The way of sowing: A Vision for Sustainability

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Keywords: sustainability; Kingfisher fables; ecological restoration; cultural additivity; Culture Tower; autoethnography.

Abstract. *This paper develops the idea of the* 'way of sowing' *as a reflective conceptual essay informed by autoethnographic methods and as a theoretical vision for sustainability. It begins from a personal encounter with restoration ecology at Colorado State University, where the author first watched Frédéric Back's animated film* 'The Man Who Planted Trees' *and later conducted fieldwork in the degraded landscapes of western Colorado under the guidance of Professor Mark W. Paschke. Through this autoethnographic material, the paper reflects on ecological restoration not merely as a technical procedure, but as a moral, cultural and intergenerational practice: one prepares the soil,*

selects native species, records both survival and failure, and then allows nature to do its part. In dialogue with the kingfisher fables by Professor Vuong Quan Hoang, the paper reconnects these lessons with Eastern philosophical traditions, especially the Vietnamese synthesis of Confucian, Buddhist and Daoist values articulated through cultural additivity and the Culture Tower. The central argument is that sustainability cannot be reduced to green technology, policy design or finance. At its deepest level, sustainability requires a civilizational ethic of sowing: disciplined action, non-possessive giving, humility before nature, and trust in futures that one may never personally witness.

> Kingfisher gives a lecture: – When it is a matter of life and death, to survive, one must be intelligent. The bird pupils ask: – What is the philosophy you swear by? Kingfisher puffs out his chest: – Don't be greedy. Let the greedy fools fight among themselves for a treasure!
>
> In 'Luck'; *Wild Wise Weird* (2025)

1. Introduction and methodological positioning

Sustainability is among the most heavily theorized concepts of our time, and it has acquired new urgency in the geological epoch now widely termed the Anthropocene (Crutzen, 2006), in which several of the planetary boundaries that define a safe operating space for humanity have already been transgressed (Steffen et al., 2015). Yet within many technocratic framings of sustainability, the ethical, pedagogical and intergenerational dispositions that sustain long-term ecological care often remain less visible than policies, technologies and indicators.

Policies are designed, technologies deployed, indicators tracked – and all of these are needed – but the deeper question of how individuals, communities and institutions cultivate the dispositions that make long-term ecological care possible is rarely the focus of formal analysis. This paper enters that gap by way

of a single thirteen-year arc of practice and reflection: how a Vietnamese student of environmental economics came to recognize, in the work of an American restoration ecologist and in the fables of a Vietnamese kingfisher, a shared civilizational ethic that he came to call the way of sowing. This paper is best described as a reflective conceptual essay informed by autoethnographic methods, in which personal narrative is treated as scholarly material rather than as biographical ornament. Autoethnography is now an established methodology in qualitative inquiry and, increasingly, in environmental humanities and sustainability scholarship (Ellis et al., 2011; Adams et al., 2015). It rests on the recognition that the researcher's situated experience can illuminate phenomena – such as restoration ethics, intergenerational care, and cross-cultural value transmission – that resist purely third-person observation. The argument advanced here does not depend on the singularity of one person's biography; it depends on what that biography is asked to show.

Three commitments organize the method. First, the narrative is treated as a site of theory, not as illustration of theory worked elsewhere. Encounters with degraded landscapes in western Colorado, the mentorship practices of a restoration ecologist, and a Vietnamese kingfisher fable collection are read for the conceptual claims they enact. Second, the analysis is comparative and reflexive: a Western field scientist and an East Asian fabular tradition are placed in deliberate conversation to explore, rather than assume, the cross-cultural resonance of an ethic of sowing. Third, the paper does not present a conventional empirical dataset. Instead, it is grounded in autoethnographic material: situated memories, emotionally charged episodes, retrospective self-interpretation and cross-cultural reflection. Its primary contribution is conceptual, but the conceptual argument emerges from lived experience rather than detached abstraction. It proposes a vocabulary – the way of sowing – intended to be useful to sustainability research, education, and policy by naming a cluster of practices (patient preparation, recording failure, non-possessive giving, intergenerational trust) that current technocratic framings of sustainability tend to obscure.

The episodes selected for analysis were chosen not because they exhaust the author's experience, but because they repeatedly returned as formative scenes in later thinking about sustainability: the first viewing of *The Man Who Planted Trees*, fieldwork in western Colorado, the instruction to 'record the deaths too', and the later encounter with the kingfisher fables. These scenes are interpreted retrospectively. The paper therefore distinguishes between what was experienced at the time and what became intelligible only later through philosophical, ecological and cultural reflection.

The paper therefore stands closer to a reflexive position paper in the Leopoldian tradition of *A Sand County Almanac* (Leopold, 1949) and the more recent ecological-autoethnographic work of Kimmerer (Kimmerer, 2015) than to a conventional empirical study based on an independently collected dataset or to a literature review. Its claim is normative: that any vision for sustainability worth the name must include a defensible ethic of sowing, and that such an ethic has both Eastern and Western roots that become visible only through attention to lived practice.

2. The first seed

My journey with the United States began in August 2010, when I arrived at Colorado State University to pursue a master's degree in Resource and Environmental Economics. Those two years were a period of double initiation. I was learning how to live in Fort Collins, and I was also encountering for the first time a distinct Western way of thinking about land, forests, natural resources and ecological degradation. Some of that way of thinking resonated with what I had carried from Viet Nam. Much of it challenged me.

Near the end of my master's programme, I wished to remain at Colorado State University for doctoral study. I needed a professor willing to accept me as a student and, just as importantly, some form of financial support. I had heard that there was a well-known professor in the university who worked on ecological restoration (Paschke et al., 2000; Paschke, McLendon, et al., 2000), a field close to my emerging interests, so I knocked on the office door of Professor Mark W. Paschke. I had little to present: a set of still indistinct research ideas and a sincere desire to learn. Mark listened without interrupting and without haste. A few weeks later, he told me that he might be able to arrange a small scholarship for me.

Only much later did I understand how extraordinary that gesture was. Mark did not know who I was. He could not know what this young student would become, whether he would do useful work, or whether he would be worthy of the scholarship. Looking back, I interpret Mark's gesture as the recognition of a young person who wanted to learn and as an act of trust in a future that neither of us could yet see. That was the first seed he sowed in me, before I knew of Bouffier, before I had a language for wuwei, and before I had any concept of the way of sowing.

I do not claim that this experience was unique in any simple sense. Other students may have encountered Mark's mentorship differently, and some may have received similar forms of trust and support. Its significance for this paper lies elsewhere. For me, as an international student far from Viet Nam, uncertain about funding, language, culture and institutional belonging, the gesture became formative because it occurred at a moment of vulnerability. It was personal in its effect, pedagogical in its form, cultural in its cross-border setting, ecological in the field practices it later enabled, and civilizational in the vocabulary of sowing it eventually made possible.

In August 2012, I officially became his doctoral student. In the spring of the following year, I entered the course I had long been waiting for: Ecological Restoration (NR 478/678), taught by Mark himself. By then the United States was no longer unfamiliar to me; I had lived there for two and a half years. Yet I felt a different kind of anticipation. I was finally going to learn directly from the teacher who had quietly created the conditions for my intellectual life to continue. I entered the classroom, opened my notebook, placed my pen between my fingers and prepared to record the ecological concepts I assumed would form the core of the course: the history of ecological restoration, ecological succession, reference conditions, the biological, physical and chemical limits of degraded soils, and restoration methods for different ecosystems.

Mark, whom I remember as a man with a gentle face, a calm gait and a low, slow voice, did not begin with any of those concepts. These remembered details are shaped by gratitude, but they also have an analytical role in this account: his slowness, silence and attentiveness gave bodily form to the temporality of ecological restoration before I understood that temporality as a concept. He turned off the lights, switched on the projector and said only this: 'Today, we are going to watch a film. After it ends, sit quietly for a moment before saying anything'.

The film was *The Man Who Planted Trees*, the animated short directed by Frédéric Back and based on Jean Giono's story (Back, 1987; Giono, 1953). It contains little dialogue. It moves through a warm narrative voice and soft, almost dreamlike hand-drawn images. The story centres on Elzéard Bouffier, an old shepherd living alone in a barren part of Provence in southern France in the early twentieth century. Every day, he walks silently across dry stony hills, carrying a bag of acorns and a small iron rod. He plants seeds, not for himself, because he knows that he will not live to see the oaks become a forest. He plants for no one in particular: for the soil, for the wind, for a future he will never see.

Two world wars passed. People still do not know him. Then, after many decades, the narrator returns to Provence and finds a vast forest, flowing streams, birds returning and villages coming back to life. All this has emerged from the quiet labour of one shepherd.

When the lights came back on, the classroom was completely silent. I remember the scene with unusual clarity. Mark did not speak at once. He looked out of the window, where a maple tree was turning yellow, then turned back to us, smiled gently and said: 'That is ecological restoration. For the rest of the course, we will only learn how to understand, with scientific tools, what Bouffier did with his hands'.

At that time, I regarded the film as a beautiful opening to a course. I did not know that the seed it planted in me would take more than a decade to germinate fully. Nor did I yet realize that Mark himself was my Bouffier.

3. Western Colorado is the place where the land teaches

The summers of 2015 and 2017 are seasons I will never forget. Following Mark, our research group travelled deep into the mountains of western Colorado, to landscapes that coal mining, uranium mining and other extractive activities had once disturbed (Fig. 1). These operations had torn through the land and left behind surfaces so bare that the wind seemed to pass over them like breath across exposed bone.

Figure 1. Prof. Mark Paschke (centre) leading the field team in western Colorado, summer 2017

The landscape possessed a haunting beauty. The sky was high and deeply blue. Clouds moved quickly. The soil was red-grey and almost without vegetation. Amid those seemingly dead lands were the restoration plots Mark had designed years earlier: small squares in which he had sown native species such as Artemisia, bunchgrasses and drought-tolerant shrubs.

My work was simple: count surviving seedlings, record coordinates and take photographs. Plant by plant. Plot by plot. Elevation by elevation. On some days, I would bend over a square plot for an entire morning to count a few dozen seedlings, each thinner than a toothpick.

The land of western Colorado is exceptionally harsh. Rain is rare. The sun burns. Nights can be cold. Soils carry the chemical memory of mining, including heavy metals and other disturbances. For a seedling to take root there is already a small miracle. Some species that Mark planted would reveal only years later whether they were alive or dead. Some plots appeared to have failed, then suddenly, in a later season, turned green. Nature has its own rhythm. Mark did his work and then waited patiently.

I remember one morning when I was counting surviving plants (Fig. 2) in a plot and murmured: 'Mark, this plot is almost entirely dead'. He sat down beside me, looked at the plot for a long while and replied: 'Then we record it exactly as it is. Record the deaths too. The dead numbers also teach us something'.

Figure 2. A native bladderpod (*Physaria acutifolia*) in bloom on a restoration plot in western Colorado

During those field trips, I learnt something that I would later recognize, when reading Laozi and Zhuangzi, as wuwei. By wuwei, I do not mean passivity or withdrawal from action. I understand it as non-coercive action: doing what is necessary with care and discipline, while refusing to force living processes into artificial human timetables. Mark did not try to force the land to become green. He did not design grandiose plans for quick reporting. He did the work that needed to be done: preparing the soil, selecting native species, sowing, recording and patiently observing. Then he allowed nature to do the rest.

Over time, I came to understand this not as resignation, but as a form of humility before ecological processes. Through Mark's practice, I learned that a human being is only one small participant in a much larger flow, and that scientific knowledge becomes most powerful when it recognizes its own limits.

This interpretation is not exclusively Daoist. It also resonates with what Robin Wall Kimmerer - a botanist trained in Western plant science and a citizen of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation - names the 'grammar of animacy', a way of approaching the more-than-human world as a community of teachers rather than a stock of resources (Kimmerer, 2015). Kimmerer argues that genuine restoration is reciprocal: humans receive instruction from the soil, the seedlings and the seasons, and contribute back through patient labour. I came to see Mark as practising precisely this reciprocity in the dry red-grey hills of western Colorado, although he would have used a different vocabulary. His insistence that we 'record the deaths too' is the same recognition Kimmerer names: the land speaks through its failures as well as its successes, and the honest scientist learns to listen to both.

At the time, I did not fully understand this. I only saw that Mark was calm, meticulous and rarely raised his voice. When I wrote a poor paragraph, he did not condemn it. He simply asked: 'Quy, what do you really want to say here?' When I struggled with visa problems, money, or family matters in Viet Nam, he did not comfort me with many words. He said one sentence and allowed me to continue walking by myself. Looking back, I interpret this restraint as another form of sowing: he created enough support for growth, but not so much control that the student could not learn to stand. I understand now that, in my memory, his pedagogy and his restoration practice converged.

4. Returning eastward

In 2018, I completed my PhD at Colorado State University. The image of Mark standing at the graduation ceremony and calling me 'Doctor Khuc' remains one of the images I will keep in my heart for the rest of my life.

I then continued a longer journey through different places. At the University of Alabama, I joined a research project on land acquisition in the global South. There, for the first time, I saw clearly another face of 'development': development without cultural roots and without moral responsibility is often only dispossession dressed in polite language. Ninety-nine-year land leases, Indigenous communities displaced, tropical forests burned for oil-palm plantations. I realized that without a way of sowing, much of what is called 'development' is destruction renamed.

In mid-2019, I returned to Viet Nam and then joined Phenikaa University. The COVID-19 pandemic was casting its shadow across the world. I was fortunate to meet Professor Quan-Hoang Vuong and a group of devoted colleagues. Together we published research on COVID-19, science journalism, public health system sustainability and the social psychology of crisis. Those years were at once anxious and intellectually energizing. We came to realize that even within a pandemic, there were seeds of knowledge that needed to be sown.

In 2021, I moved to the Faculty of Political Economy, and in 2022 to the Faculty of Development Economics, at the University of Economics and Business, Viet Nam National University, Hanoi. I continued working on environmental values, community-based sustainability and the interaction between culture and institutions. Yet beneath these different projects, the same question persisted: how can human beings and nature live together over the long term? I did not yet know that this was precisely the question Mark had planted in me in 2013. I was only learning to formulate it in my own language.

5. The Kingfisher as a catalyst for reflexivity

Then *Wild Wise Weird* (Figure 3), or 'Bói Cá' by Quan-Hoang Vuong, came to me. Bói Cá is not a specialized philosophical treatise. It is a collection of short, simple and sometimes peculiar fables in which fish (Vuong, 2025), birds and especially kingfishers become the central figures. Yet the more I read, the more I recognized beneath its surface a deep current of the 'three teachings as one': Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism interwoven into a Vietnamese mode of East Asian wisdom. This impression was not merely subjective. Vuong and

colleagues had previously used Bayesian methods to analyse Vietnamese folktales and demonstrate what they called cultural additivity: the accumulation and interaction of Confucian, Buddhist and Daoist values in the Vietnamese mind (Vuong et al., 2018). Reading Bói Cá, I realized that Professor Vuong had in a sense enacted his own theory through literary language, transforming Bayesian insight into fable. This interpretation is supported by Nguyen's review of Wild Wise Weird, which argues that the collection uses wit, wisdom and absurdity to awaken readers to blind spots in the human-nature relationship and to foster awareness, self-reflection and ecological sustainability (Nguyen, 2025).

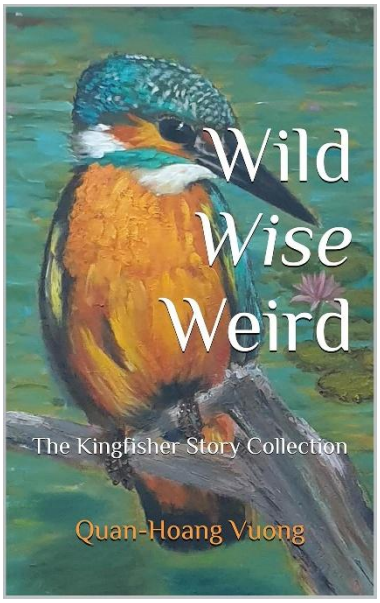

Figure 3. The Kingfisher story collection by Prof. Quan-Hoang Vuong

There is another feature of Bói Cá that I was able to name only gradually: its intentional absurdity (Nguyen & Ho, 2026). Many stories in the book begin from situations so strange that they become comic: a kingfisher inventing a button to inflate its belly and frighten enemies, an old man fishing with a straight hook, and many other impossible events. Yet the absurdity is precisely the key. Recent methodological work on the absurdist approach suggests that when the mind encounters what appears impossible, it is forced to stop; in that pause, hidden assumptions are exposed. Absurdity is not meaninglessness. It is a narrow gate

into reflexivity. This is also the spirit Zhuangzi used more than two millennia ago: is the butterfly dreaming of Zhuangzi, or is Zhuangzi dreaming of the butterfly? A later Kingfisher dialogue extends this point by showing how absurdist fiction can expose anthropocentric faith in technological progress and the systemic paradoxes it produces, including the imagined idea of 'zero-carbon bombs' (Nguyen, 2026a).

At the same time, this reading should be understood as situated: it emerges from a close Vietnamese Kingfisher-related interpretive constellation, but it also resonates with broader ecocritical scholarship on how cultural forms imagine human-environment relations and with scholarship on Daoism and ecology (Garrard, 2023; Girardot et al., 2001).

I later analysed the stories through A-variables, understood as behaviours, and K-variables, understood as knowledge and values, as one way of examining the inner structure of the work (Khuc, 2026). Here, however, the coding matters only because it helped me see three values that Bói Cá leaves with the reader.

The first is survival. Not survival in the narrow Darwinian sense in which the strongest wins, but survival in an East Asian sense: those who know who they are within the flow of nature, and who know when to move and when to remain still, are the ones who endure. In this sense, the relevant question is not merely biological persistence but the relation between Dao (the way) and Thuat (technique) (Khuc, 2026): Thuat can help us win a battle, while Dao helps us survive across many seasons. A short-lived plant may flourish in one season and disappear; an oak survives for a hundred years because its roots follow the Dao of the soil.

The second is reflexivity. This is what many parts of the modern world, driven by performance metrics, key performance indicators and competition, lack most. Bói Cá is full of it. Each character has a moment of pause, of looking back at itself, and then understanding something. Reflexivity is not self-blame. It is the ability to stop long enough for nature to speak to us. It is the courage to look at a failed experimental plot and say: record it exactly as it is; the deaths also teach us something.

The third is a humanistic and Daoist spirit. Bói Cá does not preach morality. It allows compassion, humility and the Daoist spirit of wuwei to emerge naturally through the actions of characters (Nguyen, 2026b). In a philosophical essay on the collection, Nguyen points to a deep resonance between Bói Cá and the thought of Laozi and Zhuangzi: a monistic worldview in which humans are part of nature, a recognition of the relativity and nonlinearity of value, and a warning

against order-induced blindness, the condition in which society elevates artificial orders above the Dao of nature. In this sense, Bói Cá can be read as a twenty-first-century rearticulation of the Daodejing and the Zhuangzi.

After reading Bói Cá, I was startled. I came to see a deep resonance between these three values – survival, reflexivity, and a humanistic Daoist spirit – and what I had learned from Mark during my years in Colorado. He did not name them in this vocabulary. He did not quote Laozi or Bodhidharma. He practiced a form of patient, disciplined and non-coercive care that I could name only later.

Yet the more I reflected, the more I interpreted Mark's practice as resonating not only with Buddhist and Daoist qualities, but also with Confucian ones. This interpretation does not claim to reveal his inner philosophy. It names how his habits became meaningful to me: arriving early at the laboratory, recording data meticulously, never being late to a meeting, and never leaving a manuscript until it was orderly down to its punctuation. When I submitted my first draft, he returned it with comments so detailed that I felt ashamed of my own carelessness. I came to see this not as harshness, but as propriety: the belief that honest work requires standards, and that such standards are a way of showing respect to scholarship, to students and to oneself.

I also came to understand his administrative work through this lens. As Research Associate Dean of the Warner College of Natural Resources, a position he held for more than a decade, Mark carried a responsibility that many field scientists might not naturally seek. Yet he appeared to carry it out with seriousness: on time, according to proper procedure and with due attention to duty. In my retrospective reading, this too became part of the ethic of sowing: accepting work whose results may benefit others more than oneself.

This is Confucian Dao in its quiet form: self-cultivation so one can shoulder responsibility, responsibility so one can contribute to community, and community-building so that paths are opened for those who come after. It is not the Confucianism of examinations and ritual formalities that is often criticized, but the older Confucianism of Zilu and Yan Hui: self-discipline and silent service.

Perhaps this was the real moment of awakening for me. I came to understand a Western professor conducting ecological restoration science in the mountains of Colorado through a vocabulary associated with the three teachings as one: Confucianism in discipline and propriety, Buddhism in the heart of giving, and Daoism in wuwei. This occurred not through scripture, but through daily work. Dao, it turns out, belongs neither to the East nor to the West. Dao belongs to those who dare to live truthfully with nature and with themselves.

6. The Culture Tower and cultural additivity: Naming something ancient

For the purposes of this paper, the Culture Tower and cultural additivity are useful only as interpretive lenses (Khuc, 2023; Vuong et al., 2018). They are not introduced here as a full theoretical system, but as vocabulary for naming two aspects of sowing: contribution and the additive coexistence of cultural values. Through these lenses, I could look back at my life and at Mark's mentorship with greater conceptual clarity.

Within the Culture Tower, I interpret Mark's work as an example of contribution, the highest layer: action oriented beyond immediate self-interest and towards the flourishing of others. Every seedling he sowed in western Colorado, every doctoral student he accepted, every lecture he prepared with care, was a seed-planting act whose reward lay in the future, perhaps a future he would never see.

That is Buddhist in its non-possessive giving. It is Daoist in its way of acting without forcing. It is also Confucian in its discipline, propriety and responsibility to the community of learning.

This is also the core intuition of cultural additivity theory (Khuc & Nguyen, 2026). Great cultural values do not necessarily exclude one another. They may accumulate like layers of fertile alluvium. Buddhism does not exclude science. Daoism does not exclude experimental methodology. Confucian discipline does not exclude ecological humility. A profound person may be at once a rigorous restoration ecologist and a spiritual teacher without knowing that he is both.

I had travelled halfway around the world and passed through many institutions, papers and theories, only to discover a simple truth that Mark had already taught me in 2013 through Bouffier's film and the experimental plots of western Colorado.

7. The way of sowing as a vision for sustainability

Today, writing these lines from Hanoi, half a world away from Fort Collins and thirteen years after that first lesson with The Man Who Planted Trees, I want to say to Mark something I have perhaps never said directly: You did not only sow plants in western Colorado. You sowed people. One of those seeds was me.

Looking back, I understand Mark's acceptance of me into his research group at the end of my master's programme – a young Vietnamese student carrying little more than a hungry heart and formless dreams – as another instance of sowing. He could not know whether that seed would germinate, whether it would grow,

or whether it would flower and bear fruit, just as he could not know whether seedlings in an experimental plot would live or die. Yet he sowed. That, to me, is the way of sowing.

I believe that a genuine vision for sustainability – whether in Viet Nam, the United States, or anywhere else on Earth – cannot be limited to technology, policy or green finance, though all these are necessary. At the deepest level, sustainability is a way of sowing: sowing with the wuwei spirit of Laozi and Zhuangzi, with the non-possessive giving of Buddhism, and with the persistent discipline of Confucianism. It is sowing without calculating repayment. It is planting while trusting the life of the seed and the generosity of the soil.

This convergence is not only Eastern. Writing from a Wisconsin sand county in the late 1940s, Aldo Leopold articulated what has since shaped Western environmental thought as the land ethic: a normative principle in which the 'integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community' become the criterion of right action (Leopold, 1949). Leopold did not draw on Daoism, yet his insistence that humans are members of the land community rather than its conquerors expresses the same humility before nature that Mark practiced in western Colorado. Environmental virtue ethicists have since developed Leopold's intuition into a systematic position (Cafaro, 2015; Sandler, 2007): that sustainability is best understood not only as a set of policies, technologies or institutional designs, but as a constellation of dispositions – patience, humility, gratitude, intergenerational care – cultivated in persons and embedded in communities. The way of sowing is, in this sense, an applied environmental virtue ethic. It names what these dispositions look like when they are lived.

Every sustainable civilization, whether it takes the form of a restored forest in Colorado, a community village in Lac, a university, a family or a human life, begins with someone willing to bend down and plant a seed without demanding tomorrow's proof.

I went a very long way – through Alabama, Phenikaa, UEB, scientific papers, theories, Bói Cá, the Culture Tower and Cultural Additivity Theory – only to understand something Mark had lived all along: sowing is a Dao, and this Dao is the sustainable spirit of nature and human beings. It is also the answer to the question that has quietly accompanied me for thirteen years.

Today, in Hanoi, I too am preparing for a new season of sowing. A few young students now believe in me as I once believed in Mark. Many ideas are still green and fragile. I do not know which plots will germinate and which will fail. But I

will remember Mark's lesson: if we do not plant, the probability of growth is exactly zero.

And I will remember the old shepherd in the first film I watched in Mark's class: Elzéard Bouffier, who turned a dead landscape into a forest with acorns and an iron rod, without needing anyone to know.

8. Conclusions

The way of sowing is not a sentimental metaphor added to sustainability after the technical work has been done. It is a deeper grammar of sustainable action. It tells us that regeneration is slow, that evidence includes failure, that the future often belongs to people who will not remember our names, and that human beings participate in nature most honestly when they act without trying to possess the outcome.

For sustainability studies, this perspective suggests that ecological restoration, education, cultural transmission and institutional renewal are not separate domains. They are different forms of sowing. A restored mine plot, a careful lecture, a patient act of mentorship, a scholarly theory and a community-based tourism project may all embody the same civilizational ethic when they are oriented towards life beyond the immediate self. If sustainability requires staying within planetary boundaries, then it equally requires cultivating the dispositions – patience, humility, intergenerational care – that make life within those boundaries possible.

The practical implication is simple but demanding. We should design institutions, universities, research programmes and environmental policies that make room for long-term sowing: careful preparation, patient observation, acceptance of failure, respect for local ecological and cultural conditions, and intergenerational contribution. If sustainability is to become more than a policy vocabulary, it must recover this humble art. Someone must prepare the soil. Someone must record the deaths. Someone must trust the seed.

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