moment to appreciate
what's going on around you

I just wish we as people would have
more appreciation for the nature
that's around us all the time



I think - whether I
recognized it in the
moment or not - it
made me feel a sense
of empathy for this
flower
that's kind of
thought of as a weed
- but obviously the
bee appreciates it



It was a really
beautiful day
and I remember
taking that photo
and thinking:
that might be what
a caterpillar sees
as it climbs up that
tree



I know I share the passion for the outside world with most humans
who've had the opportunity to be in it

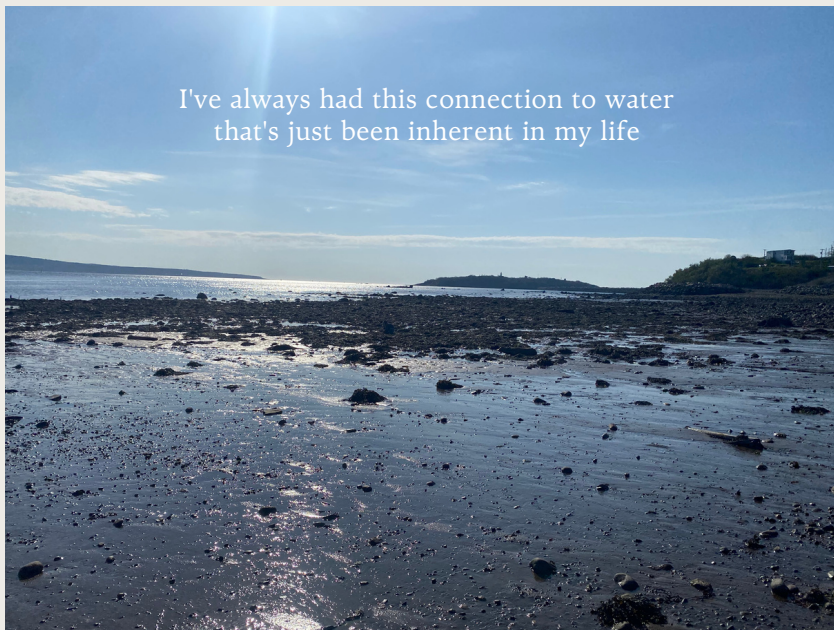
I feel like that is a universal human experience
once someone is given that opportunity to form a relationship with nature





When I'm out on
a hike in the
woods or when
I'm canoeing or
kayaking

I feel probably
most at peace at
those times



I've always had this connection to water
that's just been inherent in my life

it's something that I don't take for granted
and I cherish quite deeply
because I know not everyone has this opportunity in life

I can feel it's struggle
and it's will
to survive



to overcome these things



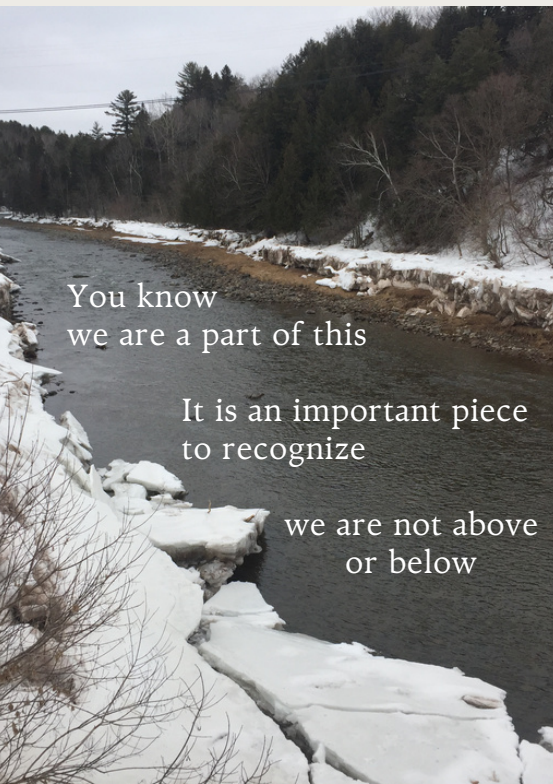
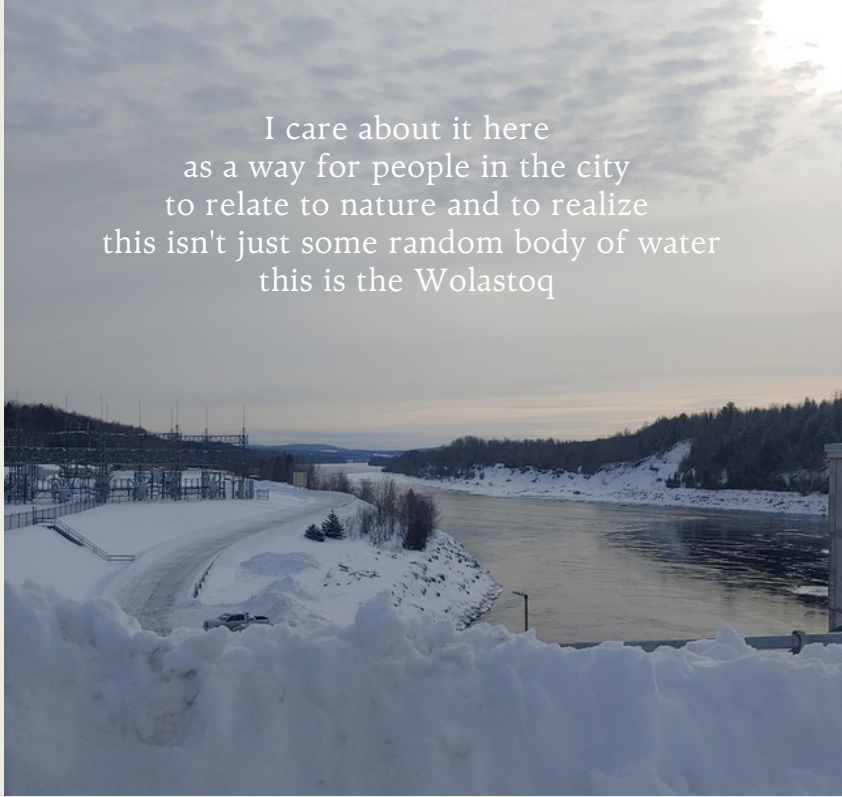
“I won't let it bring me
down, I'll keep going”



If you think about it
we've kind of won the lottery with nature



I care about it here
as a way for people in the city
to relate to nature and to realize
this isn't just some random body of water
this is the Wolastoq



You know
we are a part of this

It is an important piece
to recognize

we are not above
or below



So I took a picture of it
thinking
from the perspective of the beaver

“look at this great accomplishment”

Because it's a fairly impressive sized tree

It's impressive to think
that a small beaver
can just move a tree of that size



If I were to look at it and be able to see it
in the same color spectrum
that nature sees it in

What color does a deer see it in?
or a coyote?
or a raccoon?

I don't know
but it would be kind of cool
to understand that
and see what's going through their head

I wonder what they do think

I think that there is an aspect of
being able to care for things
that basically gives purpose

It makes us feel proud
knowing that we're making a
difference
to the actual experience
of the creatures
that will live in these ecosystems
including ourselves



I've seen very few people
who don't feel moved or touched
by having planted a tree



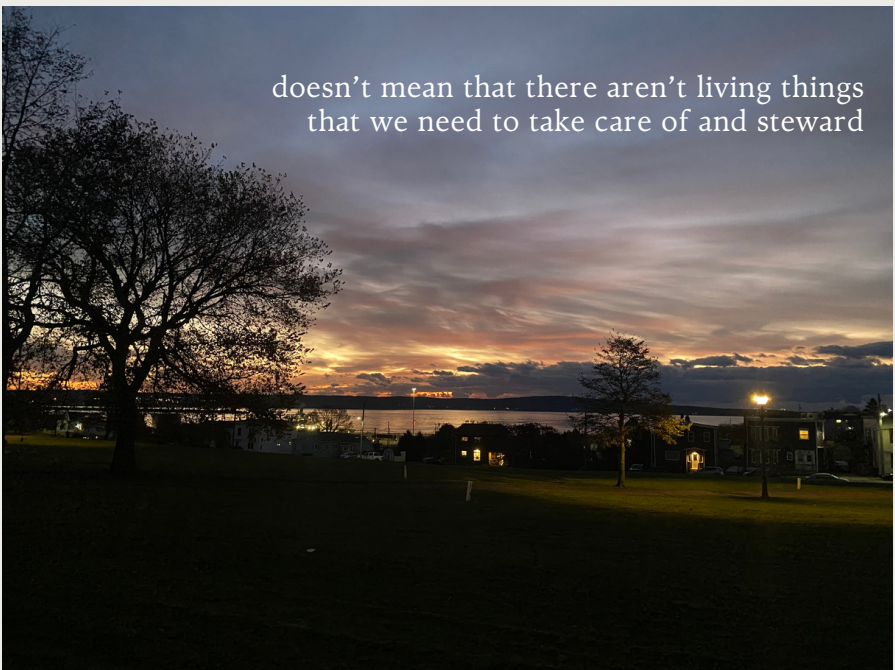
and imagining the life
and the story
that will go along with that tree
and the creatures
that will benefit from it

I feel that those are the roots of empathy
those relationships
that relationship building

just because we live in an urban environment
doesn't mean that nature is not around us



doesn't mean that there aren't living things
that we need to take care of and steward



And sometimes empathy - especially empathy for nature -
is in our DNA a little bit

it's in our roots
it's how we were born and raised

or it's something going back even further

Sometimes it just feels like we have to be reminded
that it's deep down in there



But I do believe that through experience
particularly being on the land
over time you can develop
empathy
and appreciation
and understanding
for nature

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Further, it is a product of the first phase of the research project “Eliciting a place- and practice-based Understanding of Ecological Empathy, using the Photovoice Method”. If you want to learn more about the project or contribute your knowledge or artistic talent, please email Hannah Marlen Lübker (hlaubker@brocku.ca).

