

Ungainly growth; understanding privilege as a catalyst for action

My world is beautiful: sun dappled forest floors, evergreens sagging with a load of fresh snow, the cool caress of clean water on a late summer day, laughter and song, the bursting joy of freedom, and the steady warmth of a loving hand when the tears flow.¹ There have been hardships of course, and plenty of ugly moments to balance the beauty - plenty of ignorance, misunderstanding and bias - but when it comes down to it, I have been gifted with a rich and fulfilling life. The strong connections I have with family, friends, and the natural world have given me an optimistic outlook and nourished my passion for social and environmental justice; my privilege has given me a voice to speak out against injustice.²

My childhood was pretty spectacular; the memories I have from the earliest years of my life simply glow with innocent joy. My parents doted upon me as a baby, and when I was old enough to explore, I was allowed to. My parents worked as hiking guides during the first few years of my life, so I climbed many mountains on their backs and we travelled around Europe when I was three. Later, my mother worked as a Waldorf school teacher, and my dad stayed home with me. Together, we cooked, gardened, swam, and had a lot of fun, or at least I did. And when my brother came around, I had a new friend to play with (at least in theory). My parents weren't wealthy by any means, but I was completely oblivious to whatever financial struggles they were dealing with. We had a beautiful home in rural Vermont (where our family still lives), a close community of family and friends, and that was my world.³

In retrospect, the paradigm of my childhood was not representative of mainstream American culture, nor especially ethnically diverse. Nearly all of my parent's friends were white, and living in Vermont, I rarely saw anyone of color. On the other hand, my neighbors and many

¹ Draw the reader in with an interesting hook or a colorful description

² Connect introduction to the theme of the assignment-social justice and the environment- so as to set the reader up to see the autobiographical stories within this context.

³ Provide background about childhood so as to begin to illustrate how your identities were shaped. This does not have to be placed at the beginning of the essay however. You can organize your essay in whatever way makes most sense for the stories you want to tell, but keep in mind the overall development of your identity as you draw upon different memories and experiences. You want the reader to see that you are actively reflecting on your experiences.

people I knew as a child are gay, and one of my best friends from high school is transgender, so I had a lot of exposure to people with subordinate sexual orientation and gender identities⁴. This allowed me to learn a wide spectrum of gender and sexual orientation from an early age, so it is only recently that I am beginning to understand how deeply heterosexism and sexism infiltrate American culture. There were many powerful women in my life and I relished my masculine side. As a kid, I challenged my guy friends in activities such as tackle football and arm wrestling, and I could almost always hold my own. This gained me respect among my playmates; I cannot remember ever being teased for being a girl. Thus, gender inequality was largely absent from my childhood conscience, and I didn't have many opportunities to learn about racism.⁵

Racial diversity was hard to come by in the Waldorf community my parents were a part of and rural Northern Vermont where I grew up. Renna, my best friend from 4th grade, has an African American father, but she didn't live with him. Since she grew up in a very white community, Renna was culturally white despite her darker complexion. I vividly remember the first time I met her brothers when they came up from Philadelphia to visit. Most of them were older than I, and they all talked so fast, in what was a different dialect to me. I wanted to so badly to be a part of their banter. I was deeply drawn to this culture which I didn't understand but felt a strong connection to. I'm not sure where the attraction originates, but the desire I have to explore African American culture continues to this day.

In short, my childhood gave me a relatively liberal perspective on gender, race, culture, and socio economic status. The experiences I had in my youth did not force me to consider issues of inequality or privilege, but I was still exposed to some level of diversity. Furthermore, my privilege allowed me to create my own identity in some ways, and gave me the impression that inequality, prejudice and systemic oppression are not as prevalent as they actually are.⁶

On the other hand, I became aware of the extent of ecological disruption and its implications early on in my childhood. Growing up in rural Vermont, I was enveloped in the natural world. The many acres of woods behind my house and the Green River Reservoir State Park were just as much a part of my home as my bedroom. Rural Vermont has a sort of gentle

⁴ Make sure you don't confuse sexual orientation and gender identity.

⁵ Tell stories or explain parts of your life that can illustrate how your ideologies about race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. were shaped by the people you were exposed to as a child. It is best to "show rather than tell" in this kind of essay, so stories are great if you can connect them back to the prompt.

⁶ Summarize sections of the essay so as to keep the reader engaged and connect what you have said back to the themes of social justice and the environment.

brilliance which is not as magnificent as the Andes or as striking as Death Valley, but which, to me, makes it the most beautiful place I have ever been to. Backcountry skiing, sledding, swimming and hiking with friends and family throughout my childhood created a connection with the natural world that became a fundamental part of my personality. When I was scared, angry, upset, or in need of comfort, I would often console myself by climbing trees and going for long walks in the woods. I still do, and this connection has put economic and technological development into a different perspective and inspired my passion for ecology and environmentalism.⁷

My education played an equally important role in allowing me to see the juxtaposition of industry and ecology and fostering my love of innovation and knowledge. I went to Waldorf School until 4th grade; the curriculum gave plenty of room for exploring the outdoors, creating art, developing craftsmanship and even growing and making food. I did not learn how to read until the end of 3rd grade, because I didn't want to until then and I was not forced to learn until I wanted to. This freedom to learn at my own pace and the creative focus of Waldorf education have stayed with me throughout my life. I am grateful for the privilege⁸ of attending these private schools, especially because of the teachers there. In Waldorf School, each class has one main teacher who brings the students through their whole schooling from 1st grade until 12th grade. Though I actually homeschooled for first grade, went to one school for 2nd and 3rd grade, and yet another for 4th grade, I had spectacular teachers in each situation who understood my angsty little self and helped me learn in many ways.

When I transitioned to public school in 5th grade, I experienced culture shock. The plain white hallways, industrial cafeteria, and, most prominent in my memory, the intercom, really jarred me. In Waldorf School, the classrooms and buildings tend to be built beautifully, local, thoughtfully cooked food is cherished, and technology such as computers are not used until high school. I remember holding the wrong hand over my chest every morning in defiance of the Pledge of Allegiance, and carrying stones from my driveway at home with me all day long. However, I still had great teachers in public school, and I eventually adjusted to the culture. Eventually, I came to embrace the opportunities - such as sports - that I was not afforded in

⁷ The shift in focus from awareness/experience with differences in social identities to interest in natural resources and the environment is less abrupt because a lot of background has already been explained.

⁸ Continue referring back to the main themes of the essay throughout. You want the stories you tell to build up a coherent picture of how your identities have been shaped and how that relates to your interest in natural resources.

Waldorf School. One unintended consequence of my transition to public school was that I became a much less rambunctious student, mostly because I was scared of the new environment, and began to put a lot of value into my schoolwork.⁹

The class that really cemented my perspective on environmental issues was AP Biology, which I took during my junior year in high school. The more I learned about evolution, nutrient cycling, and energy flow, the more ludicrous Western culture seemed to me. It did not make sense, for the cycles upon which the Western lifestyle is based are linear rather than circular. There is no escaping that even the most advanced technologies are dependent on natural resources. From a biological perspective, many of the technologies of the modern world are enormously harmful, and understanding this in a technical way for the first time really gave me an appreciation for the naturalist's mindset I had developed.

Biology influenced my understanding of waste most strongly, for understanding nutrient cycling in ecosystems made it painfully clear that extracting resources to produce commodities and then throwing them out is not a sustainable system. For as long as I can remember, I have despised waste. I would cut up old clothes and re-design them, save plastic bottles and bags, and take people's leftovers from school to feed to my family's chickens. It earned me a reputation as a scavenger, but I didn't care, and to be honest, I am just as much a scavenger today. In fact, I am quite proud of my ability to make do with relatively little and produce substantially less waste than the average American.

I was only able to develop this perspective on waste through my access to the natural world and education, and therefore, my thriftiness is a privilege. As a child, I never went hungry and I always had a place to sleep, warm clothes, and a family. The things I scavenged, the strange food I ate, and the old clothes that I cut up, were physical representations of the excess I lived in; I did not truly *need* to be thrifty. My life did not depend on making do with as little as possible and therefore anything I was able to get from scavenging was a bonus.

Thus, the drive to conserve is a part of me, but the supportive environment I grew up in is what allowed that instinct to blossom. Without access to semi-wild places and education, I would not have been able to come to the understanding that more than anything else, I am an

⁹ You may need to give a substantial amount of background before you will be able to make the point you are trying to convey in your essay; be sure to spice it up with specific stories. That being said, length is not the main goal of this essay, so don't go on about things that don't contribute to the story you are telling about how your views of social justice and interest in natural resources have been shaped by your background.

environmentalist, and I want to be a part of the change that is revolutionizing the way modern society views our earth.¹⁰

That being said, my life is by no means separate from the technologies and economy that drive environmental degradation. When I was living with my family, my parents drove me around a lot, we bought most of our food from the grocery store (though we have always had a garden of some sort and we raised pigs and chickens at various points during my childhood), and our home was heated by gas in addition to wood. I have never lived in a house with a working television, and my parents have always placed a lot of value on the quality and integrity of the food we eat, so there are some aspects of the American consumer economy that I have not been a part of, but these small things do not suffice to say that I have lived a “sustainable lifestyle” by any means. And to be honest, I probably never will, for the pressures of society are much stronger than I imagined them to be.¹¹

Being in college at the University of Vermont has had a huge impact on the way I view my ability to contribute to the environmental movement. Before college, all of the institutions and organizations I had been a part of were small enough for my voice to be heard without too much effort. When I entered ninth grade and decided that I wasn't going to graduate high school until Lamoille Union had a composting program, I was not making an unrealistic goal; the school started composting during my sophomore year. Of course, I did not start the program alone, and it never would have come to fruition without the support of board members, teachers, administrators, a local composting facility, and the group of friends who helped me to develop a club. During my junior year, I fundraised over \$13,000 in order to go to Ecuador during the fall semester of my senior year in high school with Kroka Expeditions, an outdoor education program with a focus on simple living, community, indigenous skills and wilderness survival. The community of friends, family, neighbors, teachers, fellow students, and strangers who came to events I hosted, responded to my fundraising letters, and helped me achieve my goal inspired me to believe that even seemingly unattainable goals are achievable.

¹⁰ Draw on the background you set up when making your point. In this paragraph, I use the information that I have already related to the reader to make clear the connections between my childhood and education that compounded my interest the environment. The claim I make “more than anything else...” is bold, but I can make it because I have provided a lot of background already.

¹¹ Making the connection between your ideals and your reality is a useful way to ground your experiences and bring the discussion back to your present circumstances and future goals.

However, as a student at the University of Vermont and an adult, I feel powerless. This very minute, I am complacently staying in my niche, following along with my studies despite the fact that there are serious issues of inequality and injustice transpiring within University of Vermont. I have seen the enormous disproportion of income among faculty and staff and the squandering of resources, but I have remained caught up in my studies when I could be pursuing change within this community I am now a part of. The root of my silence in this case is that I am realizing that if I want to have any sort of stability in my life, there are many aspects of my culture that I will have to buy into, money chief among these factors. By actively partaking in the consumer economy, I am inherently supporting injustice.¹²

I spent the spring semester of my senior year in high school biking across the United States. I was financially independent for the everyday cost of living, food and shelter. But bike touring is not at all representative of the actual cost of living. In four months, I spent \$15 on lodging. I stayed with many different people through WarmShowers.org (a free hosting network for cyclists), friends, the Peace Pagoda in Eastern Tennessee where I volunteered, and even a few strangers' homes. Most of the time that I was travelling, I just set up my tent in an obscured place along the roadside. As for food, many of the people who hosted me also fed me, and I was given food by other people on numerous occasions. I did buy food too, and my bike was expensive, but all in all, my bike trip gave me a very skewed perspective on the cost of living.

Now that I am in college, and trying to pay for room and board (I am lucky enough to have a full scholarship so I don't have to pay tuition) the ideals I hold of using my money as a way to speak up about injustice are being challenged. If Sodexo entry level job workers are being paid minimum wage and only get a few days off a season, my money is not supporting a very fair corporation. And yet, I am required to live on campus and support that corporation if I want to go to college at the University of Vermont. I would like to think that I am going to college because I want to learn from knowledgeable professors, expand my academic skills, and thereby be able to pursue my passion for social and environmental justice more effectively, but the truth

¹² Be sure to include discussion about silence and/or activism on your part in regards to social justice! It shows that you are connecting what you've learned to your current position and what you can do to move forward.

is, I am also attending college because there is a lot of social pressure to do so and it is very difficult to find meaningful work without a college degree.¹³

Thus, being in college has been very frustrating for me, because it has opened my eyes to greater injustices than I had previously been aware of while simultaneously limiting my ability to do anything about these problems because I am so busy with schoolwork. What is most troubling to me is that I have been talking about problems with the corporate hierarchy at the University of Vermont, and apathy in the student body, but I have not really been doing anything about it. The truth is, I do not know how to make the kind of fundamental changes that I believe are necessary if humans want to exist in a world half as beautiful and hospitable as the one I grew up in; the powerful force of the University of Vermont as an institution intimidates me.

Nevertheless, my time so far at the University of Vermont has been fulfilling. I have been enjoying my classes and professors. The moments of sheer joy when I am immersed in fascinating, powerful dialogues with engaged students and brilliant authors, or spending time with dear friends from home, or biking back to my dorm after orchestra rehearsal with music pouring out of my mouth on its own accord, and appreciating the importance of my schoolwork have been enough to convince me that there is no other place in the world I would rather be right now. What is more, I am beginning to realize that the disempowerment of being a part of a large institution is good for me. I can't escape dependence on a backwards economy, so it's helpful to know that I am just another privileged person struggling with their roots. I am not unique in being a frustrated, disillusioned youth, and that is powerful; there is enormous potential for organizing this frustration through collective action. I look forward to expanding my involvement with people and organizations that are working together to speak truth to power and break down social and environmental injustice.¹⁴

¹³ Explaining why you have been silent is important because it sets you up to discuss what you want to do in the future. Don't make up stuff you don't actually want to pursue or have no desire to. This essay is autobiographical, so it is assumed that you will express yourself truthfully. If social justice isn't your thing, don't pretend you're going to suddenly become this amazing activist. However, you do need to make it clear that you understand how oppression works and why silence is harmful.

¹⁴ It is helpful, though not at all necessary, to end the essay with an eye for the future. Just be sure to connect your future goals with the story you have told about your identities and interest in the environment.