

# The Return

*A Native Environmental Health Story*



Created by

**The Native Tradition, Environment and Community Health Project**



Dedicated to all the generous people whose time,  
energy, and wisdom helped craft this story.

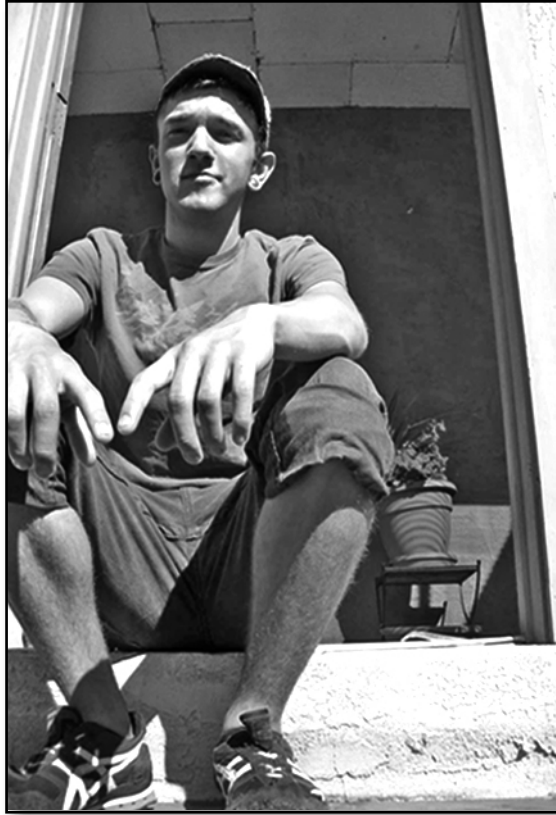
With special thanks to **Janice Brendible**, who first  
stood up and told the story that became *The Return*.



**Tradition, Environment And  
Community Health**

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## About the Artist

**N**icholas “Nico” Salazar was born in Santa Fe, New Mexico 1987 to a Spanish BBQ Chef and hardworking hazel-eyed fitness instructor. His early life was spent enjoying biscochito cookies and hearing ghost stories from his grandparents.

Ever since he could hold a pencil he has been creating works of art through painting, illustration, graphic design, jewelry, photography, and much more.

Nico is currently a student at the Institute of American Indian Arts pursuing a bachelors degree in painting and ceramics.

In 2009, Nico and his best friend founded the design house known as The Soft Museum where they collaborate on jewelry design, fine art and fashion photography.

Nico resides in Santa Fe awaiting his next adventure. Until then he dances, creates, and daydreams in his little home in the high desert.

**The Soft Museum • [www.thesoftmuseum.com](http://www.thesoftmuseum.com)**

## About the Story

**T**he Native Tradition, Environment And Community Health (TEACH) Project began in 2008 with a small collaborative grant funded by the National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences. The Northwest Indian College and the Center for Ecogenetics and Environmental Health at the University of Washington shared the funding and co-managed the project.

In the Western scientific tradition, “Environmental Health” is the study of how the environment affects people in order to promote healthier lives. One of the goals of the Native TEACH Project was to find out how Native ways of understanding the world and our place in it might lead to a unique understanding of environmental health – a “NATIVE Environmental Health Science.”

To do this, we got input from Tribal college students, staff and faculty from 30 Tribal colleges around the U.S. We did this through a combination of talking circles, interviews, and written surveys administered at the Northwest Indian College and at the 2009 American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) student conference in Missoula, MT.

When we sifted through the information we gathered, we identified three core themes that seemed to appear over and over: Community, Wellness, and Inter-Relationship.

Each of these core themes contains many rich associations and layers. Each theme can best be understood as a circle. Native Environmental Health Science is the study of how these three circles intersect and overlap, and what this means for our actions as individuals and communities.

The Return is an original story based on our research findings. With it, we hope to share the essence of what we learned from the rich conversations we had with Tribal college students, staff and faculty. It can be read quietly or aloud, used as a coloring book, or even serve as the spark for a group or classroom discussion. Mostly though, it is meant as a gift back to the many people who helped create it by sharing their time, insights, and wisdom.

## Contributors

(in alphabetical order)

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**The Center for Ecogenetics and Environmental Health • [www.ecogenetix.org](http://www.ecogenetix.org)**

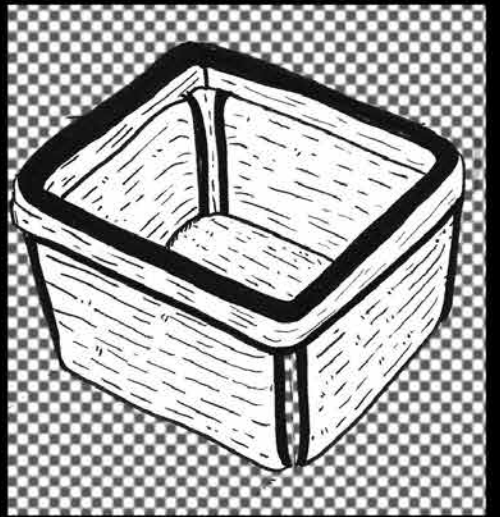
**The Northwest Indian College • [www.nwic.org](http://www.nwic.org)**

**The Native TEACH Project • [www.nativeteach.org](http://www.nativeteach.org)**

**The National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences • [www.niehs.nih.gov](http://www.niehs.nih.gov)**



This is a story of a woman who knows that her baby is coming soon.



She wants to take advantage of the late summer and finish gathering berries.

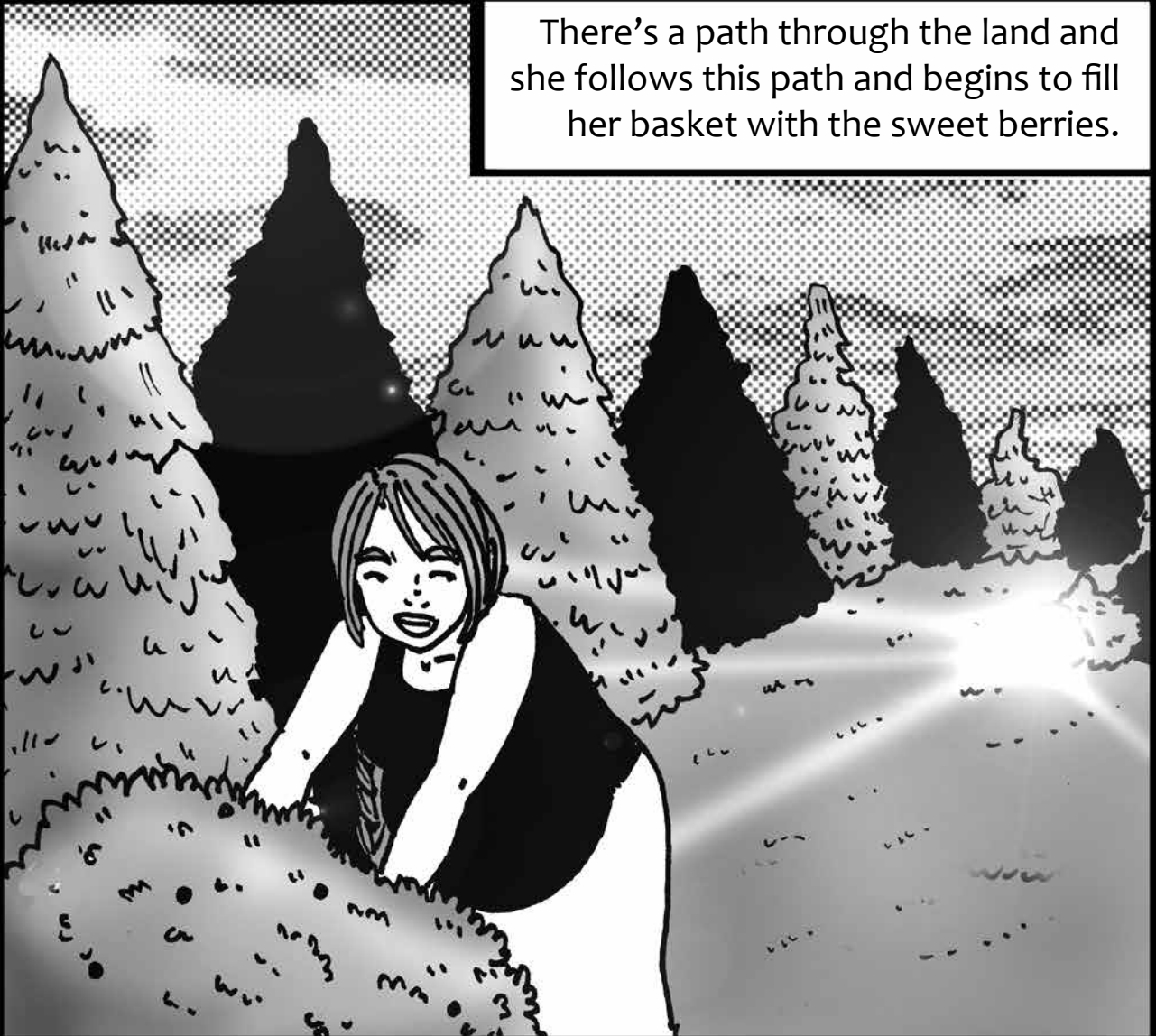


She finds a beautiful place full of all different sorts of berry bushes.

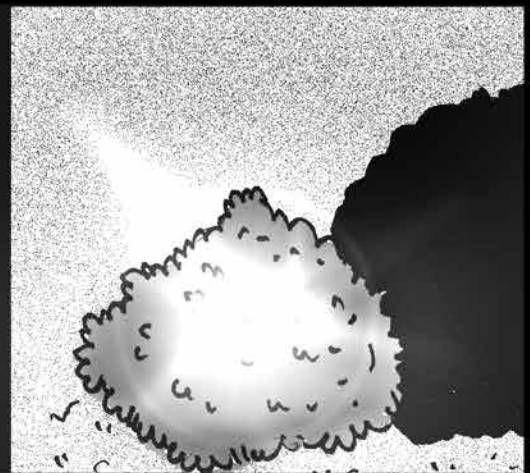


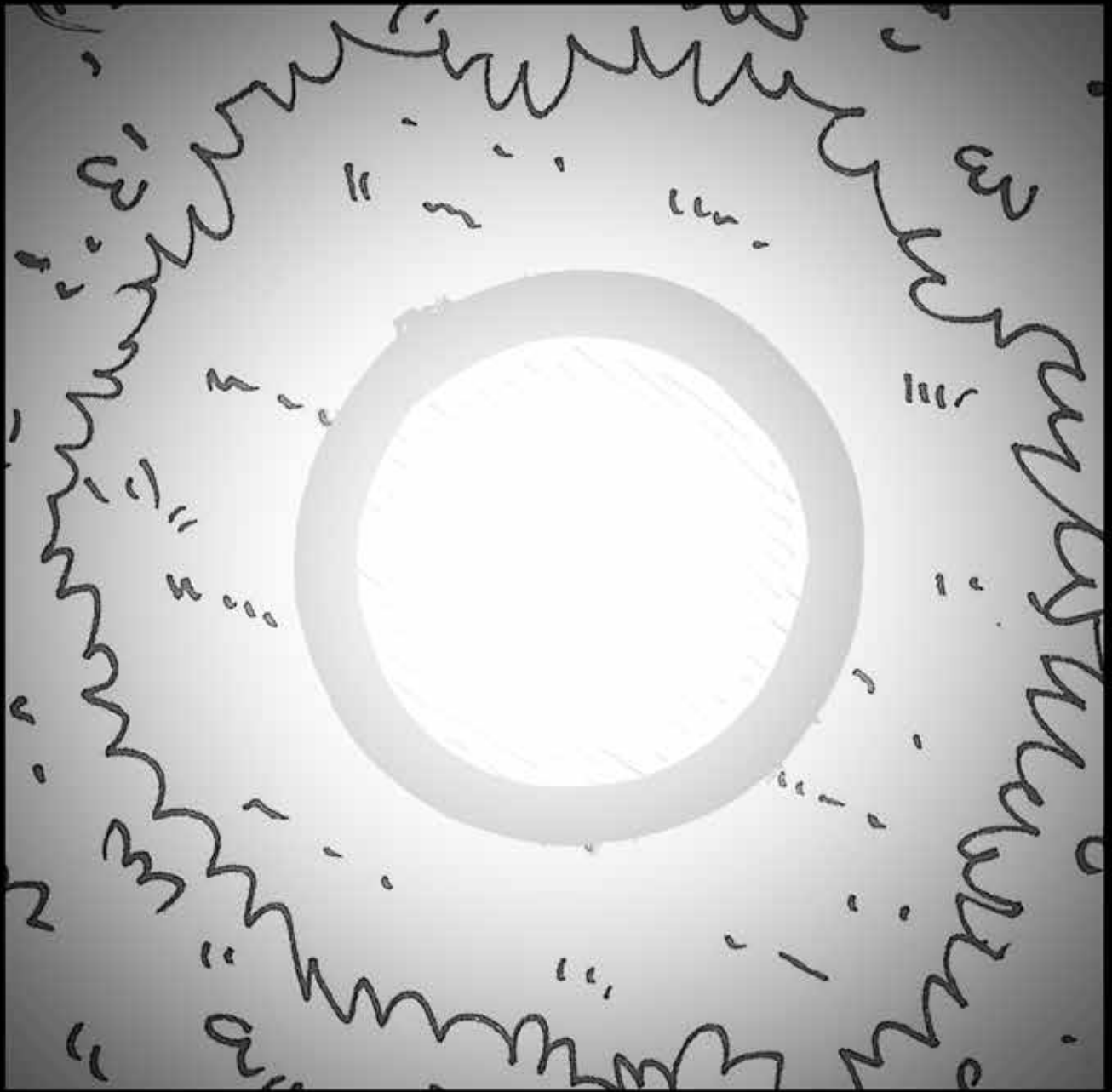


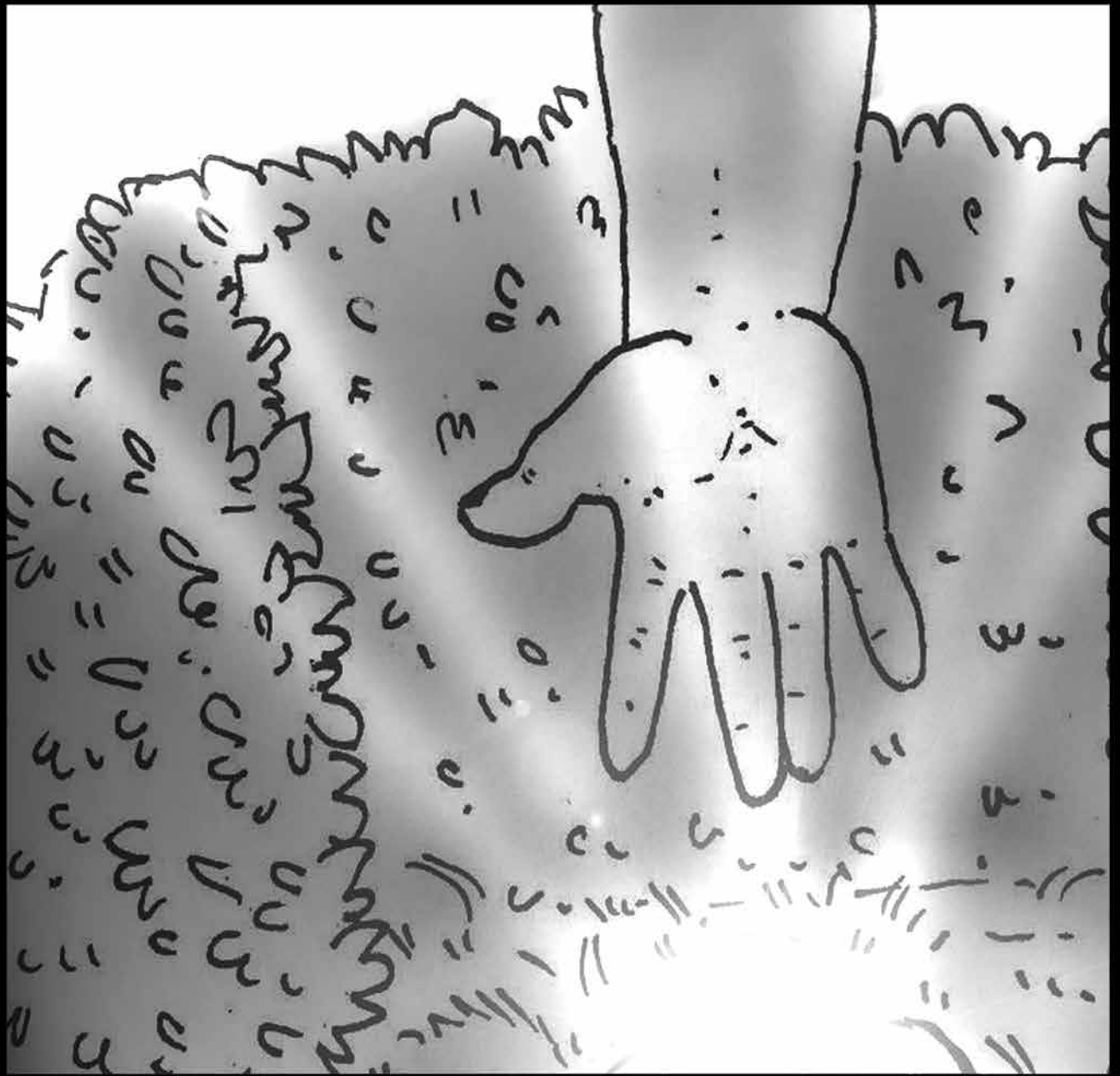
There's a path through the land and she follows this path and begins to fill her basket with the sweet berries.



As she's gathering, a bright circle buried deep within a bush catches her eye.

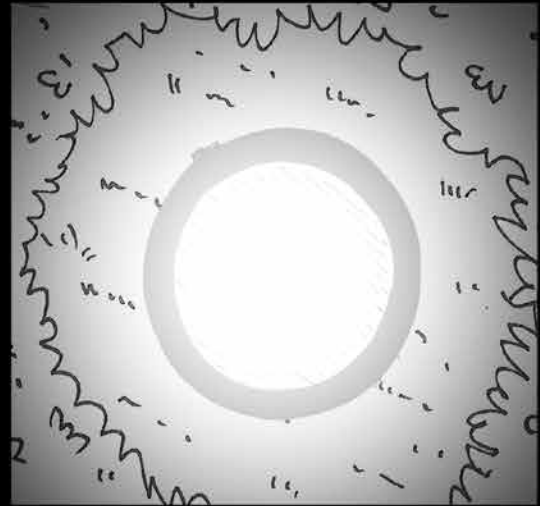






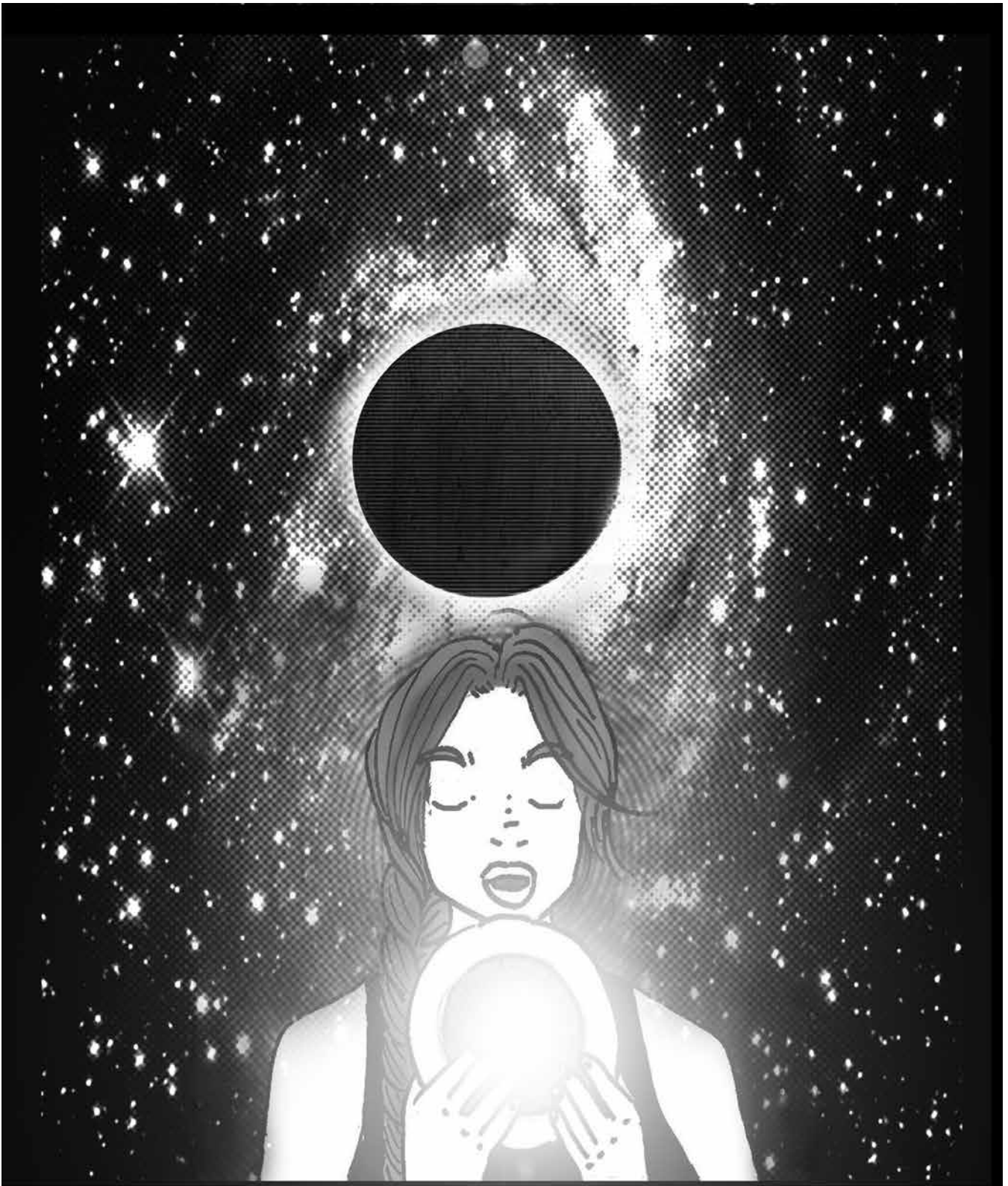


She reaches in and pulls out the circle.

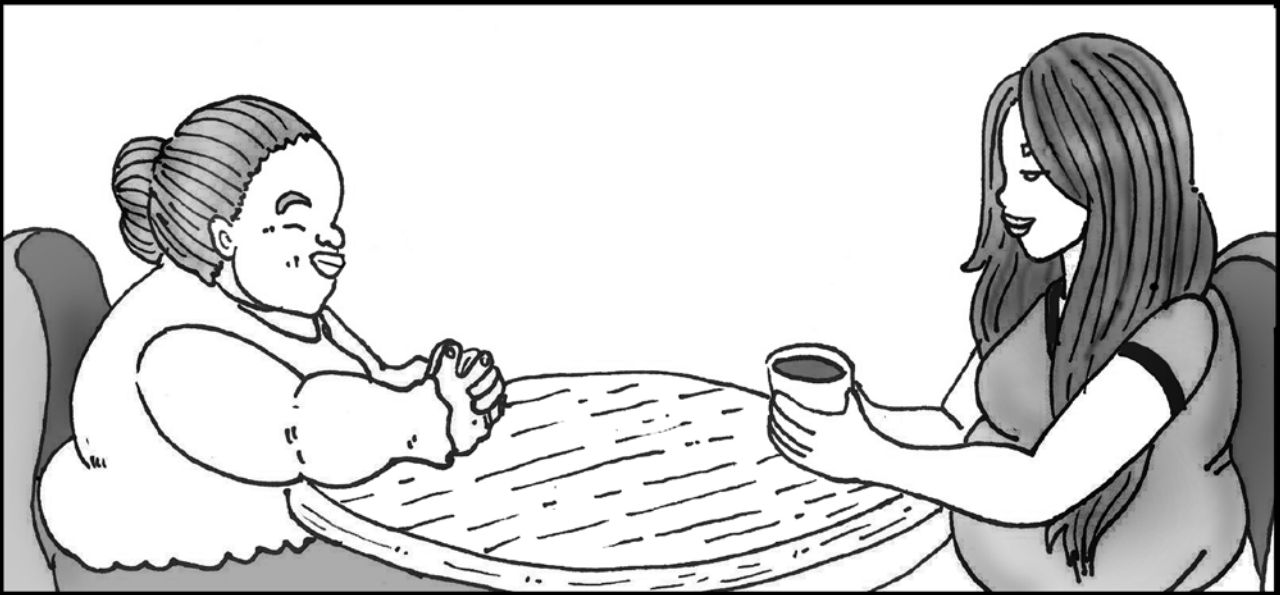


She sees that it's a table - a round kitchen table. She stops her picking to look at what she's found.

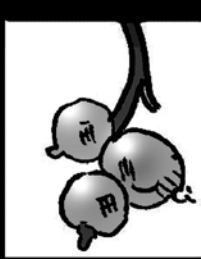




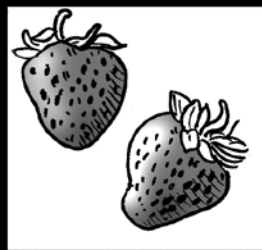
The table is made from heavy, dark wood that is worn smooth from much use.



She rejoices in the fact that this table is big enough not only for her and her new baby, but also for her family and her community.

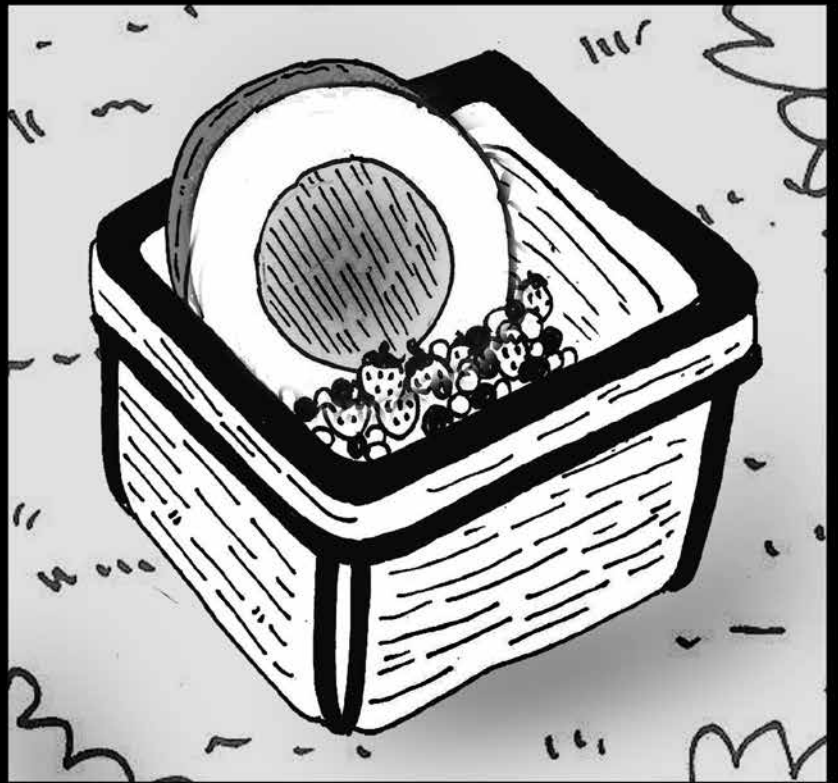


It is a place where people can come together to solve problems, to share stories, to cry and laugh and help one another.



This table is Community.

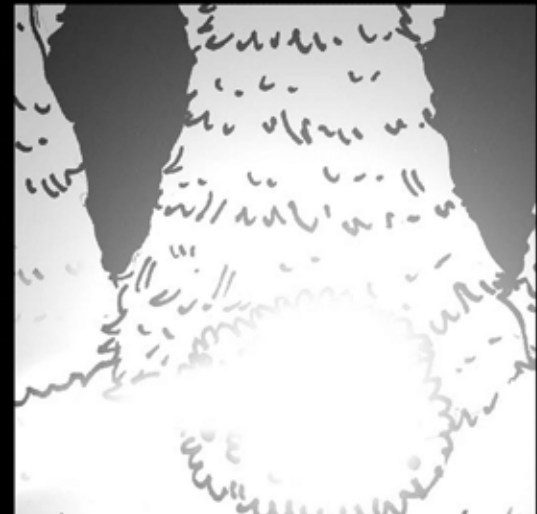




The woman  
begins  
picking  
again.



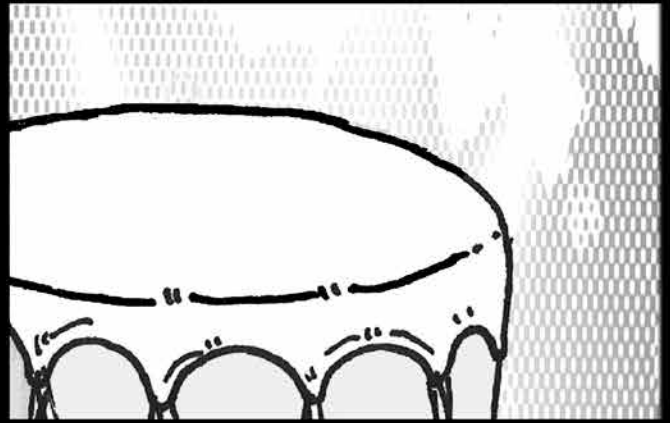
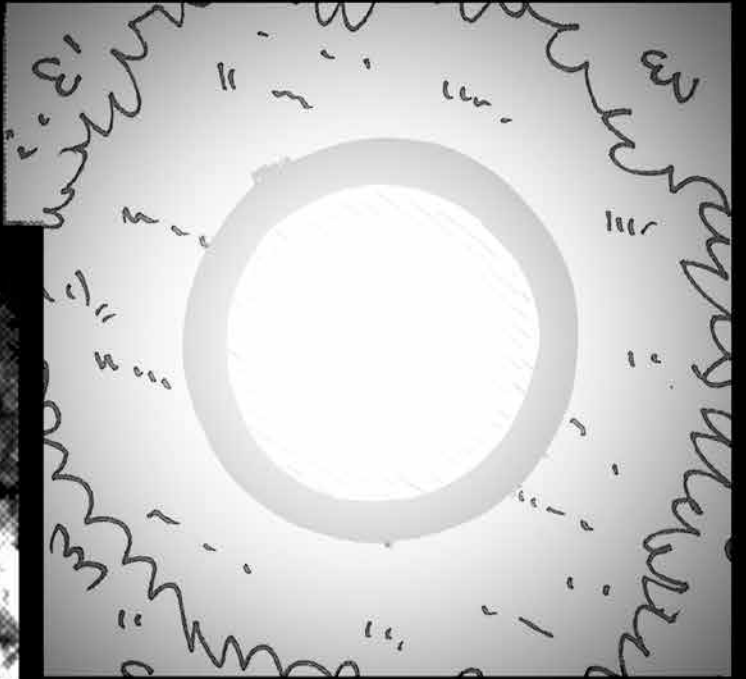
Soon a  
bright circle  
draws her  
attention  
from deep  
within a  
bush.







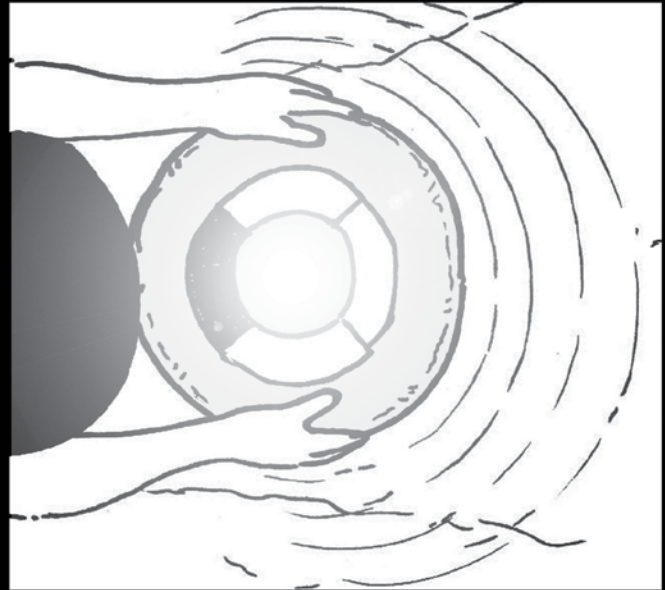
She reaches in and pulls out the circle . . .



. . . and sees that it's a drum.



She stops to rest from her gathering and look at this new gift she's been given.



The drum is perfect in form and she holds it to her to warm it and feels how the drum carries the mystery of life and creation.





It reminds her of the baby she carries and how she and he are separate, but connected.

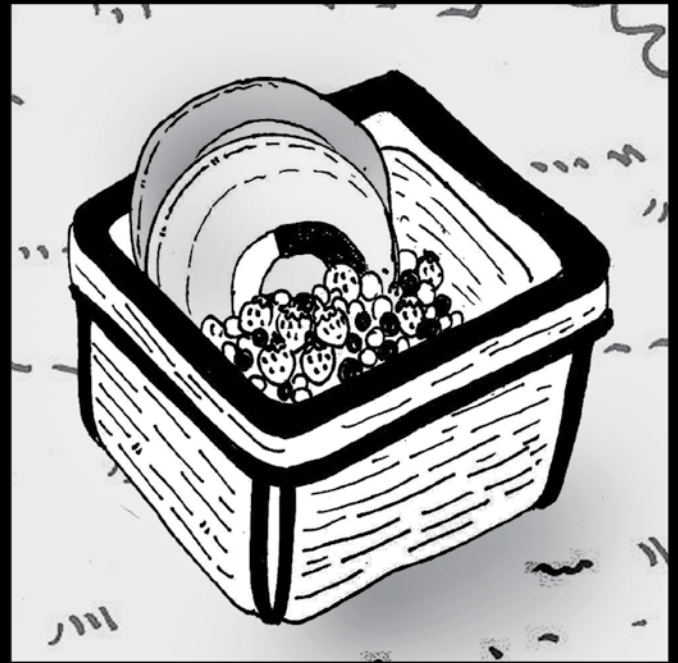
What she eats, he eats. What she drinks, he drinks. We are like that with the Earth too, she thinks.



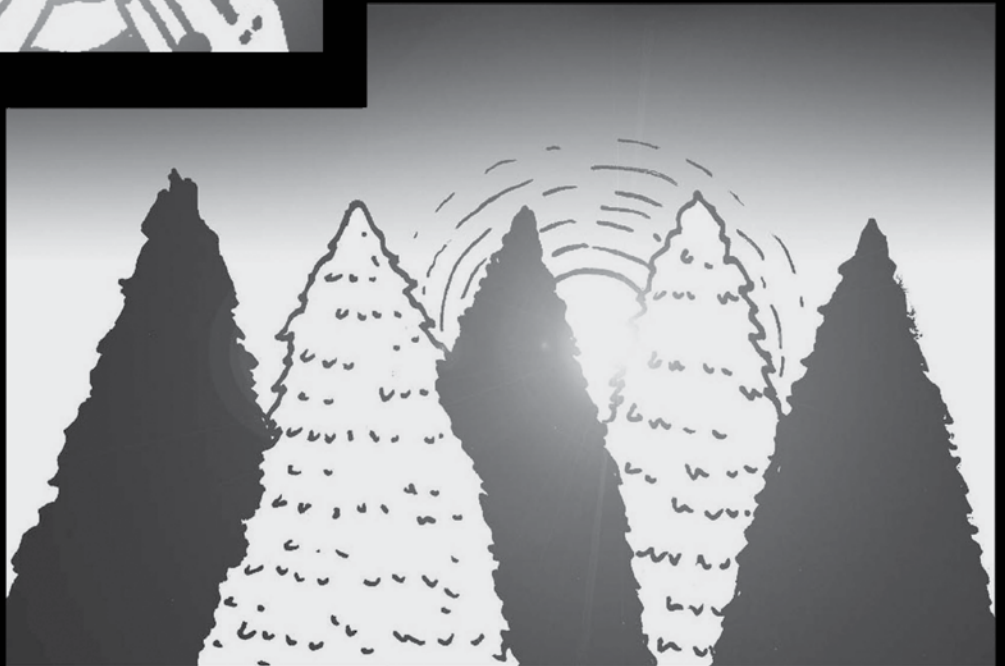




It is our womb and we are so dependent upon her for survival. How we treat Mother Earth is the most important legacy we leave our children. This drum is Wellness.



The woman continues picking.

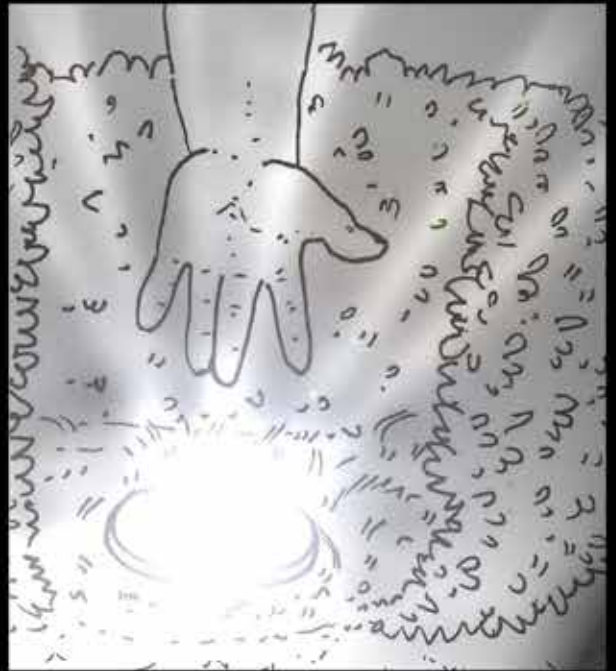
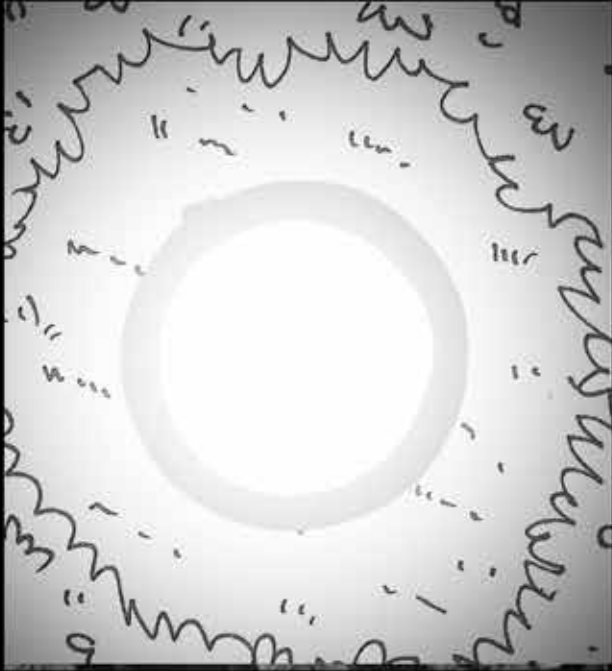




When her basket is full and she is ready to rest, another circle of light catches her eye.



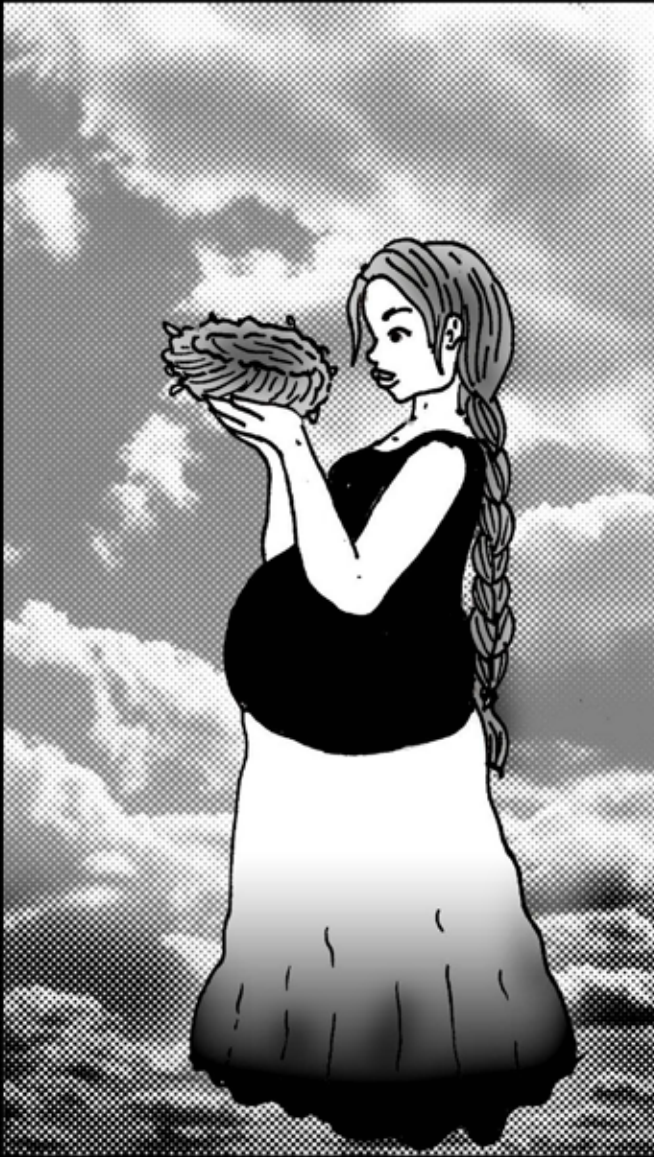




She reaches in and pulls out the circle and sees that it's a nest - a round, delicately woven bird's nest.



She stops to look at what she's found. The nest is made from tiny, fragile reeds and twigs, but the nest is strong and sturdy because of how wisely these are joined together.



She imagines the baby birds that were raised in this nest and hears the harmony of their voices joined in song.



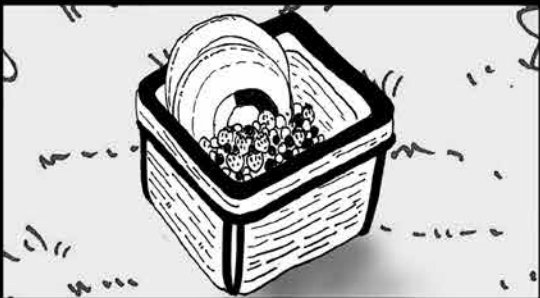
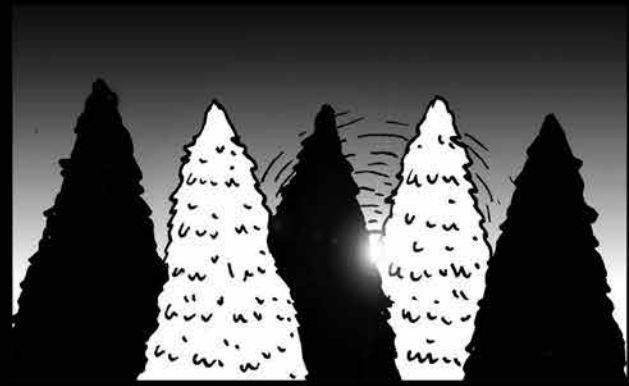
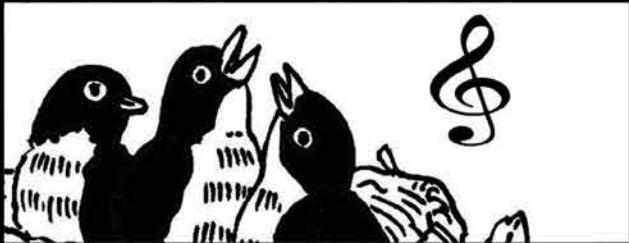




She rejoices  
that the  
nest will  
remind her  
to raise  
her baby  
to seek  
balance and  
harmony  
and the  
power of  
unity.

This nest is  
Inter-Relationship.







Several  
winters pass  
and now  
her baby is  
playing at  
her feet.

He plays  
with the  
three circles  
she found  
many  
summers  
ago.

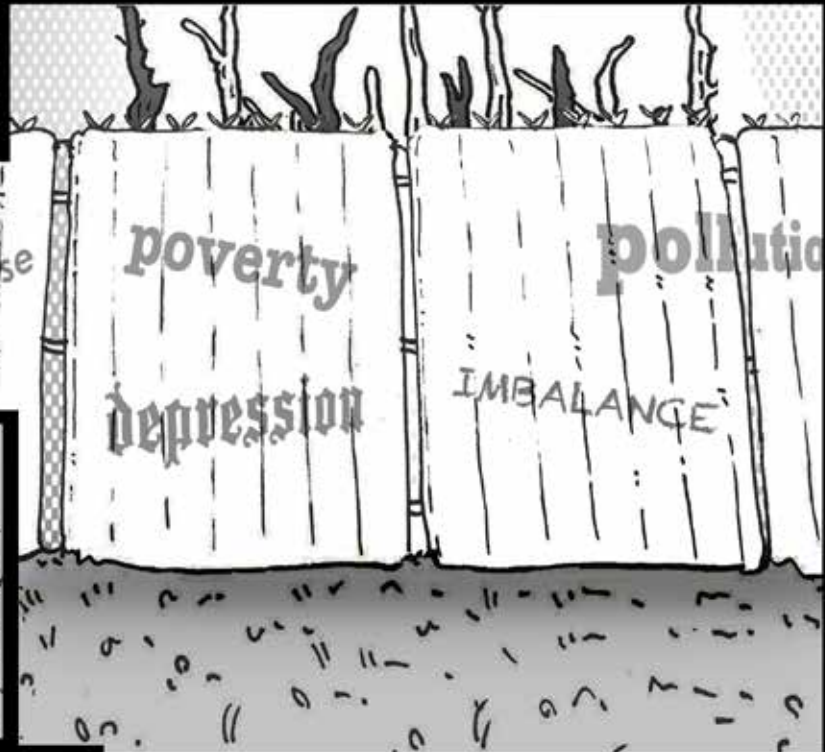


Her baby plays with the table,  
her baby plays with the drum,  
and her baby plays with the nest.

One summer day she decides to return to the beautiful place to show him where she found his playthings - he's curious and she wants to show him everything. She takes him by the hand and leads him there.



A tall hard fence now surrounds the berry bushes and she can't climb over it and she can't climb under it.



The fence has spaces between the boards and through these openings she can see that the land is brown and dying.



There are no berries left. Everything is sick.

The woman sits down on the hard ground and cries, for she wanted to show her baby how beautiful it was and she wanted to show him the gift of abundance that Mother Earth provides . . .



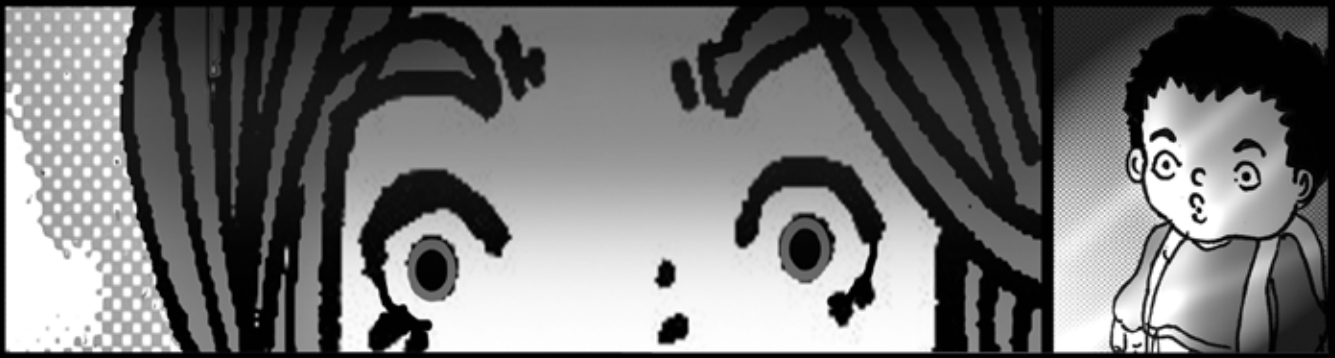
. . . but now there's nothing there.



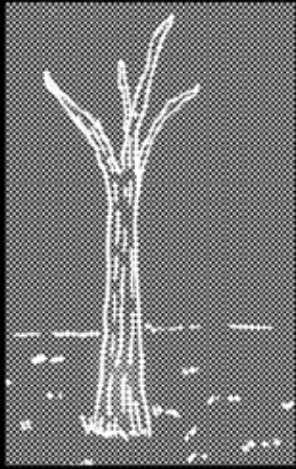
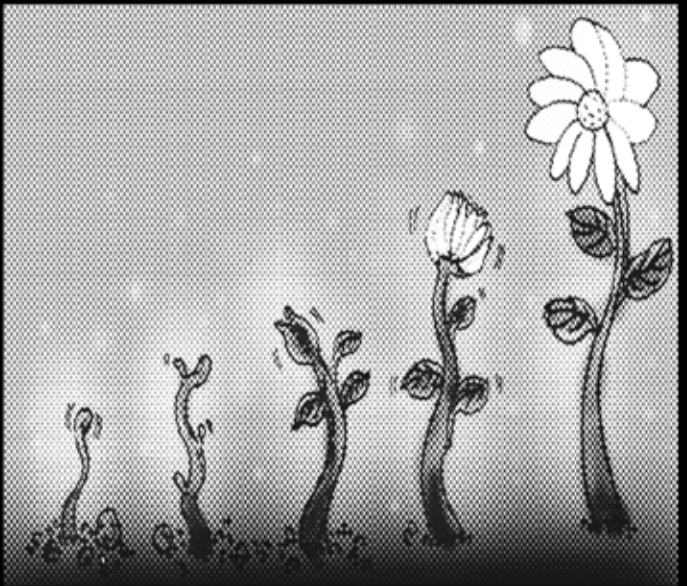
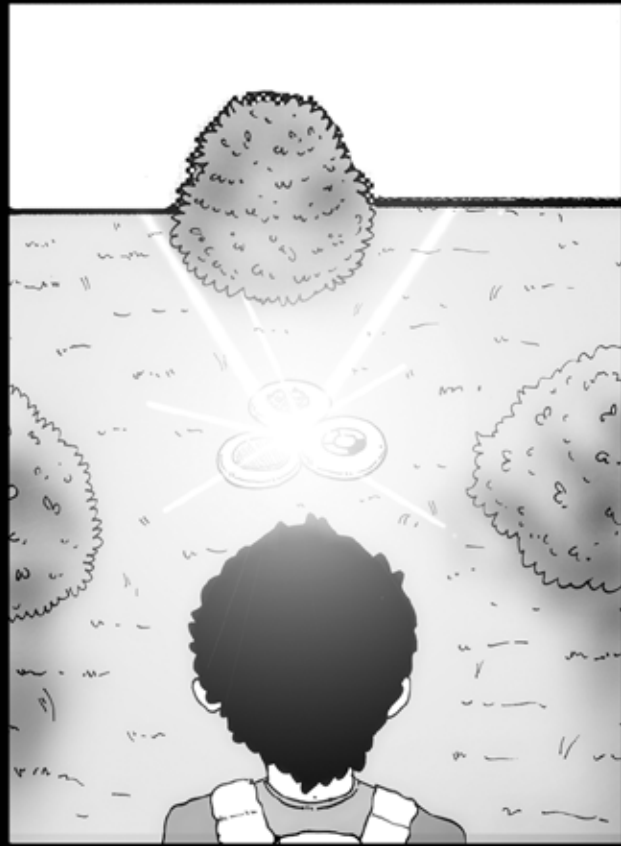
As she sits weeping, her baby gently gathers up the basket with the playthings and slips through a space in the fence. He goes over to the land and carefully returns the table, the drum, and the nest to the ground.







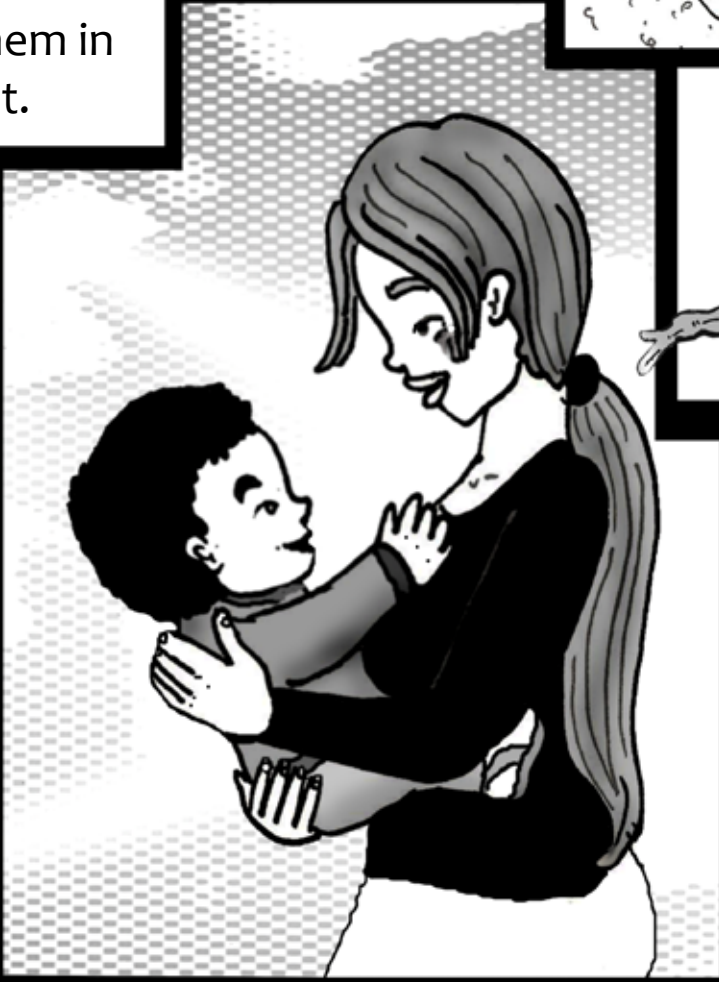
As soon as the last plaything has been returned, everything flourishes. The bushes turn a bright, apple green with fresh new growth.





Flowers bloom, drop their petals, and ripen to rich, red berries.

The baby laughs and begins picking the berries and placing them in the basket.



The woman sees the tradition being carried on through her baby and her tears turn to tears of joy and pride.



The End



## Discussion Guide

The story of *The Return* is meant to make you think about how your individual health, the health of your community and the health of the environment are connected. It is also a story about traditions and what they mean for our health and the health of our planet.

Here are a few questions you might consider raising in a classroom, talking circle, or around the dinner table with friends and family.

### Digging Deeper

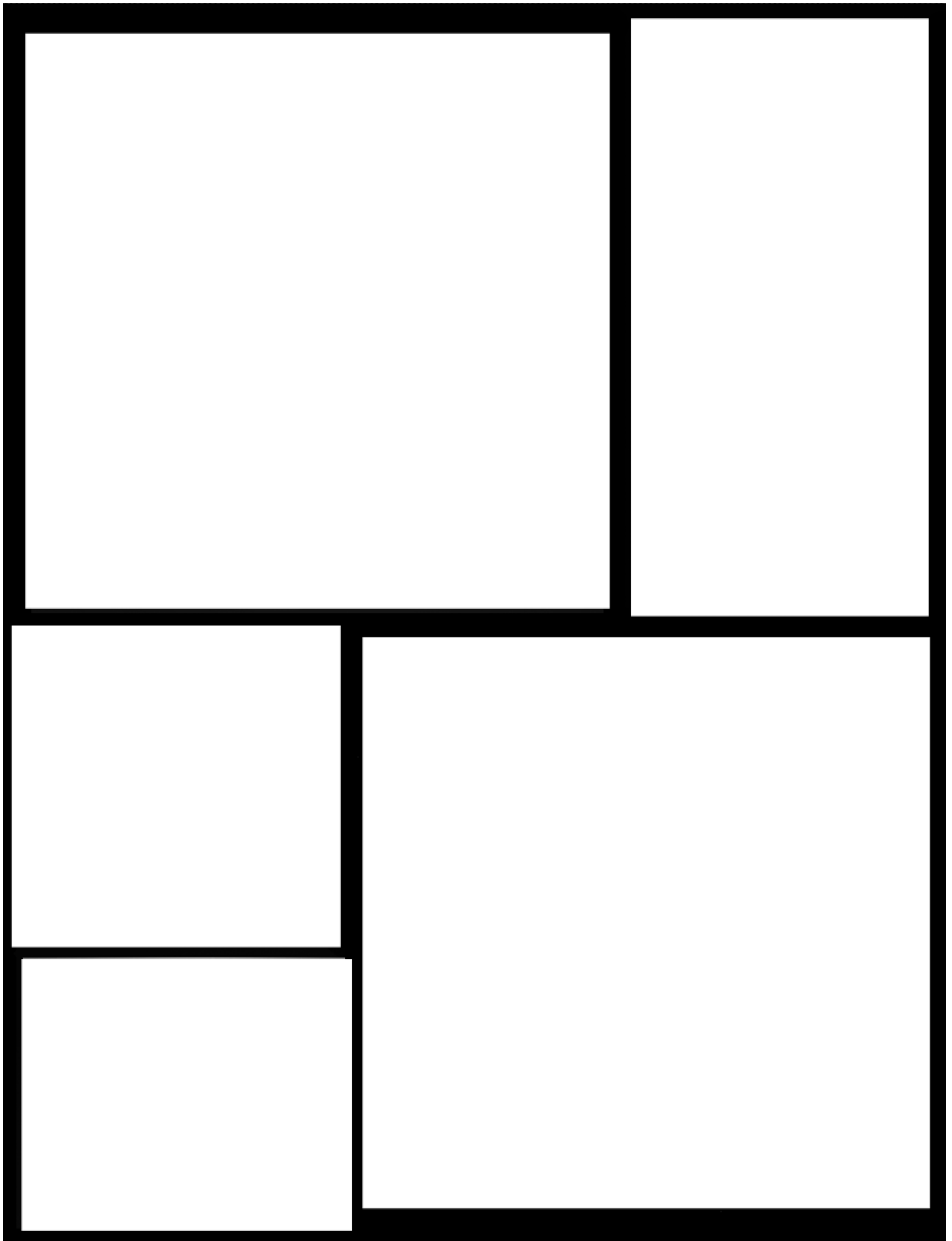
1. In the story, the woman finds three objects while she's out picking berries: a table, a drum, and a nest. What does each object symbolize to her? To you?
2. In the story, when the woman and the little boy go back to visit the berry patch, what do they find? Why do you think the berry patch is in the condition that it is?
3. In the story, the little boy sneaks through a gap in the fence to where the berry bushes used to be and returns the three objects to the earth. What happens next? Why?

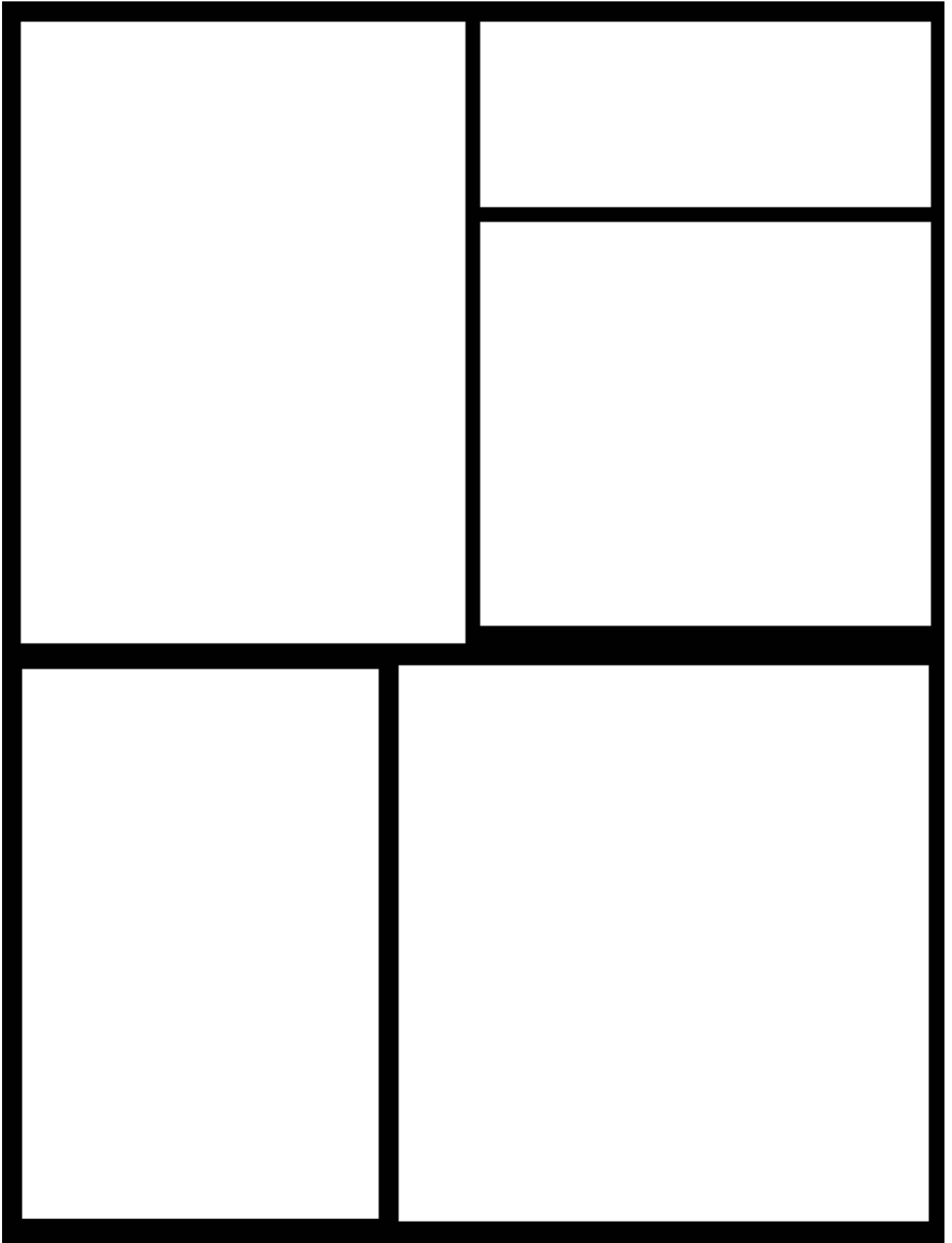
### Making it Personal

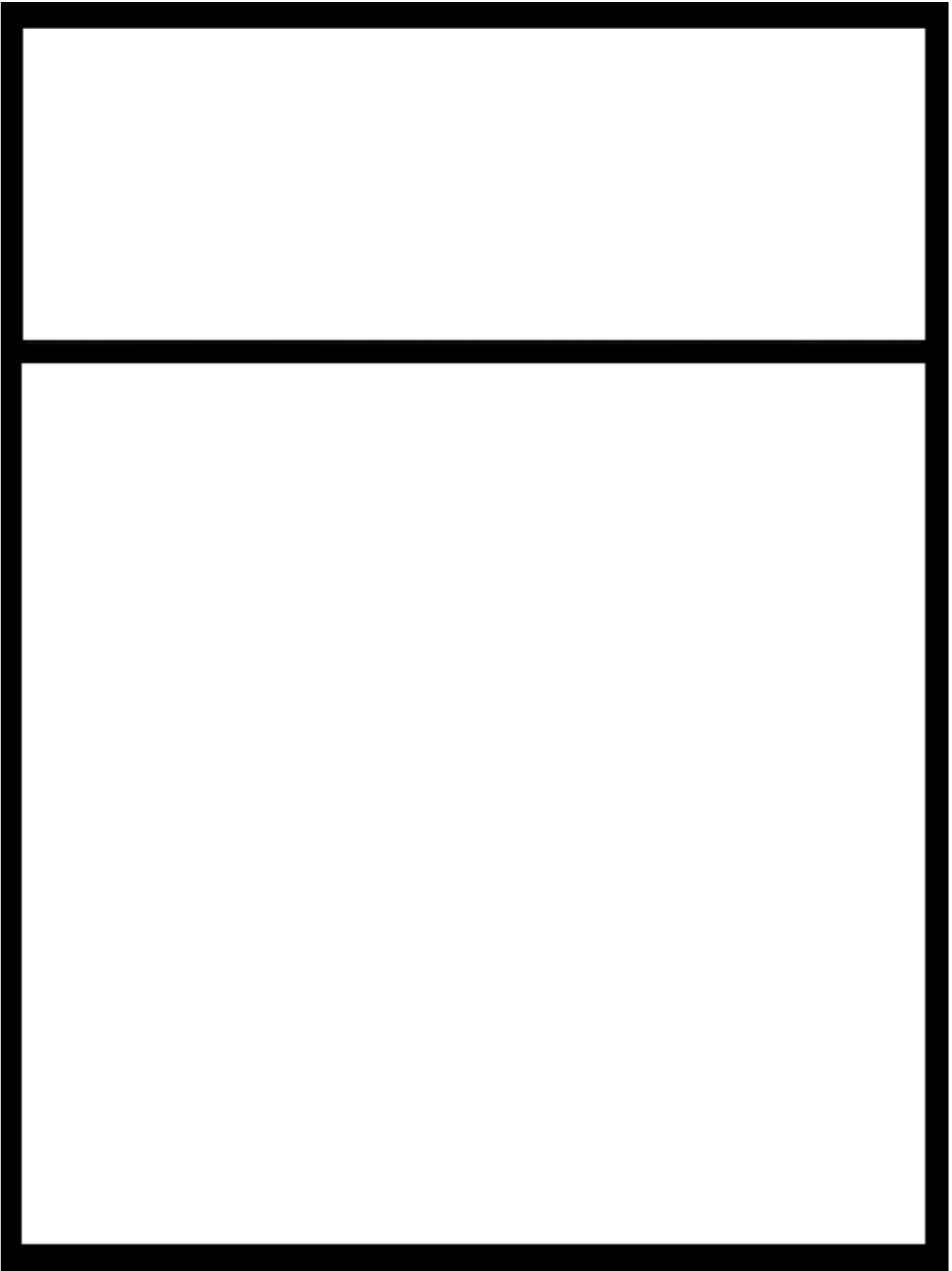
1. What does community mean to you?
2. What does it mean to you as an individual to be “well” or “healthy?”
3. What does a healthy community look like to you?
4. What traditions do you have in your community that help keep the environment clean and healthy?

### You Be the Artist

1. What words and/or pictures come to mind when you think about each of the three circles of Native Environmental Health: Community, Wellness, and Inter-Relationship? Use these words and/or pictures to create a poster that completes the sentence “Native Environmental Health is . . .”
2. On the following pages, create a comic book of your own that tells a story about your community, the environment, and health.













**Tradition, Environment And  
Community Health**

