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Seeking Answers

Since I was a young child I was curious about any and everything. I often asked the question, “but why?” more than voicing my own thoughts. From early ages, I sought to understand the world I lived in and my surrounding environments. When my parents didn’t have answers, they encouraged me to seek answers, often on my own, fostering a willingness to persist in times of unknown. Oftentimes, I found myself motivated to understand the circumstances surrounding my fears. Storms were one of my biggest fears- tornadoes to be exact. While tornadoes are known to be common in Tennessee, I prayed I’d never have to live through one as movies portrayed the extensive damage and deaths associated with said storms.

At the age of eight, I found myself throwing out all of the suitcases from the closet underneath our stairs as the tornado sirens blare a couple miles away at my elementary school. While my parents stood in the hallway knowing we would be okay, I was in full panic mode, fearful that I could lose everything I had known due to the approaching storm. Yelling at the top of my lungs “we’re gonna die,” my aunt laughed at me while my mom reassured me that everything would be okay. She suggested that I research the nature of tornadoes so I would know what to expect. I climbed into the closet underneath the stairs, plugged my ears with my headphones and began my research. My anxiety calmed almost as if we were in the eye of the storm. Science reassured me of my future.

It's no wonder why I have chosen to pursue a science heavy academic path in sustainable development. However, seeking an academic path and career in science means confronting one of my fears: a changing climate. While climate change and associated injustices hold a special place in my heart and encourage me to seek sustainable solutions, I find my anxiety spike.

Learning that storms are intensifying, that pollution is accumulating, and that capitalism cripples communities, I question my agency and the agency of society. I am worried that I can't save the planet or even begin to make an impact. Anxiety attacks are constantly on the horizon like an approaching storm, ready to tear through. Ready to force me into questioning my purpose, my place, and my capability. To prepare for the storm I research tangible ways I can reduce my negative environmental impacts.

So I shop locally, attempt a zero waste lifestyle, converse with others, volunteer, and continue to expand my knowledge in applicable ways. While at times these tasks are daunting, I reassure myself that this is all I can do for the time being. I learn in sustainable development courses that systemic change is necessary to aid a collective sustainable lifestyle as the current capitalist framework hinders opportunities outside of the agenda of maximizing profit and externalizing the costs of unintended consequences. This business like framework is woven into the fabric of systems in place which allow band aid fixes to persist, layering injustices. I chose to seek opportunities which expose me to said injustices and effects of externalities so that I might be a part of collective action. I attend services programs with my university, volunteer with local non-profits, and learn about ongoing projects to engage in. Collectively these experiences have not only given me tools to seek solutions and take action, but have given me hope. I know change is possible as I have seen it. Since those opportunities I seek ways to apply my gained knowledge and work towards becoming an active citizen. I hope others seek to be a part of collective action and work towards becoming active citizens.

When the recent tornado swept through my hometown while I was at school out of state I began to see just how many citizens were willing to help those in need. But it shouldn't take a catastrophe for average citizens to fulfill the obligations as a community member. It shouldn't

take a catastrophe to realize environmental racism is occurring in your own back yard. It shouldn't take a catastrophe to recognize the power of nature and climate. It shouldn't take a catastrophe to educate yourself and become an active citizen. But if I learned anything from the historical year of 2020, sometimes it does take a catastrophe or multiple catastrophes for us to wake up, reflect, and act. Faced with a global pandemic, intensified natural disasters, a problematic administration, a historical election, and compounded injustices, I notice people have begun to rise. The growth of the Black Lives Matter movement in a whirlwind of a year proves that people do have agency, even under oppressive systems and societies. There is strength among us; we just have to learn how to harness the power of collective action.

The election of 2020, proved arguing and complaining on the divided controversial political climate is not only toxic but makes no progress, and there is a lot of progress to be made. However, listening and conversing about ways to move forward does. I learn storytelling is a vital role in communicating climate injustices. We must share and converse about our stories and our emotions. Perhaps this key element is what has ignited the fire in the Black Lives Matter movement most recently. While racism is something I have always heard about and witnessed, I haven't heard nearly as much intentional conversations around the topic until now. This movement has shown me just how we might utilize our emotions and anxieties to fuel our agency.

While 2020 has forced us to witness and experience things we have never imagined, it has forced us to reflect on all aspects of life and re envision them in a new reality. In ways it has made me nostalgic of the past and pre-covid times, I am reminded that those times too weren't perfect. Perhaps our reality will never be perfect, but we can at least try to improve our quality of

life and sustain the present moment. It's time we wake up, combat our anxieties, and right our wrongs because our planet and our people can't brave another storm.