Family Trees

I begin running, leaping from rock to rock till I reach the edge of the cliff. Granite mountains and forests surround me as I turn and gaze at the glacier-carved lake shimmering in the moonlight. Wind whips at my bare arms, reminding me that I am surrounded by life, amidst the homes of all the organisms around me. I feel the gentle rhythm of my heartbeat; I start to feel sleepy. I bring my sleeping bag to the top, prepared to sleep under the stars.

My family goes camping at Lake Utica in the Sierra Nevada Mountains every year. This is where I took my first step as a wide-eyed infant. This is where I climbed the tallest mountain with my Dad, as we created our own trail. This is where I caught a lizard for the first time; and after I studied it, gave him his freedom back. This is where I lounged with my toes dipped in the water reading peacefully for hours. This is where I kayaked through lily pads under the starry night sky. Lake Utica is where my reverence for the natural world arose.

These camping trips are a small sampling of the outings my parents have taken me on to
explore Mother Nature ever since I was a child. On weekends, my family’s go-to activity is usually a bike ride into nearby open space preserves including entertaining lessons on the native plants and animals from my dad, who worked in the state park service in high school. My family is multicultural (my mother immigrated from China and my Dad’s heritage is an eclectic European mix), so we do not identify with any particular culture super closely. On holidays, while many of my friends celebrate with traditions passed down from generation to generation, my family instead always treks to nearby lakes and forests for a day of hiking, picnicking, kayaking, and exploring. Further, over summers, I have attended sleep-away outdoor summer camps offering classes in rock climbing, wind surfing, backpacking, and survival skills that further instilled in me a love for nature. I am grateful for all this exposure, and feel lucky my parents have prioritized sharing their reverence for the Earth with me from birth.

 *Lake Utica – Sherri Meyer, July 2012*

In addition to the excursions into nature, my parents also encouraged me to follow my curiosities academically, chauffeuring me to outdoor education classes and science events. One presentation at a sustainability event, sponsored by American physicist, Sally Ride, particularly sticks with me as the moment my childhood bubble of viewing the world as a “perfect place” was shattered. The speaker (whose name I have long since forgotten but passion and love for Earth I could never forget) explained how our planet would suffer over the next 50 years if current carbon emissions, pollution, and consumption-waste patterns continue. For example, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), forecasts that the Earth’s temperature will rise 2.5 to 10 degrees Fahrenheit this century. This raises several issues of concern including sea level rise, wildfire, air quality, agriculture, and disease outbreaks. For example, sea level rise threatens many homes because about 10% of the world’s population lives less than 30 feet above sea level. Further, new viruses that thrive under higher heat conditions, which previously never had the chance to encounter human populations, spread quickly and cause huge outbreaks because we have neither immunity nor vaccines (Current and Future Climate Change Effects). This is a small sampling of the issues I learned about during the presentation; I had never been so scared and upset in my life. To those who knew of global warming and allowed much destruction already, I wondered how they could live with themselves – and it made me angry. While the intensity of my feelings that day has worn off, the desire to do something about it stays with me.

Another environmental inspiration for me originates from my family’s Utica trip at age fourteen. At some point after our trip the year before, the forest service carved the once unmarked path into Lake Utica’s campground out into a dirt road, making it infinitely more accessible. Upon our subsequent arrival, I raced out of the car to the water’s edge smiling and excited, ready for my afternoon swim, only to discover a scene of partying and port-a-potties against a backdrop of forgotten beer bottles. During the night, it was difficult to sleep due to noise pollution of parties from nearby campsites. I was reminded of the Sally Ride talk, and thought long and hard about the importance and value of conserving Earth’s natural spaces. The disappointment of that night haunts me (and my family). Four years have passed, and we have not returned to our second home. The threat to Lake Utica fuels my passion to pioneer solutions that will fight against such destruction and protect the environment.

I realize that not everyone grows up in families with exposure to the outdoors, and thus do not have the same appreciation for the environment as I do. I could not imagine having not spent my formative years immersed in nature. I wish every individual could feel and share in the joy I derive from camping or hiking in the outdoors. I find that spending time with nature makes me a happier person, and thus strive to go outside (usually for a walk or run) daily and even hug a tree. This never fails to boost my mood, and also makes me a much more productive person for the rest of the day.

In addition, I also keep a plant in bedroom and on my desk where I study. My cacti and flowers brighten the room, and allow me to never need to go far for a smile. Many times others are skeptical if I try and explain my love for nature to them. However, science shows that we, as a species, benefit from nature both for healing properties and for happiness. For example, a study performed at Kansas State University on the recoveries of 90 patients from appendectomies revealed that the patients who recovered in hospital rooms with foliage on average asked for less postoperative pain medications, had lower blood pressure and heart rate, less anxiety and fatigue, and rated their recovery rooms higher for satisfaction than their counterparts in hospitals rooms without plants (Park, Mattson). If everyone has the opportunity to experience nature and understand the positive impact the natural Earth has on human lives, more people will care about conservation, sustainability, and living more in sync with nature.

My experiences with Earth’s beauty, especially Lake Utica, influence my political perspective, research interests, and intellectual curiosities. Now, whenever faced with an ethical dilemma related to sustainable practices, I think of Lake Utica and the right choice becomes obvious. My summer workplace in 2014 lacked recycling bins in their office. On the first day, I was not sure what to do with my empty lunch container – because tossing it in the trash and forgetting about it was not a viable option. Every day that summer I packaged up all my containers and waste to bring home where recycling was available. A few weeks later, I noticed a cooking academy I attended in the same city, Sunnyvale, CA, also did not offer recycling options. At this point, I questioned both CEO’s about this issue, and they both explained that recycling would involve extra fees, which they could not afford.

I researched policies online and reached out to Sunnyvale’s waste management coordinator, Mr. Bowers, about my concerns. He explained that Sunnyvale’s policies are actually more eco-friendly than many other cities, because a recycling plant sorts all waste regardless of whether placed in a recycling or garbage bin. The city also offers a monetary incentive for businesses to recycle, and the real issue lies in communication where businesses do not understand that garbage costs more in the end. Mr. Bowers and I discussed communication alternatives to better inform businesses of the monetary benefits of recycling - while also encouraging businesses to be green friendly simply because it is good for the planet.

Further, just a few weeks ago, my college residential hall sponsored a trip to a local frozen yogurt place, Café 472. We all walked the long mile to get there, and then waited for 45 minutes in line to place our orders. I had my selections all ready to go (chocolate base with oreos, kit kat and strawberries), only to discover at the front of the line that the containers used to serve the yogurt were Styrofoam. Styrofoam goes against my values because it cannot be recycled economically, fills landfills, and was named the 5th largest creator of hazardous solid waste by the Environmental Protection Agency (Polystyrene Foam Report). I was internally torn about whether the hour plus I had spent anticipating the frozen yogurt made up for the negative environmental impacts of Styrofoam. But when I thought of Utica I declined to order.

As a student and STEM lover, in the future, I hope to use science to develop tools that will empower humanity to exist symbiotically with nature rather than exploiting it. I am scared of a world where civilization takes over Earth and the biosphere’s natural beauty is not preserved. Coming from an ethnically mixed family, I had never been quite sure how to respond to questions about my culture. But I realize now the answer is simple. My family tree is made up of tree-lovers, our second home is among nature and trees, and our culture is loving Earth.

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