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The Elephants in the Room

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The Purpose of Further and Higher Education in a Climate and Ecological Emergency

Student Perspective
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At age 6, I was introduced to the concept of the 'future' at school when I was asked what I wanted to be when I grew older. I recall contemplating on the world full of exceptional possibilities I had. The glossy pages of my picture books were brimmed with illustrations that unravelled so many streams of imagination. How did I envision myself as a 20 year old? How did I envision the world to look like in the future? Everything seemed like a possibility for me.

Third grade came along and I was absolutely certain I wanted to be an astronaut. My report card said that I was observant and was building a better understanding of the world. I suppose this remark made me happy, as my parents were happy by it, and my neighbour congratulated me on it as well. But I couldn't help but wonder - what did I learn that gave me a better understanding of the world?

It was during this timeframe that I began to discover that the world around me was not equal. Within the immediate environment I grew up in Bangalore, India, there were children my age who could not afford to go to school, couldn't afford to enjoy three meals a day, or had only ever held a single storybook in their lives. And yet, through conversations, we had shared dreams of wanting to go to space, touch the stars, wave at our parents who we imagined to live in a happy world.

Middle school was when I spent all my time memorising scales, times tables, and verse, in order to equip myself to perform more advanced functions and display greater creativity. Or so I was told. I was told which of my dreams were unrealistic and which of my aspirations were achievable. Based on a competitive standpoint, we were driven to be creative, but a little more creative than our peers. In our environmental science classes we were told to envision our future as a green city. But what was a green city? Did even two of us envision our sustainable city to look similar? Well, eventually, we were trained to do so.

Through high school, being called a dreamer, held synonymously to being called naive and almost childish. This felt like the biggest failure to the last decade of one's education. I had to be realistic, logical, pragmatic, sceptical. But I also had to change the world, or so everybody hoped I would.

Moving to Edinburgh for my higher education in sustainable development has been a taxing process of learning how to save the world through one indirect key strategy — the process of unlearning. Unlearning a decade worth of knowledge in rote learning, untrapping myself from the rat race, consistently attempting to re-evoke my curiosity to reimagine the world and re-envision the social structures around me. Learning that the process of building a responsible vision of a sustainable world is not a rational one. It comes from intricate values, not engineered logic.

If we are not being allowed to envision and don't know where we want to go, it makes little difference that we make great progress. The process of envisioning, however, is not only missing almost entirely from policy discussions; it is missing from our whole culture. We put ourselves in echo chambers where we constantly discuss our fears, frustrations, and doubts about the impending end, but we talk only so rarely, and with sheer embarrassment about our dreams for the future of the planet.

Through the process of studying sustainable development, one of my biggest goals has been to find solutions to avoid imminent catastrophe. And in the process of trying to find ways to combat the looming crisis and merely surviving for a while longer, we are neglecting what we want our world to look like after we barely save it. Is this a failure on the way we're building the world? Truly question, what is the world we want?

I have constantly observed that the very message and foundations of a western perspective to environmentalism is being painted with themes of restriction, prohibition, regulation and sacrifice. What if we reframed it such that conserving, nurturing, balancing and giving were the main points of focus?

So through the course of the day and eventually after, as we exchange our intellectual capacities and ideas, perhaps rediscovering this spirit of imagination and allowing our minds to get momentarily absorbed in challenges like: What does my home and neighbourhood look like in a sustainable world? How would I feel before going to bed? When would I learn the concept of inequality within this system? What kind of work would I do in this sustainable world? How am I contributing to this system?

And so, importantly, what we do see? And what do we not see?