Sustainability Autobiography
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Part A: Keep, Sell, Donate

The box fan in the corner pushes warm August air across my room, stirring the banker's box of old school papers and half-used folders; the top one has my name in a rushed Sharpie from seventh grade. I stood there, surrounded ankle-deep in piles of my past. Just weeks ago, I found myself facing the classic dilemma of figuring out what to do with my old belongings before moving. Keep? Sell? Donate? In a few days, I would be loading the car for college, and the room was asking me to make a choice.

I struggled, not because I was unsure of which pile to make, but because I could not answer a different question: why did I have so much extra stuff in the first place? I did not just own a game console. I had generations of them stacked in dust. My music collection was the same. Hundreds of vinyl records with no working player, three drum sets when I only touched one, buckets of drumsticks—some destroyed, some worn, others still sealed with outdated packaging. Each layer of the room revealed another receipt, another hoodie still tagged, another item I thought "would come in handy" that never did.

Twelve years ago, this was not the case. Rushing through airports across borders, I anxiously waited to find out whether I would sit on the window or the aisle on each flight. I was nervous yet elated as always to fly back to the United States from Brazil. But this time, we were moving. The air inside the terminals felt colder, sharper than normal. Stowed in a carry-on with room to spare, my life's belongings strolled next to me, the handle taller than I was. I tried to keep my eyes open through the layovers, but I woke up on the last flight only when the landing gear punched down onto unfamiliar ground. Pressing my forehead against the window, the atmosphere glittered with a different kind of light. I saw snow for the first time.

When we arrived, it felt as though our new house was waiting for a new family to give it company. The rooms echoed as we spoke. I had my own room now, four empty walls that felt vast with possibility compared to the apartment we had left behind. Down the hall, I could already hear the washer and dryer humming to each other. I found out that day what a water heater is. Past my initial exploration of touching every surface I could get my hands on, unpacking was rather brief. Inside my bag were six or seven changes of clothes, my flip flops still sprinkled with sand, and a candy stash that I quickly slipped into my oak-stained nightstand. As my mom helped me fold my shirts, I could not stop looking out the window at the white, tireless weather. I had much less in that moment, yet I felt like I had an open door to whatever I desired. And I was happy.

As I became more accustomed to American culture, life expanded into endless shelves of choices I never had before. Clothes, for example, came in like newspapers—clearance deals, outfits for every season, and new sizes every year. Food was purchased in bulk instead of at the market every day. “Family-size” packaging was a shock to me. Yet, I also found my appreciation for life and value in things deteriorating. Leftovers disappeared into the fridge and came out as trash. Family became secondary to school and schedules, and any toys or gifts I received were quickly forgotten about the second I was given a phone. Life itself was easier to waste, and though abundance felt like freedom, it bred a habit of turning things of the past disposable.

When I circled back to my “keep” pile of memories before college, I realized the extent to which memories faded in my head. Piled up on a dusty shelf, I thumbed through stacks of papers. Old birthday letters with expired gift cards. Love letters from an ex I could never forget. Mementos from loved ones who had passed. I finally found value in objects carrying a weight that usefulness cannot measure.

Still, the room would not empty itself, so I tried selling my belongings. Listing countless items on Facebook Marketplace lit up offers across my phone, some fair, some almost insulting. It was genuinely difficult to put a price on something tied to my memories. Yet, when I sold an instrument to a young student and received a video the next day of my past ventures coming back to life, a bright spark lit inside of me that I had not seen since I was in that same position. For a moment, I felt anchored to the same feeling that first drew me to music, like watching a younger version of myself reappear. Unfortunately, there is an overwhelming nature to being flooded with messages, and the constant stream of notifications, counteroffers, and requests quickly became too much, so I gave up on selling away my memories.

The night before my drive to South Bend, I was still tripping over boxes of things I had no use for just to get to my bed. Outside, the stars aligned with the usual Big and Little Dipper constellations, the only ones I could ever actually find. In a fit of spontaneous resolve, I hauled everything into my car. “Where are you going?” my mom asked. I was not completely sure myself. Minutes later, I was opening my trunk and engaging in soft conversation with a volunteer worker as I parked at my church’s donation center. The wind that night bit through my sweater when I walked back to the car, but I felt lighter. Selling had been about value; donating was about learning to let go.

And then there was college. I managed to arrive at Duncan Hall with a Jeep full of “essentials” and uncertain expectations. After unpacking, I noticed an emptiness in the white brick room. So, like any financially irresponsible student would do, I bought a TV, furniture, a fridge, a microwave, and a futon. A week later, I question what compelled me to muster up my last college savings for all of this. I am in others’ rooms more than my own. I do not watch TV, nor do I have a subscription to watch anything if I wanted to. I use the dorm lounge microwave

not to wake my roommate up, and my fridge holds mostly smuggled dining hall food. So, I guess I am back to the same three boxes. Keep? Sell? Donate?

Part B: Analysis

It is often argued that children are the most vulnerable to absorbing information as they have not yet built the filters of skepticism that come with age. For me, this susceptibility to influence was especially consequential as I had just transitioned out of a culture that placed little emphasis on material possessions. In Brazil, where I had experienced much of my early childhood, I unknowingly had a natural comfort in being grateful for what I had. I prized the modest things in life more. Yet, when I grew accustomed to American culture, I was drawn like a fly to light. My understanding of sustainability today comes less from reading statistics or news and more from tracing how that development into adolescence and adulthood left an otherwise disregarded ecological footprint.

As a child, I rarely questioned credibility. If a commercial offered joy, I believed it. If a toy was advertised as essential or a food as irresistible, I wanted it. Yet, it is not that these sources contained a level of inherent authority that warranted trust, but rather that my mind was defenseless to the expansion of American consumerism that quickly became wrapped around me. While some may debate the premise of this idea, it is both a feature and a flaw of capitalism in that rampant values of consumerism quickly lead to a buildup of waste from half-used consumer goods. As I grew older, I found that these ideologies did not simply go away. In fact, if anything, they got more entrenched. One of the most prominent influences on my perception of consumer consumption has been money. When resources were scarce as a child, we believed in durability. Fixing clothes rather than buying new ones, making new use of leftovers, and sharing everything. Later on, the same financial influence flipped. The more money I had, the more

wasteful buying became prevalent in my life. Yet, my most profound realizations of sustainable thinking have come from watching the actions of others. A shaky phone video from a Facebook Marketplace buyer showing my old instrument in the hands of a student convinced me of the importance of reuse more than any slogan or article ever did. A soft-spoken donation worker gave me more reason to trust the act of giving to others than any protest or campaign has. These people are not experts by any means, but they were credible because they were real.

In the same way that sustainable thinking is influenced by others, rampant consumerism is reasoned through poor judgment and manufactured tactics. The idea of buying things as "new" has a positive, clicking connotation that resonates with those who look towards solutions to problems they did not realize they had. When I grew older, that reasoning followed me into adolescence, shaped by fast fashion and advertising that made disposability feel natural. Shirts that I found either in tags years later or destroyed after a year from cheap manufacturing still felt justified because they were cheap, and cheapness itself carried the false weight of logic. Because of this, I always felt like I encountered sustainability of means of one or the other without a middle ground. Even as I thought I had finally begun to stray away from disposable practices, I experienced a striking failure of logic when I experienced the aftermath of furnishing my college dorm. The question of whether a purchase is justified should not just be limited to the price or convenience. Rather, the decision should extend to evaluating if one's use of the item offsets the environmental impact it has on others.

Despite my experiences with synthesizing American culture in my life, sorting through my memories has shown me the most in terms of sustainable practices. At many points in my attempt to clear my room before college, I felt the weight of memory pressing against the impulse to discard. Throwing them away felt like erasing a part of myself. Similarly, that

emotional pull evoked a sense of shame as I looked at the vast accumulation of personal things that I had no use for. Yet, emotion also pushed me astray. The emptiness of my dorm gave me the anxiety that only ownership could fill, and so I bought a fridge, a futon, and a TV I barely touched. These purchases in their immediacy have shown me that any past thoughts of sustainable thinking were drowned out by impulse. It is often less about what we know and more about what we sense that pushes us to act.

Reflection

Looking back, it is clear that there have been gaps in my development of a mindset focusing on sustainability. Relying on instinct and emotion alone has made my choices reactive rather than consistent, and that inconsistency has followed me from childhood to college. I have also realized that short-term emotions towards a particular sector of consumerism push one to use mental logical thinking to rationalize something that may not entirely be the best option for them. Confronting my "role" in consumerism and waste showed me the potential in redistributing my belongings to make others happy, but it also revealed how little I had thought about sustainability on a systemic level. Going forward, I hope to actually base my ideologies on more statistical or factual information to obtain a better mindset of how the mind processes these needs for goods. On a global level, I believe it is crucial to assess one’s personal footprint behind the products one buys to shape more sustainable patterns of thinking. If I had paused to question what I genuinely needed, I would have saved money and begun to discern consumption as a responsibility rather than indulgence. Ultimately, my experiences with sustainability are not just a purge of personal belongings. It is a lifelong lens for evaluating what I keep, what I give away, and learning how my choices ripple into the larger world we share.