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First-Year and Common Reading Guide

Warmth

Coming of Age at the End of Our World

By Daniel Sherrell

Guide written by Chris Gilbert

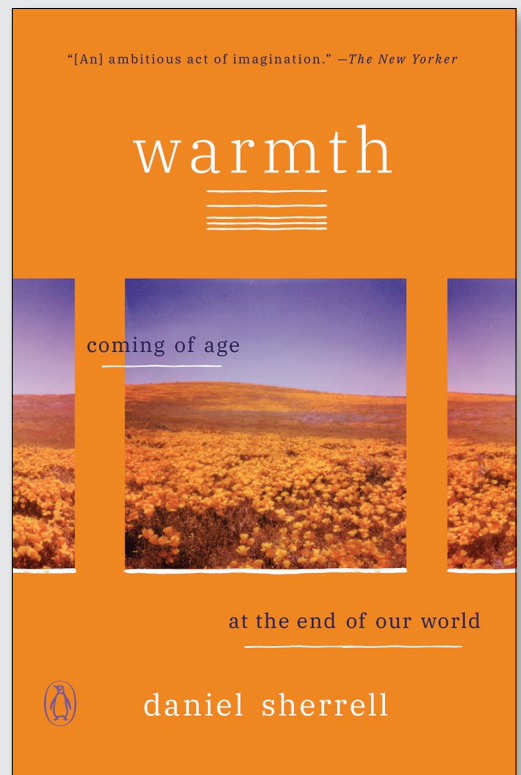
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INTRODUCTION

Daniel Sherrell's *Warmth: Coming of Age at the End of Our World* is very much a book about weight. It invites the reader to confront and reflect on the profound emotional weight associated with living one's life in the vast shadow of climate change. Is it possible for young people to acknowledge the immensity of climate change (or "the Problem," as Daniel calls it) and preserve room for hope? What does it mean to consider starting a family in the face of the Problem? And, despite the weight of it all, how can forward progress be maintained? Daniel invites the reader to consider these questions and others in this timely, thought-provoking book, and this guide was written to assist teachers and students as they engage with it. Through the questions, activities, and resources featured within, students are encouraged to adopt an analytical view of *Warmth* and related topics. This guide contains five sections: discussion questions, classroom activities, research opportunities, service learning projects, and other resources for students, teachers, and programs. Each section is applicable to multiple curricular areas and, as such, this document has an interdisciplinary focus. Activities can also be easily modified and scaled, as they were constructed with flexibility in mind. Lastly, students are encouraged throughout to utilize technology and work collaboratively as they complete their First-Year Experience® (FYE®). This guide should provoke meaningful analysis and reflection, and it supports the overall purpose of the FYE®: to fuse rigorous classroom study with immersive, communal learning experiences.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions can be posed to an entire class, given to small groups, used to initiate online discussions, etc.

1. “While the man burned—the flames carbonizing his skin, then evaporating his blood—I hadn’t felt a thing. It had been a beautiful day, and as I said, I’d spent much of it asleep” (p. 5). To what extent can you relate to Daniel’s reaction to David Buckel’s death? In general, do you believe we have become desensitized to tragedies like this one related to the Problem?
2. While commenting on Kirsten Dunst’s character in the film *Melancholia*, Daniel notes, “In her sadness lay a certain lucidity” (p. 26). When you consider your views and associated emotions related to the Problem, can you relate to this character? Do you feel you have acknowledged the full weight of the Problem? If so, what emotions accompany this acknowledgment?
3. In his discussion of social movements and demonstrations on page 35, Daniel touches on the idea that social actions serve as forms of storytelling. In your view, what are the dominant stories we tell ourselves and each other about the Problem? How do these stories circulate, and who sustains them? Which counter-stories should be told, and through what actions?
4. On the topic of increasingly powerful storms, Daniel notes that media “coverage of the storms had been ritualized” (p. 102). How, in your opinion, do we combat this? What are some ways to resist the ever-forward-facing news cycle and maintain our focus on climate-related events and their human and environmental effects?
5. “There was a whole category of leader like the governor, leaders who acknowledged the science but couldn’t seem to digest the magnitude” (p. 113). When you consider current political leadership, at state and national levels, do you share Daniel’s observation? Do you perceive a disconnect between the magnitude of the Problem and the strength, or lack thereof, of the associated political response?
6. How do you feel about framing the Problem as a “hyperobject” (p. 123)? What are some advantages and disadvantages of this particular framing?
7. What is your reaction to the debate between Les Knight and Tucker Carlson, as described on pages 147–148? Which side do you largely identify with? Why?
8. How do you feel about Daniel’s statement that even if climate change is “ongoing and inevitable, there’s still a world of difference between two degrees Celsius and six degrees Celsius in terms of human suffering and general chaos” (p. 153)? Does this make you hopeful and more determined to act? Why? Why not?
9. Daniel discusses the “arts of noticing” on page 203. In the context of the Problem, do you think there is value in noticing the natural world around us? Why? Why not?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

10. Daniel confesses that he rarely shares his “anxieties with any boomers beyond my parents” (p. 249). Can you relate to this? Why? Why not? Do you feel older generations, generally speaking, have the appropriate sense of urgency when it comes to addressing the Problem?
11. As a young person, to what extent do your feelings about climate change mirror Daniel’s? Are you able to locate an emotional space that allows you to both mourn *and* take action? Share your thoughts and feelings with other young people around you.
12. As you reflect on the book as a whole, what insights will you take with you? How have your attitude and behavior toward the Problem been affected by Daniel’s book?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

The following activities are applicable to a variety of curricular areas.

1. Write a Letter

Following Daniel’s lead, have your students compose a letter to their potential future child that explores their thoughts, dreams, hopes, and fears in the context of the Problem. Perhaps their letter will wrestle with the decision to bring a child into an increasingly volatile world; or perhaps the letter will share reasons why the writer has decided to remain childfree. For students who plan on procreating, the letter could be saved and shared at a future time. For students who write to children who will never be born, this still offers a powerful reflective exercise for the writer.

Students may wish to keep these letters private, or they may wish to share them online using websites such as [Blogger](#), [Medium](#), or various social media platforms. Invite them to reread sections of *Warmth* for writing ideas and inspiration. For students who are comfortable sharing their work, ask them to read and comment on each other’s writing.

2. Engage in Reflective Writing

“I wanted to mourn *and* organize but could do neither fully, mired as I was in the sense that they precluded each other. . . . I no longer believe that grief and resistance are mutually exclusive: I think the former is *necessary* to the latter, that honest sorrow is perhaps *the only thing* that makes a real fight even possible” (pp. 245–246).

In light of this passage, and the rest of Daniel’s moving book, ask your students to reflect on these questions through writing: In what ways can you, as a young person, identify with Daniel’s attempt to hold both grief and the desire to act in the same space? Are you able to grieve the loss of a world you perhaps never knew while also fighting for a reality you hope to create? When you think about the present and the future, are you able to find a space for optimism? Ask your students, through their writing, to stay in this uncomfortable emotional space, “let the dam break a little” (p. 247), and see what pours forth.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

3. Story Circle: Compare and Contrast Narratives

“I arrange a few meetings, too, story circles with survivors of Katrina. We hold them in church basements and public parks in the days preceding the anniversary. There is a gentleness to these meetings, an empathy borne of shared trauma” (pp. 171–172).

Students can use this activity to, in a sense, create their own story circle by comparing and contrasting narratives from individuals grappling with the Problem. After reading *Warmth*, have students access the three sources below. Each one details the on-the-ground experiences of individuals affected by climate change.

- Climate stories from WaterAid: <https://stories.wateraid.org/climate-stories/>
- Stories from the Climate Stories Project: <https://www.climatestoriesproject.org/climatestories.html>
- “Displaced by the Climate,” a project from Sky News: <https://news.sky.com/story/climate-change-the-people-forced-from-their-homes-by-floods-wildfires-storms-and-sea-level-rise-12355533>

To begin, have students browse these sources. Next, ask students to select two stories to compare and contrast.

To facilitate this process, instruct students to use a Venn diagram. In one circle, students should note unique aspects of one narrative; in the other circle, they should note unique aspects of the other narrative. In the middle section of the Venn diagram, students should record similarities. Ask students to consider similarities and differences as they relate to the environmental *and* human consequences detailed in their selected stories. Have students pair up and share their analysis before transitioning to a whole-class conversation. Students could also further explore their noted similarities and differences through extended writing.

4. Paideia Seminar

A Paideia seminar is a student-centered, Socratic discussion. In it, the teacher serves as a facilitator by providing students with open-ended questions, prompting students to respond, and by linking student comments. There are three main question categories: *opening questions*, *core questions*, *closing questions*. *Opening questions* identify main ideas from the text (How does the emotional tone change throughout the book?). *Core questions* require students to analyze textual details (What do you consider to be some of the central turning points in Daniel’s narrative? Why?). Finally, *closing questions* personalize textual concepts (What sort of lessons did you take from the book? What makes it such a timely text?). Construct multiple questions like these, and have students gather in a large circle.

Establish group goals for the discussion and have students create individual goals as well. Some group goals could include practicing active listening strategies, disagreeing constructively, and having each participant express at least two thoughts. Individual goals could include referring to specific passages, building on another student’s comment, and making consistent eye contact with others. Facilitate the conversation and concentrate on eliciting student responses. When the discussion concludes, have students self-assess and provide feedback on the

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

seminar. Note that many of the discussion questions in this guide can be used during this activity.

For more information, consult <https://www.paideia.org/our-approach/paideia-seminar/index>.

5. Gallery Walk - Images of Climate Change

“Katrina is still here, too...The whole area looks like it’s been wiped clean: of trees, of towns, of most structures. Even on a sunny day I feel exposed somehow, like we’re driving across the surface of a raft. The ground is too flat, the ocean too close. We round a bend and there it is, only a few feet from the wheels, almost exactly level with the land” (pp. 177–178).

In *Warmth*, Daniel provides a number of descriptive passages that construct vivid images of the Problem in specific locations. Focusing on visuals is perhaps one way to pin down the “hyperobject” and confront the material reality of climate change. To accentuate this visual experience, have students analyze related images through their participation in a gallery walk activity.

A gallery walk requires students to move around the classroom while thoughtfully observing and analyzing visual content. To prep this activity, select five to eight images that you believe will provoke students to reflect on the text and think deeply. You can select these images from the following websites:

- “Images of Change” - a series of before-and-after images from NASA that document climate change
<https://climate.nasa.gov/images-of-change?id=534#534-columbia-glacier-melt-alaska>
- “Stunning photos of climate change” - images from CBS News
<https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/climate-change-photos/>
- Collections of climate change-related images from Climate Visuals
<https://climatevisuals.org/collections/>

After selecting the images, display each on its own designated laptop/tablet or print each out in color. Each image should be placed at a different location in the room, and desks should be arranged so that students can easily move around and quietly visit each image. Encourage students to spend sufficient time reflecting on each image and, as they do so, have them record responses to the following questions, per image:

- What would a good title for the image be? Why?
- What strikes you about the figure(s), environment, and/or object(s) featured in the image?
- How does the image make you feel? Explain.
- In what ways can you connect the image to *Warmth*?

After students have circulated around the room, have them share their responses in small groups or during a whole-class discussion.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

6. “Tour the Hall of Planet Earth!” - A Virtual Tour from the American Museum of Natural History

Invite your students to participate in this virtual tour of the American Museum of Natural History’s Hall of Planet Earth by accessing this resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_bj2e-UVw1s. During the tour, museum guide Michael Hamburg provides narration as viewers get an intimate look at the exhibit. The tour covers some of the Earth’s history along with an exploration of the effects of climate change. Ask students to jot down their general reactions while they watch; students will likely be particularly interested in the climate wall. They can also get a closer look at several associated exhibits here: <https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent/planet-earth/what-causes-climate-and-climate-change>. After students have had a chance to watch, listen, and reflect, provide them an opportunity to unpack their reactions through small group or whole-class discussion.

RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

The following topics are designed to provide students with opportunities for extended inquiry and analysis. In response to these, students could:

- Compose a research paper
 - Deliver a presentation
 - Design a lesson plan and teach a class
 - Record a podcast (<https://lifelife.com/how-to-start-your-own-podcast-1709798447>)
 - Create a website (<http://www.wix.com>, <http://www.weebly.com>, and <https://sites.google.com> are excellent free resources for this)
 - Use Adobe Creative Express (<https://www.adobe.com/express/>) to create and share a variety of graphics and videos
1. “The Atlantic crashed through the community, scouring kitchens and basements, blocking off roads. The water ripped up stop signs and buoyed parked cars . . . Across the neighborhood, thousands of people were forced to evacuate their homes, leaving hastily as the storm worsened” (p. 11). Daniel provides vivid descriptions like this of the damages caused by powerful superstorms such as Hurricane Sandy. Perform research to learn more about the relationship between climate change and mega-storms. What does the scientific evidence tell us about the effects of rising temperatures on hurricane strength? Are supercharged storms predicted to become more frequent moving forward? You might also take a closer look at the damage these massive storm systems leave behind. Choose a location that has been affected and research the physical, economic, and social damages.
 2. One of the primary drivers of the climate crisis is undoubtedly the influence of the fossil fuel industry on our elected officials. Perform research to learn more about the connection between campaign contributions from the industry, political figures, and resulting legislation that harms the environment. Who are

**RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES
(CONTINUED)**

the central players, both in industry and government, hindering attempts to fight climate change? You may approach this research topic in a broad fashion by surveying political parties and their various connections to fossil fuels. Alternatively, you might focus on one or two politicians and explore their funding sources, fossil fuel industry connections, and political moves. Either way, <https://www.opensecrets.org/> will be a valuable resource for you.

3. "... it wasn't enough to keep contesting your opponent . . . you also had to guard against your own desire to hand them the mantle of inevitability, to say, simply, that there was nothing to be done" (p. 104). One way to guard against the desire to surrender is to continually locate wins, no matter how small, in the fight against the Problem. What victories have occurred in your city, county, state, and/or region? Who were the central actors? What tactics did they employ? Perform research to address these questions, sharpen your activist tools, and sustain hope.
4. "Like most people, I've grown accustomed to these blinkings, and am now almost completely numbed by statistics on extinction and biodiversity loss" (p. 185). While the human species is undoubtedly threatened by climate change, countless other species are also at risk. In fact, our planet is experiencing its sixth mass extinction event. Perform research to learn more about the relationship between the Problem and the planet's current mass extinction. Research your own area. Which species have disappeared? Which species are at risk? How has the erasure of one species affected others in the local ecosystem? What are several ways this extinction process could be slowed or even entirely halted?
5. "Distribution would have to supplant accumulation. Abstention would need to replace industry. Degrowth would need to be the ultimate goal, deceleration the means by which we got there. Maybe then, once we'd finally learned to relax, a collective chill could cut the rising heat" (p. 109). What is the degrowth movement? When did it originate? And from whom? In what ways does this movement fundamentally challenge capitalism and the associated climate crisis? What would it take for the degrowth movement to go mainstream? Perform research to answer these questions and others that emerge.
6. As Daniel notes in *Warmth*, the Problem affects everyone, but it does not do so in an equitable fashion. How does climate change affect communities of color and others experiencing poverty? In what ways does the Problem exacerbate existing inequities both in the United States and beyond? What sort of effects does it have on indigenous communities? Research these questions and others to learn more about how climate change disproportionately impacts marginalized communities.

SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS

These projects are designed to connect students' learning experiences with the larger community.

1. Support a Climate-Related Charity or Organization

To initiate this activity, have students organize themselves into groups and invite them to select one of the charities described below (note that these are only suggestions; students can look online to locate others as well. If they do so, encourage students to vet charities through the use of <https://www.charitynavigator.org> and <http://www.guidestar.org>):

- Cool Earth (<https://www.coolearth.org/>) fights climate change by supporting indigenous communities and protecting rainforests.
- The Clean Air Task Force (<https://www.catf.us/>) works to decarbonize the energy system.
- Carbon180 (<https://carbon180.org/>) combats climate change by promoting climate-absorbing technologies.
- Earthjustice (<https://earthjustice.org/>) provides free legal support for green groups to protect wildlife and combat climate change.
- NDN Collective (<https://ndncollective.org/>) is an Indigenous-led organization dedicated to creating sustainable change on Indigenous terms through organizing, activism, philanthropy, grantmaking, capacity-building and narrative change.
- Sunrise Movement (<https://www.sunrisemovement.org/>) is a youth movement to stop climate change and create millions of good jobs in the process.

After students select a charity, ask them to plan and implement several different fundraising activities to support it. To provide students with some fundraising ideas, refer them to the extensive list located here: <https://www.causevox.com/fundraising-ideas/>.

Whatever students choose to do, encourage them to promote their efforts through social media. After students conclude their fundraising efforts, have them debrief and reflect on what was successful and what could be improved.

2. Join the Climate Movement

“Whatever form it takes, my own legacy can’t end with this letter. Once it’s finished, I’ll put my pen down and get back to organizing. The world from which I retreated is the same to which I’ll return, and I can’t live in it for long without working to prevent its unwinding” (p. 249).

Encourage students to engage in the important work Daniel describes by asking them to volunteer with an organization dedicated to fighting the Problem. The following organizations offer a variety of climate-movement opportunities that might interest students:

SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS (CONTINUED)

- <https://www.sunrisemovement.org/find-a-sunrise-hub-near-you/>
- <https://citizensclimatelobby.org/join-citizens-climate-lobby/>
- <https://www.volunteerworld.com/en/volunteer-abroad/climate-change>
- <https://rebellion.global/get-involved/>
- <https://gofossilfree.org/>
- <https://350.org/get-involved/>
- <http://www.americansagainstfracking.org/about-the-coalition/members/>
- <https://www.ls4ca.org/>

Ask students to maintain a journal during their time volunteering so that they can share their experiences with classmates and the local community when they return.

3. Share your Story and Start a Campaign

One of the issues with the “hyperobject,” as Daniel explains, is that it exists as “both a mist and a monolith—it is everywhere but it cannot be touched” (p. 123). One way to attempt to pin it down is by narrowing one’s focus to its local effects. Invite your students to do so by asking them to focus on a climate-related issue in their community or region. Ultimately, the purpose of this activity is to broaden awareness of an important issue and move others in the area to act on it.

- To begin, have students assemble in small groups. Ask them to identify an environmental issue at the local or regional level they would like to make others aware of.
- The next step is to require students to research the issue and create media related to it. For example, students might record a video and/or take pictures of an affected location for the purpose of documenting it. Students might also consider interviewing those citizens affected by it.
- Lastly, have students utilize social media platforms to initiate an awareness and action campaign. They should disseminate their images, videos, texts, etc. by sharing them widely and using hashtags and other online tools to promote content. Students could also include an action item in the campaign using resources such as <https://resist.bot/> or https://www.change.org/start-a-petition?source_location=homepage_large_button&started_flow=true.
- For additional, useful tips on social media campaigns, direct students to <https://resources.mojomedialabs.com/blog/8-steps-to-creating-a-social-media-campaign-that-gets-results> and <https://www.yesmagazine.org/people-power/yes-social-media-can-be-used-for-positive-change-20180423>.
- Students might also consider submitting their stories to the youth climate stories archive at Our Climate Our Future, <https://ourclimateourfuture.org/map/>

SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS (CONTINUED)

4. Join the Fossil Fuel Divestment Movement

“Together with some friends, we founded a campaign to divest our university’s endowment holdings from the coal industry. Our argument felt obvious: that if the purpose of the institution was to prepare its students for their future, then it could not sustain itself through investment in an industry whose core business model threw that future into jeopardy” (p. 45).

This activity invites students to follow Daniel’s lead and participate in the larger effort to force institutions to divest from fossil fuels. Typically, divestment movements target local governments, colleges, religious organizations, and other institutions. Students could certainly focus their divestment campaign on their university, or they could select another institution of interest.

Invite students to access and utilize the resources below to help them design their own fossil fuel divestment campaigns and connect them with some of the larger movements happening across the country.

- Fossil Free is a project of 350.org and a network of campaigns and campaigners who work to free communities from fossil fuels. Their website offers students an interactive map where they can initiate and display their own campaign and/or locate other fossil fuel divestment campaigns nearby. <https://campaigns.gofossilfree.org>
- The Fossil Fuel Divestment Student Network works to mentor, train, and organize students in order to support fossil fuel divestment and community reinvestment. Among other useful items, their website features a downloadable toolkit for reinvestment campaigns. <http://www.studentsdivest.org>
- A useful database that documents fossil fuel divestment commitments made by institutions across the globe. <https://divestmentdatabase.org/>

5. Debunk Myths Regarding the Problem

“What scared me was not the content of the myths, but the fact that there could be stories so compelling and gratifying and widespread and long running that in order to maintain their integrity, millions of people would be willing to sacrifice the world they purported to describe” (p. 71).

As Daniel notes in *Warmth*, the dominant stories we tell ourselves and others possess incredible power. Have students identify and debunk myths regarding climate change and its causes by creating and distributing brochures and/or fact sheets. These two document forms are ideal for this activity because they typically feature concise language, statistics, and are easily distributed and quickly read.

- To begin, place students in small groups. In these groups, students should list some of the most prominent myths they are familiar with regarding climate change. After this, have students perform online research to locate additional myths and information about them.
- Next, have students perform research (using credible sources) to debunk the myths they have identified.

SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS (CONTINUED)

- Finally, students should organize their information in a concise, visually appealing format. If possible, show them examples of exemplary brochures and fact sheets, and direct students to create their own and distribute them to the campus population. Note that students could (and likely should) also distribute digital versions of their work through social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr.

Useful resources for this activity:

- “10 Myths about Climate Change,” a resource from the World Wildlife Fund – UK
<https://www.wwf.org.uk/updates/10-myths-about-climate-change>
- “10 common myths about climate change—and what science really says,” from CBS News
<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/climate-change-myths-what-science-really-says/>
- “Seven climate change myths that big oil continues to perpetuate,” a resource from The Conversation
<https://theconversation.com/seven-climate-change-myths-that-big-oil-continues-to-perpetuate-92088>
- A free, online brochure maker
<https://www.canva.com/create/brochures/>
- Suggestions and guidelines for composing fact sheets
<http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/participation/promoting-interest/fact-sheets/main>

OTHER RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND PROGRAMS

The following resources are useful for extending a study of *Warmth* and its related subjects:

- A conversation with Daniel Sherrell and Bill McKibben from Point Reyes Books
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4_kZ7Ex1Hk
- Daniel Sherrell speaking at the FYE® Conference 2022
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=licJA3ZSgLO>
- An interview with Daniel Sherrell from *The Cut*
<https://www.thecut.com/2021/09/interview-with-daniel-sherrell-author-of-warmth.html>
- The *New Yorker* Radio Hour podcast interview with Daniel Sherrell
<https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/tnyradiohour/segments/daniel-sherrell-warmth>
- A *Know Your Enemy* podcast interview with Daniel Sherrell
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/living-at-the-end-of-our-world-w-daniel-sherrell/id1462703434?i=1000534153631>
- The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report
<https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/>

OTHER RESOURCES
FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS,
AND PROGRAMS
(CONTINUED)

- “Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene,” by Roy Scranton
<https://archive.nytimes.com/opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/10/learning-how-to-die-in-the-anthropocene/>
- Climate-related content from TED Countdown
<https://countdown.ted.com/>
- The official website of the Sunrise Movement
<https://www.sunrisemovement.org/>
- *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* By Elizabeth Kolbert
- *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* By Naomi Klein
- *Who Do We Choose to Be?: Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity* By Margaret J. Wheatley

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OF THIS GUIDE

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