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SD 3531-102

My Climate Essay - Fate and Emotionality in the Time of Climate Change

I was born three months premature, and I was going to die. In the incredibly unlikely chance that I was to live on, there was no doubt that I would have some kind of physical, mental, or emotional issue somewhere down the line. I was airlifted from my smaller local hospital to a larger one with more resources across Dallas. Due to the trauma that she endured from my birth, my mother was projected to have a fate similar to mine. However, after hearing how unlikely my survival was, she was allowed to check out just long enough to say goodbye to me before being taken back to heal her own shattered body. Two days later, a life-saving heart surgery was performed on me, along with half a dozen other operations throughout the first three years of my life. I was hand-fed a diet of pure fat for my first four months, merely to get enough meat on my bones to leave the hospital. Any infinitesimal germ could have been the end of me, any wrong decision, a fatal one. And yet, through the odds, the fears, trials, and tribulations, little me lived thanks to the tireless work of the nurses, doctors, and medical experts - and perhaps a little bit of Lady Luck. And it's this latter factor that I want to address; I am forever indebted to this second chance, this small twist of fate that allowed me to live. There are an infinite number of reasons as to why I should not be here now and yet here I am, writing this very sentence; I would be a fool to waste this life.

And in truth, every person is lucky to be alive; the probability of the average person existing at all is around 1 in $10^{2,685,000}$. That's 10 followed by 2,685,000

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zeroes (NPR, 2011)! Think about yourself and your life: you are here because... Your mother met your father. Then your mom and dad conceived you, with a certain egg in your mom joining with a certain sperm from your dad which in and of itself could only happen because not one of your direct ancestors, going all the way back to the beginning of life itself, died before passing on her or his genes. So this begs the question: what are the chances of us happening? Of us being here? The answer is amazingly, astoundingly, mind-bogglingly high. Now if you're not good with numbers (and I am certainly among you), let me simply sum that number up above by saying that it leads to one massive fact: we are incredibly fortunate to be alive at all, let alone in this particular time and place. As individuals, the circumstances that line up and the paths that we've taken all led us to be right where we are here and now, and it's good to look upon that fact from time to time. From this realization we can move forth in confidence towards shaping the future in a manner that aligns with our status of being alive.

Now think of how every living creature also faces enormous odds at existence - how precious life is, then. This small ball of earth is all that we and all other living creatures big and small have, and it is our duty to save what we can while bettering it for those that are here, as well as those that will come after us. Stepping into the future, this will be my driving thought just as it was when I was younger (I just didn't know it quite yet). I was always environmentally conscious thanks to my parents. They would recycle, something that, until one learns the truth, feels incredibly

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rewarding and important to the cause. I'd see my mom gardening every day, using compost in her beds while my dad jerry-rigged a rain-barrel out of an old plastic drum. My mom in particular taught me how the largest living organism is a strain of mycelium that's some 4-miles wide, how the Earth will live on well past us, nurturing itself back to life over some tens of millions of years, and that we are all born with 2.5 billion heartbeats on average. These first facts showed me the connections between all living things and how to be mindful of my surroundings. They taught me to foster a love of the more profound sides of life. The last fact made me thankful that I got any heartbeats at all, that I get to experience what it is to be human. Which, to me, above all else, is to utilize every single one of those beats to run the gamut of human emotion.

In my life, I have always *felt*, felt a *lot*, and felt *deeply*. When others cried, I would too; when boys my age spoke of competition and fighting, I just did *not* relate, though it wasn't for a lack of trying. When harsh words were said, I took them personally. Often so personally that when my parents would scold me, they would often have to walk their words back, as anything they could say or do paled in comparison to the shame that I placed upon myself. At times I felt isolated being a more emotional male. My mom said it would be a good thing when I'm older - and she was right - but there were definitely some rough patches along the way. Middle-schoolers can be the most vicious mix of hormones and malice when they want to be, you see. I was phased for a long while, obsessing over masculinity,

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stoicism, and the like, with a twisted view of what it is to be a man. Emotions were bad, crying was bad, feeling was bad. Texas didn't help that either, with its antiquated views on the mythic cowboy of the Wild West. Thankfully, the cities that we resided in were oases, and both my mom and dad actively encouraged me to embrace what I felt, to accept emotions all along the spectrum, and view them as a means to interact with this world and to grow. Now, at 23, I would feel absolutely lost without my emotions; I'm most at home, most human, most *alive* when I'm feeling. Creativity and freedom come from letting it all flow. It's something that I've had to wrestle with, but that's also ultimately been vital in paving the path that I'm on today.

One thing that's always stayed consistent - and it happens to be one of my favorite parts of being alive - are the times when the utter sense of awe that I feel at being alive becomes overwhelming, to the point where all that I can do in response is cry. Whether it be staring at a breathtaking sight, or simply sitting in my room listening to music, there are so many ways to experience the feeling of *feeling*. This feeling of enormity is easy to forget, being so wrapped up in everyday life, but one thought back to my birth and I'm taken right back to that reminder of how precious the time we have is.

In feeling so much so often and for so long, I gained this acute awareness at a pretty young age of how my actions ripple out and affect other people. In caring for others, I came to care deeply for the earth and all of the natural life that she holds, seeing it all in equal regard, and I wanted to see all of it that I could while I was

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young. So, when I was fresh out of high school, I took a gap year where I road-tripped from Texas all the way to California, up the Pacific Coast Highway (PCH), to Oregon, over to Yellowstone and finally, to my end-destination of North Carolina. Travel brought out that feeling of enormity once more. However, a new, unfamiliar feeling was rising to meet it.. On the drive, I had to divert from the PCH just north of San Francisco due to part of the highway being blocked by a massive mudslide that was caused by rainfall and erosion. Likewise, fires raged in the very hills of California that I roamed. The more I listened to the news, the more I began to realize that this planet was fading. The more I heard about another species on the edge of extinction, or witnessed another hurricane blow through my home-state, the more I worried; the more I pondered... Was I part of the problem? What damage was I doing? Was there anything to be done before it all comes crashing down? Ecoanxiety had taken hold before I had even heard of the word. At that point in time it manifested in this overarching, overwhelming mess of emotion and fear; I had no outlet or power over the destruction that I was told was coming.

Come college, my existential struggles from my birth had morphed from the personal into the universal as I began to learn more and more of climate change's inevitable march. Plus, there were more immediate issues to contend with: I had no tangible idea of what I wanted to do with my life other than "finish school with as good of grades as I could muster" and "help people." I was there, I was living, I simply had to find the reason *why*. Thinking that technology was the route forward - along

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with a decent push from my electrical engineer of a dad - I joined the Sustainable Technology department. It was a step in the right direction for sure, but it still didn't feel quite right (and the additional math classes sure didn't help, as I've always been atrocious with numbers). Again, I was without a clear way forwards. Yet, life is at its best when it's at its most unexpected. The same is true for the class that this paper is for. Its teacher and my friend, Sydney Blume, was the catalyst for my decision in moving towards Sustainable Development. I was at a community event hosted by Climate Action Collaborative, a local Boone organization focused on direct climate justice and community-building. We occupied the Jones House, a local Boone community center that resides in the heart of the town, where she began to speak on the steps. Though the words themselves may be blurry as I try and recall them now, I remember the way in which they made me feel: I wanted to be a part of what she was speaking of. I wanted to be a part of a genuinely caring, justice-oriented, clean-Earth-ed, transformative future (*greatly oversimplifying here*). In response, a few days later, I sat down with Rick Rheingans, the head of Appalachian State University's Sustainable Development department about the possibility of SD becoming my new home.

Sustainable Development is a term that I have come to love dearly. It encompasses not only agriculture and conservation as one may assume, but my professors also imbued it with deep root-lines of social, racial, and environmental justice. They encouraged us to look at life in revolutionary new perspectives. In

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doing so, sustainability became less about resource management as I had previously thought and more about what it is to be a part of all of these systems: re-envisioning a brighter future for all living creatures and tearing down antiquated, oppressive modes of existence while lifting up those that need the most aid. In the end, it encompasses what it says: developing the world sustainably - though it is up to us as to what we define to be "sustainable." Is it merely continuing to go along with today's status-quo of social ills but with more solar-panels? Or does it look like a complete transformation of societies, mindsets, and what it is to be alive? The inherent interconnectedness of life, death, and all of the aspects held within is a thing of beauty and this new lens through which I see only serves to highlight this. Through my studies and conversations with peers, I've come to realize that there was so much more I did not know. For example, what the hell Neoliberalism means (along with its wrongdoings, of which there are plenty), history, justice, activism, what it is to live in this day and age knowing full well the past that holds our present up... It all flooded into my subconscious, melding and merging until I came to realize that everything - *everything* - connects. "Maybe this interconnectedness can extend to people too," I thought to myself, though I also had to fight the urge to tack on "if only we would get our head out of our own egos for a moment to realize it" at the end.

I came into college not knowing an ounce of what to do and now, four unforgettable years later I am leaving it with a newfound confidence, a whole community surrounding me, and a drive to do and be all of those things that Sydney

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spoke of in her speech. However, like many in this field, I find myself terrified of the unknown future and all that it holds. The struggle with Ecoanxiety plagues me just as it did when I was younger, only now I have knowledge backing it up. I fear for those who will be worst affected by the actions of people who lived generations ago, people who were never made aware of how fortunate they were to be alive, and how their actions would come to affect others in time.

When examining what the human race is today, we find many things: we are damaging, fearful, divided, and yet also conservational, brave, and united. By-and-large, it appears to be that the former three are winning out over the latter, and yet we cannot lose hope. As the women in *All We Can Save* have demonstrated so beautifully with their words: people *are* waking up. We are finding that we cannot take and take, giving nothing in return. We should also treat one another as human-beings like we all deserve. Decency will find its day if we all believe that life is precious. Growing up, my mom often taught me a lesson of awareness; each and every person's actions affect others, so it is our duty to be aware of your own. This has been a double-edged sword: the more I am aware of my actions, the more I become aware of other's actions and in turn, hyper-aware to the point of letting it affect my mental and emotional health. However, the positive effects of my parent-taught awareness have been innumerable; an increased propensity towards feeling what others felt, thought, and did, and an acute appreciation for how my actions may affect others in turn. Every person deserves to be treated with dignity

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and respect - awareness is how people begin to wake up. It's spreading even now as you read these very words.

What is perhaps the most amazing thing that I have come to find is that I am not alone. My story is one of billions (and that's not including all those that have come before). I'm lucky enough to get to tell mine, and I'm beyond thankful for the opportunity to find my direction in this ever-vital time in humanity's story. Likewise, in the effort of remaining honest and fair, I would be remiss if I didn't confront and address the fact that I am a straight, white, male, and receive benefits based on these (and more) traits. Also thanks to what I've learned, I plan to use this privilege to dismantle the same systems of oppression that create and enforce my privilege in the first place.

I fear the future, yes, and yet I'll feel through it too. I know that I am many things: fortunate to be alive, privileged, angered by inaction, in love with life and all that it holds, fearful for the death of all things that are green and blue, the death of what is to come and what is. I'm eternally grateful to all of the factors I've mentioned thus far. They push me to be the person that I am today; take away just one and I would be a completely different person. I have finally found my *why*: I hope to help in the fight to influence us to one side of the mountain, and for those who are to be worst affected by the ever-changing climate. I also hope to be inclusive and constructive with all of my words and actions with my mind fixed on justice and honesty. Time will tell if I stay true to that, but I do attribute so much of who I am

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today to finding my calling in school, and for it providing a strong base to stand upon looking towards the future.

Remembering those numbers above, we're all lucky, in a way. We get many chances, and sometimes, whether that be through our own fault or through some force beyond our control, we may find ourselves in need of a second chance. Regardless of what kind of second-chance it may be, at some point in our lives we all get at least one. It's then placed into our hands as to what to do with this second chance, with this newfound time and opportunity. There have been dozens of examples of these that I've had in my life, such as changing my major from one that only served to please my dad and avoid math to one that has turned me into a vastly more well-rounded human; and to my very connection to life itself. I do not plan to waste these second-chances.

Regardless of *how* or *why*, or even the *odds* of how we are here, the fact remains that we have been dealt these cards and it is up to us to decide how we play them. Our existences are fortunate for many reasons, one of which being that we get to exist in this most crucial of times - a sort of make-or-break moment in which humanity is balanced upon a massive mountain. We will inevitably slide down one side or the other; one being grassy and shallow while the other drops the entirety of our collective lives, hopes, tears and fears into the inky oblivion that is time and non-existence. Each of these possible futures has a million varying ways to reach these two outcomes. The manner in which we get to one of them is up to us.

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Which future will humanity choose here and now? What *is* being done and what *can* be done to push us one way or the other? How can those who want to fight tear down the oppressive, greed-filled society in which we live today, turning it to one that benefits the earth as much as its people? Those are questions that we have to answer on our own, as well as collectively. In my eyes, it comes down to recognizing how fortunate we are to be here, and channeling our emotions to use as fuel for the fight that's ahead.

By embracing emotions we become more in tune with one another and ourselves, and by realizing the odds and decisions that led us to where we are today, we can allow ourselves to feel more deeply. This creates a self-reciprocating pattern. When held in the context of the realization that we are all interconnected and are fortunate to be alive, the awareness only grows stronger. By the nature of knowing such impossibilities we are allowed to think on a whole new scale, one that transcends what we sense and interact with into something larger than ourselves. It's this new place that I hope we all find - and soon - because all that we know and hold dear is increasingly tied to our actions in the here and now. We have to grasp onto our livelihoods and one another, coming together in the effort to save these very things; the time for ego and greed needs to pass. I would argue that by being aware of the forces that brought us to where we stand comes with a far greater sense of awareness, one that can ripple out and impact lives that are as yet unborn, and influence words that have yet to be spoken.