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IMAGINING UTOPIA

“A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at.”

— *Oscar Wilde*

After graduating from college, I hit the road in a 15-foot Ford van, outfitted with a sink, stove, solar-powered fridge, collapsible bed, and a basic supply of clothes, gear, and supplies. I was inspired by the opportunity to explore the country, the idea of a minimalist, nomadic lifestyle, and the action-packed, well-edited content of van-life YouTubers. My adventure was also a research expedition. I didn't know what kind of life I wanted to live, where I wanted to live it, or with whom I wanted to surround myself. I felt compelled to make a positive impact, but overwhelmed by the range and severity of problems facing humanity. Perhaps this epic journey would lead me to a better understanding of myself and my place in the world, as if I were Hesse's Siddhartha, the shepherd boy in *The Alchemist*, or Dorothy on the Yellow Brick Road.

Three years later, I have reframed this search. Instead of finding resolution, my travels deepened my awareness of the contradictions in society — systems that grant opportunity to some and impose suffering upon others, an economy predicated on infinite growth exploiting a planet of limited resources, and a species of social, loving, creative human beings living increasingly isolated, unhealthy, unhappy lives. Fortunately, in my travels I also encountered cherished people, places, and ideas that inspire me to conceive of alternatives to our current state. This process of envisioning better futures has fundamentally changed my worldview and impacted my daily life. I call it, “imagining utopia.”

In my utopia, people create things. One of my first stops on the road was a van gathering in Alamosa, Colorado, where hundreds of nomads congregated for a week in an ephemeral, self-contained community. As I walked through the dusty desert with a group of new “van friends”, surrounded by a neighborhood of converted vehicles, school buses, and RVs, framed by the backdrop of the Great Sand Dunes and Sangre de Cristo mountain range, I was struck with awe and admiration. The ingenuity of each of these people and their unconventional, self-made accommodations was inspirational and uplifting. Humans are natural builders, inventors, and

creatives, and having the ability to put our originaive tendencies towards our own determination is a vivifying experience. I loved the process of building my van, and I loved living in a space that I built myself. For many people, understandably, this does not lead to a desire to live in a car — but perhaps the urge to tend a garden, decorate a room, repair an appliance, or prepare food for loved ones. In my utopia, these generative acts are celebrated, taught, and supported. All people have access to resources, tools, and materials to realize their creative potential and unlock a higher degree of self-sufficiency.

I worked a remote, full-time job while traveling in my van. This led me to spend lots of time in libraries during the week, seeking good internet connection and a comfortable spot to work on my computer. Libraries have come to play an important role in my utopia. More than media hubs and friendly places to work, they are centers of culture and community. My first stop when entering a library is the bulletin board, where I have perused fliers advertising everything from salsa dancing to bird watching to spoon carving. During my library hours, I watched children engrossed in their first literary adventures, book clubs convening to discuss the latest best-seller, and a cheery librarian ritually setting up a movie for a disabled patron. People with nowhere else to be have the right to exist and learn in these public spaces. I envision libraries and shared spaces in every town that offer all this and more — lending not only books but also tools, recreation equipment, musical instruments, art supplies, even furniture. I imagine communal kitchens where people gather to swap recipes and provide food for those in need, makerspaces where people learn practical skills and collaborate on projects, art and music studios where people express themselves. Communities form identity within communal spaces, and we all become richer when we agree to share.

Equally impactful in my wanderings were places of solitude and contemplation, which I most often found in nature. I spent most of my weekends and free time outdoors — hiking through fiery autumn leaves in Vermont, patchwork cornfields in Indiana, venerable ridges in Appalachia, dramatic lakeside bluffs in Michigan, looming Saguaros in Arizona, quiescent alpine lakes in Colorado, mystical bubbling springs in Wyoming, ungovernable peaks in Montana, and hallowed Redwood forests in California. At places like Starcross, I played a more participatory role in my environment, learning to tend the land and live harmoniously with the cycles of the seasons. Each experience filled me with a new wonder and gratitude for ecological systems that sustain us physically, mentally, and spiritually — of which we are a part, as much as the furry,

feathery, and scaly creatures that live here too. My utopia recognizes our interdependence with nature and holds it as sacred. We have rituals and traditions that encourage us to connect intimately with our natural surroundings. We use science and technology to help us be better scholars and stewards of our complex and beautiful planet. Our governance accounts for not only the needs of humans, but of all life, present and future.

Perhaps the most important lesson from my travels is that we live in a world of unconquerable diversity and plenitude. After three years on the road, touching nearly every state, I still feel as if I have barely scratched the surface of this country alone. No categorical simplification could paint a complete picture of American lands or the people inhabiting them. This used to be a paralyzing thought, as if I needed to hold the entirety of the world in my mind before I knew my place in it. I have accepted my mistake. I needed to look no further than the soil underneath my feet to see that the world is immensely complex, fractal, and constantly changing — and that is its source of power and beauty. My utopia is, to use a phrase from the Indigenous people of Chiapas, “Un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos”, or “A world where many worlds fit.” I suspect each individual’s idea of utopia looks a little — or a lot — different from mine. But I also believe most people’s dreams are good, and many of them can exist simultaneously. In my utopia, we acknowledge difference as a strength, not a weakness — that diversity enriches our lives, not threatens them. We accept our place in the entirety.

Imagining utopia can feel like an exercise in impractical fantasy, particularly when the problems of the world are real and imminent, and our ideal worlds feel distant and unachievable. Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano writes of utopia, “Utopia is on the horizon. I move two steps closer; it moves two steps further away. I walk another ten steps and the horizon runs ten steps further away. As much as I may walk, I’ll never reach it. So what’s the point of utopia? The point is this: to keep walking.” I believe that without the ability to imagine worlds we would like to live in, we are powerless to change the world that exists. Utopian dreaming motivates me to revolutionize my life to reflect my ideals — to begin the march towards the horizon with my feet grounded in the present. In the upcoming year, I have decided to slow my travels to dedicate more time to finding utopia in everyday life — integrating creative, communal, and spiritual practices. It is a new type of journey, and I look forward to the lessons it will teach me.

What is your utopia?