

Landback

Imagining Land Justice





PRACTICE

Before diving into this guide, consider grounding in these two practices:

- **Invite a gentle, curious awareness of your body.** As you read, take note where your heart quickens or when you lean forward in your chair. Similarly, note when you feel tension, contraction, or resistance. In all sensations, ask: Where am I called to go deeper? What am I being called to learn? What might Spirit's wildest imaginings be drawing us toward?
- **Take a moment to acknowledge the land you're on.** Give thanks for its gifts, and to the original Indigenous stewards who tended it since time immemorial.



Welcome!

Dear Reader,

Welcome to *Imagining Land Justice*! This three-part series is the first publication of the N&N Land Justice Project, an initiative that supports religious communities to create new land legacies rooted in climate resilience and racial justice.

With each generation, the Earth herself is becoming more entangled by extraction and racism: 1500 acres of U.S. land are developed every day, 98% of private land is owned by white people, and our governing systems preserve profit, and white wealth, at all costs.

As sisters discern the future of their properties, many community initiatives — regenerative farms, habitat restoration projects, Black and Indigenous food sovereignty collectives, and beyond—are in search of land to steward, often inhibited by the rising costs of property. Given financial complexities and often unclear options on both sides of this equation, the choices can feel uninspiring, overwhelming, or downright dismal.

But what if we could address the situation differently? What if religious land transitions could repair histories of harm *and* nurture a future of climate-resilient communities?

We believe that this is possible, and that there are tools, models, and friends that can help us get there together. But as the adage goes, we can't go anywhere we haven't already been in our minds. Thus, in *Imagining Land Justice*, we explore critical calls of the climate justice movement—Landback, reparations, and regeneration—and ask: "What is possible?"

These guides are intended as a beginning, not an end. They don't include step-by-step instructions or prescriptive templates. It will be up to each of us to apply them in our own contexts, share with each other in the learning journey, and participate in the opportunities ahead.

For decades, sisters have been "living otherwise," caring for the needs of the Earth and standing up for justice. We pray that these pages further that legacy, encourage your vision, and amplify the critical role that women religious can continue to play in this transformative moment. May we arrive, with every question and each imagining, one step closer to wholeness.

Onward,
—the N&N Land Justice Team

Why Landback?

Since time immemorial, Indigenous people have lived in reciprocal relationship with the land as its stewards and relatives. Through the process of colonization, Indigenous people were forcibly removed from billions of acres of land that they depended upon and belonged to.

How might we imagine land legacies that heal the harms of colonization, support regenerative stewardship of the land, and help us evolve into a new era of right relationship?

The foundations of extractive capitalism are intertwined with early ideas of white Christian supremacy through colonization. While not often covered in our history classes, the Pope gave European nations and Christian royalty explicit religious and legal orders to seize the lands and eliminate the cultures of non-Christian peoples through slavery, genocide, or coerced conversion.

In this wave of genocide and displacement, the communal responsibility to land inherent in Indigenous nationhood has been nearly lost — attacked by a worldview that land is a commodity to be owned.

The definition of Landback is as it sounds: a returning of land to the stewardship of Indigenous peoples, and a restoration of all that was stolen without their consent, including language, culture, ceremony, medicines, and kinship. Landback goes hand-in-hand with dismantling the colonial forces of individualism, racism, and extractivism in the first place. When done authentically, Landback is both a material and a spiritual endeavor: restoring Native sovereignty and lifeways is part of an ongoing journey of repentance, repair, and right relationship with the living world.

While “Landback” is a newer term, Indigenous peoples’ struggle for self-determination is as old as colonization itself, drawing upon generations of resistance and revitalization. Related to Landback is the notion of **rematriation** — restoring a people to their rightful place, in sacred relationship with their ancestral lands. Sometimes referenced as a “re-mothering,” it invokes the leadership of Indigenous women, the matrilineal roots of many Indige-



nous tribes, and the call to, in the words of Diné elder Pat McCabe, “return the land – the mother – to herself.”

Because land is inextricably tied to the reclamation of Indigenous lifeways, **the central call of Landback and rematriation is the physical return of land.**

Landowners can realize the vision of Landback by working with an Indigenous nation or organization to bequeath, donate, sell, or grant legal rights or access to their property. *There are many legal and financial ways to do this.* Most importantly, work according to the group’s needs and wishes, and enlist experienced land return practitioners to support you both.

If you don’t own land, or if this is not (or not yet) a possibility, there are many supportive acts that can get you started. For example, many settlers participate in a voluntary “land tax” to the original stewards of the land they’re on, supporting tribal efforts like mutual aid, food sovereignty projects, language and cultural revitalization, or the purchase of ancestral land. You can also look for locally-rooted ways to stand in solidarity with Indigenous people fighting the environmental degradation of their lands, such as mines or pipelines.

In the end, “Landback” is about reclaiming the land from settler colonialism itself, working to repair the harms of the past, and moving towards a future that restores the sacred relationship between people and land. As Cutcha Risling Baldy (Hoopa Valley Tribe) said, “We need radical imagination for what life can look like beyond the settler-state, beyond capitalism. We can story it into being.”

“Although Indigenous people make up less than 5% of the world’s population, they protect 80% of the world’s biodiversity...”

At its core, Landback is for life and for the people. *Indigenous people hold the key to curbing climate change...[It] begins with allowing us, Indigenous people, to govern our own lands, reclaim stolen lands, and to lead climate change initiatives without threat of being killed or arrested.”*

Demetrius Johnson (Diné), NDN Collective

ABOVE: The Black Hills. A central demand of NDN Collective’s Landback campaign is the closure of Mount Rushmore and the return of the unceded Black Hills to the Lakota people.



The Doctrine of Discovery

One often-overlooked element of Catholic lineage is the Doctrine of Discovery – a linchpin in the history and present-day process of colonization.

The Doctrine of Discovery refers to a series of 15th century Papal Bulls which served as the legal, moral, spiritual, and political justification for the seizure of land inhabited by non-Christians, and became the foundation for European control through colonies. In fact, it gave explicit permission to “invade, search out, capture, vanquish and subdue” all non-Christians and “reduce their persons to perpetual slavery.”

During the “Age of Exploration,” the Doctrine of Discovery directly enabled the enslavement of Africans, the theft of Indigenous land, and the genocide of Indigenous peoples. The Doctrine of Discovery was officially woven into U.S. federal law in 1823, when the Supreme Court began to cite it to invalidate Native peoples’ claims to their land. It has been used as legal precedent by the Supreme Court as recently as 2005. In other words, the Justices of the Supreme Court have pointed to these Papal Bulls as the core premise of the U.S. government’s power to steal land.

“This is the use of religion by the state to reduce and dehumanize,” comments scholar Steven Newcomb (Shawnee, Lenape). “This is part of a biblical narrative, that Earth’s dominion is for the profit of the Chosen People to develop the world.”

The violence of the Doctrine of Discovery enacted on Indigenous peoples is vast. It includes outright warfare, massacre, and forced removal; land theft and fraudulent treaties; forced assimilation and conversion; the outlawing of language, religion, medicines, and traditional knowledge systems; the coercion and kidnapping of children into Christian-run boarding schools; the desecration of cultural and sacred sites; and the destruction of native ecosystems for private wealth and profit.

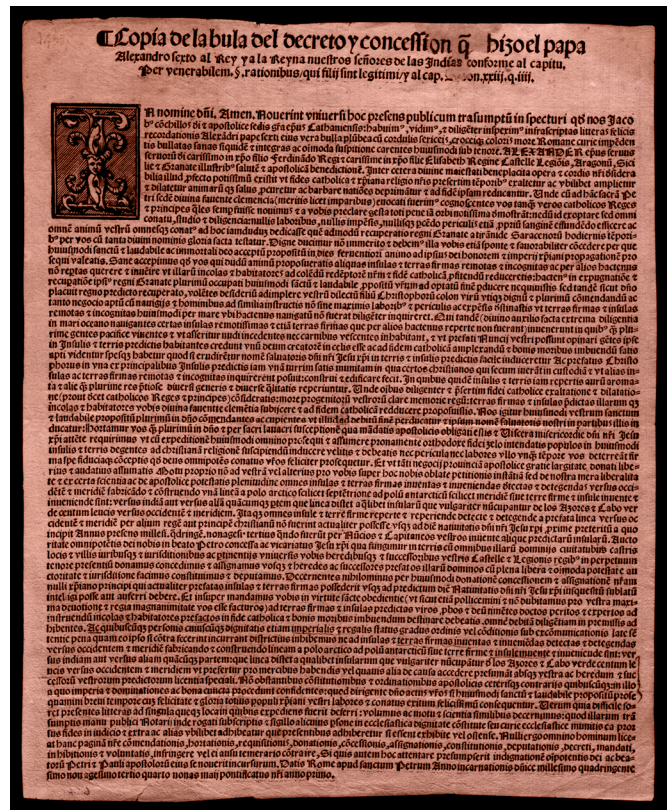
This legacy of harm can also be seen in the wealth, power, and privileges of settler descendants. While Indigenous people have become “minorities in their own lands,” writes the NDN Collective, “settler societies in those lands experience prosperity directly related to the benefits of stolen lands, extractive economies, and genocide and displacement of Indigenous people.”

This generational trauma continues in myriad ways—but so does the legacy of Indigenous survival, resistance, and resurgence. “Our symptoms of oppression... are all rooted in our loss of land. Landback is really a synonym for decolonization and dismantling white supremacy,” writes Nikki Pieratos (Chippewa).

"[It] needs to happen so that all other aspects of Indigenous livelihood can return with it."

Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez writes that the God of history "does not remove us from the historical process, but rather compels us to immerse ourselves in it so that we may responsibly exercise our solidarity with the poor and the oppressed."

In 2014, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious published an Assembly resolution calling on Pope Francis to formally repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery. In 2021, this gesture was reinforced by the LCWR leadership's public ritual of repentance for their own participation in systems of colonization and racism. From a foundation of courage, honesty, and repentance, we can be better poised for bold, reparative action from a place of authenticity.



ABOVE: *Inter Caetera*, Demarcation Bull of Pope Alexander VI, May 4, 1493. LEFT: Map from Treaty of Tordesillas, 1494.

Grappling with Harm

- How do notions of land ownership or territory exist in your life or mindset? Where do they come from? When did you become conscious of them?
- Why is there general silence around the Doctrine of Discovery?
- How might this reckoning help to express the core of Catholic Social Teaching: the "liberation of oppressed peoples?"
- In our healing within this history, how can we center people most harmed by the Doctrine of Discovery – namely, Black and Indigenous communities who are still suffering state violence 500 years later – rather than our own goals or comfort?

Landback in Action

FOUR EXAMPLES OF LAND RETURN

SOGOREA TE' LAND TRUST

Sogorea Te' Land Trust is an Indigenous land trust based in the San Francisco Bay Area. The first piece of land rematriated by Sogorea Te' is a quarter-acre site that was previously owned by a local food justice organization, Planting Justice. Upon their return from Standing Rock, the Planting Justice team asked how they could support Indigenous people living in the Bay Area. After some discussion and meetings, they transferred the title of their urban nursery to Sogorea Te'.

The site, now called Lisjan, is home to the first Native ceremonial space in that territory in over 250 years, as well as many traditional and medicinal plants and a rainwater catchment system with over 5,500 gallons of potable water storage.

Sogorea Te' continues to build their land base, both from land donations as well as by purchasing land. One important source of funding is the Shuumi Land Tax, a voluntary land tax paid by non-Indigenous people who live on Ohlone land.

FINANCIAL PARTNERSHIPS

To support the protection of 1,200 acres to the formerly landless Esselen Tribe, the Western River Conservancy worked with the tribe to secure a \$4.5M grant from the California Natural Resources Agency. This gave the tribe the funds needed to purchase the land from the conservancy. The tribe and conservancy considered themselves "incredibly aligned partners" in a vision to restore the land and streams on the property.

SWEETWATER CULTURAL CENTER

In November 2019, after months of dialogue and relationship-building, the Hudson River presbytery transferred the title of the former Stony Point Church property to Sweetwater Cultural Center, created "to promote the education, health and welfare of Indigenous or Native peoples and to preserve their cultures and ceremonial practices."

Two years after officially denouncing the Doctrine of Discovery, the Presbyterian Church urged its leaders to move toward strategy and action to redress harm with Indigenous people. This act of return was one result of that call.

As part of its design, Sweetwater's board, the majority of which is Native or Indigenous, set aside two seats for Hudson River Presbytery members for the project's first 10 years.

THE FOUR WINDS CENTER

The Four Winds Center was founded by the Denver Indigenous community as a place to practice culture and organize for liberation. For its first 25 years, Four Winds used an old Lutheran parsonage on a rent-free basis. After years of deepening relationship and respect, the Rocky Mountain Lutheran Synod, chose instead to "let go of their property claim" and return to Four Winds, acknowledging that "we never really owned it in the first place."

It wasn't without complications: It cost money to the synod, and it required Four Winds to register a 501(c)3 organization with the US government. The groups remain in good relationship today.

“There is no template for how we do this work, and there is never going to be.”

Krystal Two Bulls, NDN Collective

“We are breaking new ground when Christians take real action to make amends.”

Chief Dwaine Perry, Sweetwater Cultural Center (Ramapough-Lenape Nation)



NUTS, BOLTS, & HELPFUL TERMS

Many people think of land transitions like a black-and-white transaction. In reality, it's more like a painter's palette: There are many, many tools that can be blended together depending on legal realities, financial needs, and other factors. For more examples and case studies, see www.nunsandnones.org/imagine.

KEY TERMS FOR LAND TRANSITIONS

Full Donation: This is the simplest way to transfer land and the most affordable option for the receiving party, but it's not always financially possible. If donating land isn't a possibility for you, keep reading.

Charitable (Bargain) Sale: Properties can be sold below the appraised value to nonprofit organizations. This choice comes with income tax breaks.

Full Value Sale: The most familiar scenario, in which the buyer pays the full appraised price for a property title. While this is efficient, it leaves out people who can't afford the full "market" value. If this is the case, you can consider an **installment sale** or **zero-interest financing**, in which payment is given over time. You can also support people, groups, or organizations to fundraise for the full value, and give them a healthy timeline to do so.

Donation of a Remainder Interest: You can also arrange for your land to be donated after your lifetime, by retaining what is called a "life estate" and donating a "**remainder interest**" in the land.

Bequeathing Land: You can donate land through a will or living trust.

EASEMENTS: A MIXED BAG

An **easement** is a permanent legal agreement about the use of a specific property. It is held by and enforced by a third-party entity, often a land trust. Easements "follow the land," meaning that they are enforced in perpetuity, no matter who the owner is.

A **conservation easement** permanently restricts land use incongruent with ecological conservation. Similarly, an **agricultural easement** protects farmland.

An easement is not a sale or donation of the land, but the two aren't mutually exclusive. For example, you could put an easement on your property before selling or donating it, though it would be wise to discuss the parameters with future owners or stewards.

There are limitations of conservation and agricultural easements to consider. While they're wonderful at protection from development, they do **not** guarantee engagement on issues like inequitable land access, regenerative stewardship, or food sovereignty.

Cultural use easements (or **cultural conservation easements**) are unique in that they grant Indigenous communities certain access rights to lands for continuing and preserving cultural heritage and ecological stewardship.

Evolving A Lineage

“[Our institutions] taught us that we have dominion over the Earth and that we could buy it and sell it. There’s something terribly wrong with our Western civilization’s way of thinking.”

—Sr. Miriam Therese MacGillis, OP

THE UNFINISHED TASK OF THE NEW COSMOLOGY

Catholic sisters have been a true force in transforming a domination-based creation story into one of evolution and relationship. In recent decades especially, a quiet and powerful patchwork of sister-run spiritual ecology projects have emerged, caring for the land while advancing a creation story that holds God, Earth, universe, and our very lives as a single, unfolding process.

As we deepen in the rich and necessary journey of ecospirituality and evolving consciousness, we must remember the forgotten element of Thomas Berry’s “universe of communion:” the *human* subjects that have been most cut off from the land — and most

impacted by the harms of capitalism and environmental injustice.

As we deepen in relations with the universe, land, waters, and more-than-human-world, we must ask: Who has the luxury of connecting with land in the first place? What does it mean that 98 percent of landowners are white? That 90 percent of all visitors to public lands are white? That white Americans have built their wealth on the inheritance of property that was stolen to begin with?

The very people from whom this land was stolen have never let go of that sense of kinship with the living world. Indigenous people still hold their own, ancient cosmologies that tell of our interrelatedness with all creation. Even against the violent forces of colonialism, Indigenous people have fought to retain and tend this worldview — and having never been meant to survive, they are the ones fighting at the frontlines for the health of our entire planet.

In this light, we see the unfinished task of the new cosmology: We must not only practice our individual or even communal relationship with land, Earth, and Universe. We must ask, what does the land ask of us? How can we restore power and sovereignty back to those who still remember the Earth’s original instructions?

The unfinished work of the new cosmology is to let go of our own control of the land, to humble ourselves to the truth of how we gained access to it, and to listen for what it asks of us now.

*“The universe is a communion of subjects,
not a collection of objects.”*

Thomas Berry

“Decolonization is not a metaphor.”

Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang

PRACTICES OF SOLIDARITY WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

Land taxes: Non-indigenous people can make a voluntary annual contribution to the Indigenous people whose land you occupy. In some places, this is already organized, like the [Shuumi Land Tax](#) on Ohlone Land in California, and others. In other places, you might need to research where to give. See our resource page for more examples.

Help defend Indigenous land: Because Indigenous land is often a target for extraction without consent, Indigenous people are often the first to expose projects that degrade the Earth. Support Land Defenders and Water Protectors through efforts like Stand With Standing Rock and Stop Line 3.

Support the return of public lands: There are many efforts to return public lands to Indigenous stewardship and traditional management practices, which are known to restore ecological health and diversity. For example, the NDN Collective is organizing for the closure of Mount Rushmore and [the return of the Black Hills to the Lakota people](#). Learn more and help advocate for the return of public lands.

Repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery: While Pope Francis and the Catholic Church have not yet repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery, many communities have put public pressure to do so through their own statements, [including the Leadership Conference of Women Religious \(LCWR\) in 2014](#).

A note on trust: It might take time to build trust and relationships with Indigenous people. Remember: Generations of Indigenous people have been traumatized by Catholic institutions, and are still fighting to assert their own self-determination in a colonized country. True solidarity – rather than charity – means prioritizing their consent, boundaries, pace, needs, and desires over your own expectations. It is a spiritual discipline of humility and love.



ABOVE: Demonstration garden at Genesis Farms. (credit: Rhonda Fabian)

Getting Started

LEARN

- **Dig deeper into the Doctrine of Discovery.** Reckoning with the Catholic Church's legacy of spiritually and legally justifying land theft and genocide is important to do in community. Consider forming a discussion group and explore together: How does the history of your community map onto the history of the Doctrine? To what extent has this history been learned or acknowledged?
- **Researching Boarding Schools and Opening Your Archives.** Many communities have begun to conduct research on their congregation's involvement with Indian boarding schools. Some have even hired specialized researchers to work with their archivists. If your congregation has archives that relate to boarding school history, reach out to the impacted tribe(s) and ask if they would like access. In addition, advise the [Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition](#) (NABS). Opening this information might feel vulnerable, but it can support families' ongoing research and healing.
- **Learn About Indigenous People Where you Live.** Use a map like www.native-land.ca to learn the names of the original Indigenous inhabitants of the land you're on. Research Indigenous-led movements in the area today.

REFLECT

- **Connect to Community Values.** Bring forward a fundamental excerpt of your community's constitution or commitments. Perhaps it is the articulation of your charism, the text of the vow of poverty, a list of critical social or environmental concerns, a Gospel text, or something else. Meditating on the text, ask how your community's values and commitments might connect to the Landback movement and call to action.
- **Moving Through Fear and Discomfort.** In reading through this guide — or in subsequent research and conversation — did you notice fear or discomfort arising? As you engage in this inquiry, pay attention to your body. When and where does constriction arise? How can you breathe into those places and moments? If there's discomfort or resistance, spend some time exploring it. What needs might be present that this feeling is trying to care for? What are some ways of caring for these needs while remaining committed to justice?

NOTE: For more resources and ones linked here, visit www.nunsandnones.org/imagine.

TAKE ACTION

- **Land Acknowledgment.** As a first step to grow consciousness, begin any meeting concerning these themes with the practice of land acknowledgment. Explore bringing the practice to your entire community as a way to grow consciousness and begin conversations.
- **Boarding School Acknowledgment.** If your congregation had an Indian boarding school, develop a statement of acknowledgement and apology. Work with NABS and the affected communities to learn what appropriate actions might begin amends.
- **Build Relationships.** If your community does not already have ties to Indigenous groups or communities in your region, begin to seek out people or groups in good standing with their tribe and the ideals of the climate justice movement. You can begin simply by asking around, joining mailing lists, and showing up when there

are calls for allyship at public events, meetings, or actions. If you're asking Indigenous leaders in your area for their time or expertise, offer an honorarium.

- **Share These Materials with your Estate Planner, Lawyer, or other Technical Supports.** Start a conversation about what might be possible where you live. Bring up the tools mentioned in this guide that decolonize and repatriate land. If you'd like support in connecting with practitioners experienced in this work, reach out to the N&N Land Justice team.

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BELOW: Four Winds transfer ceremony (credit: Photoprose PhotoGraphics)



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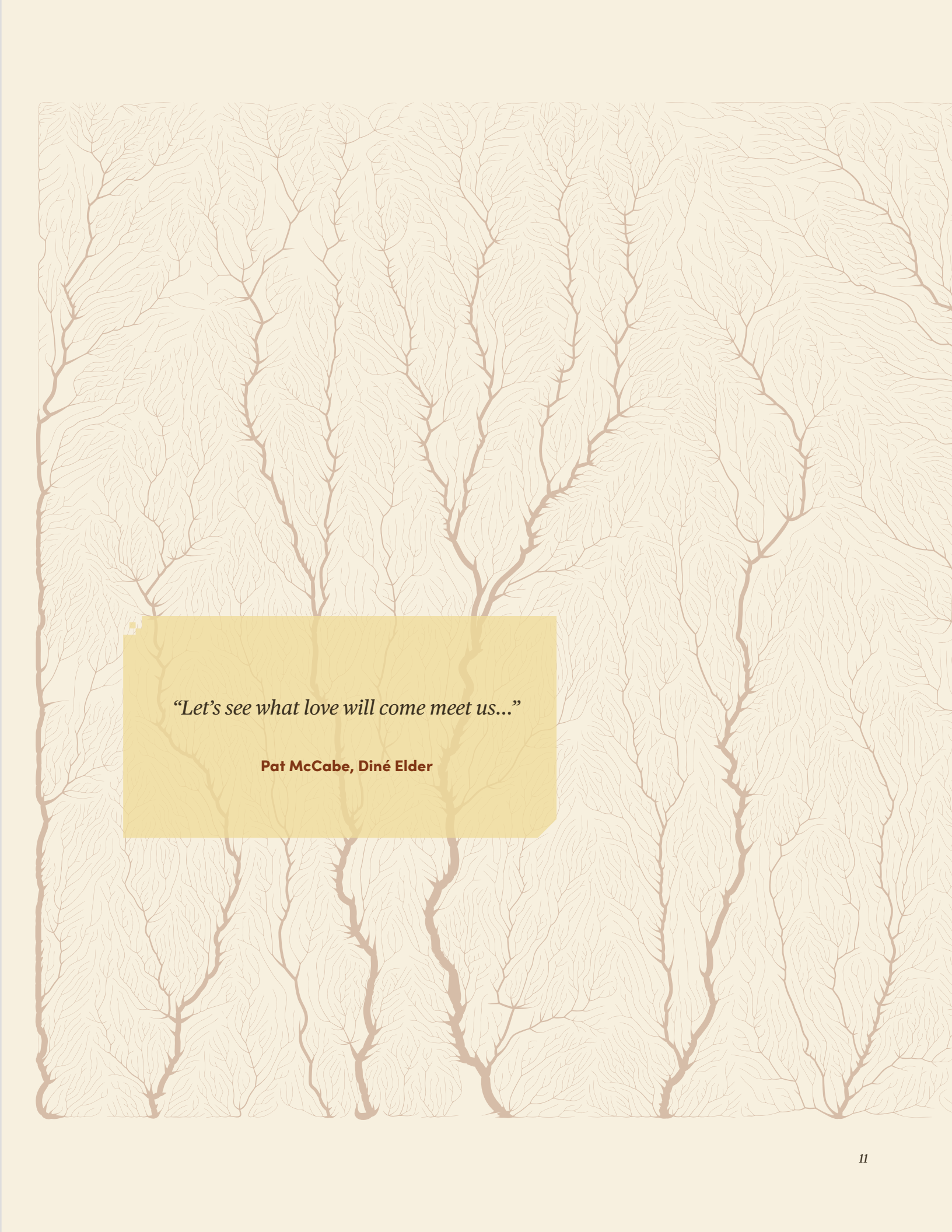
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“Let’s see what love will come meet us...”

Pat McCabe, Diné Elder

