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AWCS

Who I Am

The immense heat of the Atlanta sun rays would bounce off the skyscrapers towering above me. The trees and greenspace I have always yearned for only seemed to disappear as I grew older. I sat on my porch, staring out at the effortlessly green golf course adjacent to me. The flowing stream that once housed a family of turtles and was run by a Great Blue Heron was no more. What little water was left to run was littered with coke cans, cigarette butts, and leftover scraps from makeshift tents homeless people erected along the stream bank. This brought me great sadness and left me wondering what else was out there.

Who am I?

What is my purpose here?

These are questions that have continued to weigh heavily on my conscience since my youth. Forming connections and relationships with people, places, and things has been my path to solving these life-long inquiries that I can't seem to get out of my head. From a young age, I always hated reaching 'milestones' because each time it gave people the right to ask about my future plans, like I had a damn clue. Growing up in a time where societal pressures shadow you at every turn has made it difficult to know who I am, but my dad continuously reminds me that success is not about making money, it's about figuring out how to be happy. I have found immense happiness within the relationships I have formed throughout my life with the most sacred and significant being the one I have nourished between myself and the world that encompasses me.

As a young child you could always find me in my family's little garden picking flowers or rolling around in the grass in the backyard for hours past when my mom told me to come in.

From chasing butterflies in the afternoon to following the fireflies after sun-down, I was always the hardest kid to drag inside. So, my parents immersed me in the outdoors. We would take vacations out West to different national parks, each one unique and magical in its own way. Admiring the diversity of the plants, animals, and local people made my heart swell. The National Park Service helped me understand that the thousands of native taxa present in each park represents “the species able to either persist in the area or recolonize after glaciers, lava flows, and other major disturbances”, reminding me just how powerful nature is. But everytime I returned back home to Atlanta’s skyscrapers, concrete jungles, and squirrels, my heart would sink, and all of nature’s beauty would feel like a dream thousands of miles away.

I found solace in a saying we learned in Hebrew School as a kid, *Tikkun Olam*, which roughly means “to repair the world”. This simple phrase lit a fire in my youthful self, if I was not happy with the way the world was, it was my responsibility to do something about it. Life seemed like such a joke to me as a teenager. We are born into this magical world, full of opportunities and experiences, yet expected to ignore and throw it all away for what ends up being a capitalistic education. We are taught history incorrectly and shielded from anything that makes our country, or our species in particular look bad. Nothing ensues us to find answers within nature anymore; everything surrounds technology and innovation. But every time I feel like giving up on society (which occurs quite often...), I remind myself of *tikkun olam*, and how it is my own duty to actively change the wrong. It is my own duty to recognize the way society’s perspective on life and nature has negatively changed over centuries, and my own duty to tell a different narrative.

This newfound notion of *tikkun olam* became very important to me, and helped me find my own identity. Gerald J. Blidstein, the Israel Prize laureate in Jewish philosophy and an

esteemed professor at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, describes the crucial part of *tikkun olam* to be “responsibility”. Blidstein furthered my daily life questioning by saying how “We are asking: What does Judaism as a self-conscious entity say? What do our normative materials teach us as to this involvement? Do they impose this responsibility on us? And on a more pragmatic and specific level: How are we best advised to pursue this responsibility? What priority does it claim vis-a-vis other responsibilities and norms?”. These seemed to be inquiries I subconsciously thought about daily but never got around to answering. As I got older, I participated much more in my Temple’s community because I found their values to be much like my own. We are taught at a young age that no matter what you have materially or financially, you will always hold the ability to practice ‘mitzvot’. A ‘mitzvah’ translates literally in Hebrew to ‘commandment’, but is used generally to mean the act of a good deed. In K-5th grade, everyone would bring in quarters or dollars to place on the ‘mitzvah cart’ as it traveled from class to class. You would get to choose whether to donate to animals, Israel, people, or the environment. Even as a kid, I made sure my allowance always made it into the ‘environment’ slot, many times urging my peers to do the same. As we got older and the ‘mitzvah cart’ no longer made it around to our classes, my Temple found more impactful, hands-on ways for us to continue our practice of *mitzvot*, and *tikkun olam*.

In 2013, we had the opportunity to travel to New Orleans, which was eight years after Hurricane Katrina tore through the land and people’s lives. Professor and Head of the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Illinois, Robert B. Olshansky, stated that “Hurricane Katrina was the greatest urban and regional disaster in U.S. history”, and it was unimaginable how much of that disaster was still present almost a decade later. Olshansky believes that “To succeed, we must learn from disasters of the past, while also applying the

planning knowledge of the present". I could not agree more with this statement. It's so important to understand why and how something happened in order to keep it from recurring. The progress we made in New Orleans, though small in my eyes, was extremely impactful for the community. Neighbors from blocks over would stroll by and note that the city had basically abandoned many of the roads they deemed to be "too much work". They told us tales of the nightmare they or their family members endured. Major chunks of sidewalks had been ripped up and were stacked on top of one another. Each section covered in its own diverse array of fallen trees, mounds of dirt, and the worst of it all--the trash. Imagine every item-tiny or large- we have in our homes, from clothes to trinkets to pots and pans to just our daily household trash. It was all present and accounted for in the ruins of what once was a beautiful neighborhood with an elementary school, church and community garden across the street.

My freshman year of college, I came in as undecided regarding my major, without the smallest idea where I would wind up, but knowing in my heart I wanted to make a difference, somewhere, somehow. Both of my parents are strong advocates for social and climate justice and would not stop talking about this 'new, cool major' they wish had been around when they were in college. Cluelessly, I chose Cody Millers 'principles of Sustainable Development' (where I met the beautiful LuAnna Nesbitt!!!), and it changed my perspective on everything, including how I understood *Tikkun Olam*. As a teenager, I never tried to make my voice heard. I stayed in the back and quietly did my part- recycling, shopping second-hand, picking up litter on walks with my dog, conserving water while brushing teeth and showering. It was through SD that I realized doing our part individually, although important, is not enough. We are the youth that see through all the corporate bs, but also the youth that do not know their voice because society worked so hard to strip it away. I now fully comprehend the power behind community action and

bringing multiple voices together to drive the change we all want and need. This is something I never would have realized or acknowledged had it not been for this major pushing me to strengthen my relationships with nature and the like-minded individuals around me.

Something I keep going back to is a quote from the documentary, 'Kiss the Ground'. President Franklin D. Roosevelt acknowledged our ways of agriculture as being destructive to the land, and in 1936, created the Soil Conservation Service. "What I have seen confirms me in the belief that I have had for a long time that we're going to win on this problem. It relates to working out a plan of cooperation with nature instead of going along with what we've been doing in the past trying to buck nature". The majority of the film hones in on soil's innate properties and how with our current farming systems such as tilling, we are in turn de-fertilizing the soil-rendering it useless. Roosevelt addressed this issue almost a century ago, and yet our harmful practices remain the exact same.

The issue is that not enough people are knowledgeable on these topics because either they truly do not care or they do not have access to the information. We have to be willing to not only learn, but also share what we do know with others. I strongly stand behind community action and believe Peter Senge and Claus Otto Scharmer explained it quite well in chapter 17 of Hillary Bradbury's book, Handbook of Action Research: "Community action research builds on the tradition of action research by embedding change-oriented projects within a larger community of practitioners, consultants, and researchers. Like action research, community action confronts the challenges of producing practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives". What makes this form of action so powerful to me is the environment that is created through collective action. A setting where people are free to come and speak their mind and more importantly, reflect.

We are all living on a massive floating rock in the sky with very little true knowledge on how it came to be, except for the fact that humans are currently killing it slowly. Now I don't know about the rest of y'all, but the thought of this causes me great anxiety for the future to come. Finding community settings such as the sustainable development department here at App or my Temple squad back in Atl, helped me realize I am not alone. The power of community is innate, and it is only a matter of time until this is common knowledge. I may not know exactly who I am or where I am going in life, but I know in my heart that I am on the right path surrounded by the right people. I give thanks to nature for being my second home, thanks to my parents for pushing me to be the activist I am today, and the warmest of thank yous to my beautiful community of SD peers for constantly reminding me why I am here and do what I do.

Sources

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