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My Sustainability Journey

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Dear future change-making tiger,

My sustainability journey began with a simple tote bag. Though this statement may sound absurd out of context, it is important to think about why something so small can represent something so much more significant. I take this tote bag to the store and reject those flimsy white plastic bags that everyone so robotically relies on. So proudly, I walked out of the store with my cute little tote bag as if I just cleaned 100 pounds of trash out of the ocean. I have just changed the world single-handedly; you are welcome. Beyond my plastic-wrapped produce, I pull out a box of q-tips, a bag of makeup wipes, and red solo cups for an upcoming event at my house. I wonder how my tote bag could have any feasible impact on plastic waste; everything was covered in it! My ego was then quickly battered by realizing that my small act of rebellion had little effect on whatever cause I thought I was supporting. Though I was not aware of why I was so drawn towards such an action and had little knowledge of sustainability, I realize in hindsight that I had contributed to sustainability in one of the most crucial ways: with action!

This is why, my fellow tiger, the biggest takeaway from this anecdote is that there are two significant components to sustainability: understanding the theories behind its existence and real-life application. Once I was able to follow sustainability through research, casual reading, and engagement on social media with environmental activists such as Greta Thunberg, I was equipped with enough knowledge to prompt the desire to deepen my understanding of today's ecological crisis. I believe this is what led me to take Campus Sustainability 101 in my secondary education. What I have had the opportunity to do, and what I hope you can do as well, is being aware of today's most devastating environmental problems, learning about sustainability, and knowing its history are crucial starting points. Nonetheless, sustainability does not end there; it can not end there.

One of the most constructive things I learned about sustainability is that it can not only be put into words. Sustainability goes beyond concept and requires an application. I sit and read books about sustainability; however, the most I and anyone else can get from sustainably materializes from action beyond scribbled words in a textbook. Sustainability is not a new idea, it is merely new to me, and there is a long way to go when applying these new ideas. I feel as though many students and individuals our age have experienced this same dilemma. We learn about sustainability, feed into today's uprising

of environmentally conscious efforts, and lose track of where to focus our newfound passion. I am guilty of this mentality, and maybe you are too. As I developed my understanding of sustainability, I took in so much information I lost sight of purpose. Why is this important to me? Is this a waste of time? What are the applications of sustainability? Do I have the capability to make a change? These are questions you may be asking yourself. I have learned that a crucial step in successfully adopting sustainability into your life is answering questions like these.

There is a struggle with any impactful journey, which is why persistence and commitment are essential to sustainability on a grand scale. I struggled to find my place in today's environmental movement at the start. It takes research, communication, active listening, collaboration, and action in the academic sphere and beyond to fully grasp where you fit into it all. Once you find your drive and passion, there needs to be a movement towards putting your knowledge and skills to use, which brings us to the ambiguous title of "changemaker." To overcome society's continuous unsustainable treatment of the earth, there needs to be a cultural and political shift in how the general population enforces sustainable mentalities. Sustainability relies so heavily on adaptations and changes in such structures. It is individuals like us who turn their passion into action that can become change agents. I hope that my journey to becoming a changemaker guides you to the answers to the many questions that may arise in doing so. You may be questioning the importance of being a changemaker, what it means to be a changemaker, and how to become a changemaker.

There are a multitude of benefits in the act of simply doing. As you know, change does not transpire without action. Personally, action is my favorite part. Though, how do we take action? I do recognize how daunting it may be to jump into a cause, not knowing how you will be received or if you will succeed. The great thing I learned about sustainability is that it is continuously evolving, and numerous applications will make a difference, big and small. I started my efforts towards change by occasionally working and volunteering on the Ullem Farm. By going out on the farm, I put my intellectual and physical strengths into action. By weeding, planting, and moving tarps to improve growing conditions, I contributed to the farm and realized how the farm's sustainability could be further enhanced. As a class, we discussed possible enhancements to the farm and, with guidance from our instructor, it was time to turn those words into action. Weeks of course work had led up to the moment I spoke with high up faculty with my fellow classmate about the class's proposals. It is

important to remember that those major steps did not come with ease. Thus, it is crucial to examine what makes a successful change and how we get there. That's what you really want to know, right?

The first significant catalyst for change I had experienced was the magic of collaboration. During high school, I was a lone worker. I always felt as if my work was mine and mine only. Group projects were always a struggle for me, and I believe that attitude hindered my work's impact and limited the diversity of perspectives. Ever since my experience working with others in the pursuit of change, my perspective on collaborative learning has changed completely. The principles of sustainability are far too complicated for you or any one individual to tackle. Once that is understood, you can open your mind, work more efficiently, and have a support system to ensure my growth as a changemaker. The African proverb Robertson quotes in "Sustainability: Principles and Practice" portray the idea entirely, "If you want to walk fast, walk alone. If you want to walk far, walk together" (Robertson 337). This sums up sustainability in its entirety. Society coming together is critical for small scale and widespread change. It is also vital to leave blame placing behind and work as a unified front. We all have had an impact on the environment. It is up to us to no longer uphold past and current generations' devastating practices as a united front. To be a changemaker is to be a collective and applied learner who uses their skill and experiences for a cause outside of oneself.

In case you are still skeptical of what collaboration looks like in action, I learned a lot from analyzing the Story of Stuff's "Story of Change" descriptions of the characteristics of different changemakers. Changemakers can be seen as nurturers, networkers, communicators, builders, investigators, and resistors (www.storyofstuff.com). After discovering my own contribution to change-making as a networker, many things started to fall into place. I had a better understanding of where I would be most applicable. I was categorized as a networker as my skills of bringing groups of people together and being sociable. Coordinating gatherings that permit discussion about change implications is a considerable part of change-making though it can not work alone. I highly recommend assessing your own change-making personality as it may help you use your strengths to their full capability. If you think you are a fellow networker, let me know!

Now more than ever, it is essential that we build a community of diverse changemakers. There is a sense of urgency in the sustainability world, and with reason. Anthropogenic activities have had significant impacts on the environment within the past 200 years (Robertson 9). The earth is currently

at 140 percent of its carrying capacity, and we are experiencing substantial consequences in how we maintain life at such capacity (Robertson 44). Water usage, carbon dioxide and methane emissions, ocean acidification, tropical forest loss, earth temperature, and pollution levels are rising. The environmental movement, which started in the 1960s, needs momentum and a resurgence of changemakers to combat these issues (Robertson 12). Though many of these issues have their origins before our lifetimes, we are the ones who will feel environmental devastation the hardest and must act.

Life can not be sustained at the current rate resources are being extracted, used, and discarded. The threats of famine, war, and disease may emerge, and we will be left wishing we did more (Robertson 9). There is always talk about the power of the population in the degradation of the environment, but what about the people's power in saving the environment? With the hands-on experience at the Ullem Farm, collaboration with my classmates, Ullem farm enhancement project, interaction with the Story of Stuff, and expansion of my sustainability knowledge through class readings like that of Robertson, I believe I have been provided with the tools to serve a purpose in a population of changemakers. By becoming a changemaker, you decide the life you want to live and the world you want to live in. The hard work and commitment gives you a sense of purpose and belonging in the movements you believe in. Not only are you bettering the planet, but I also guarantee the feeling of accomplishment you will feel on the road to change. I hope that after reading this, you consider joining me in this movement.

Your friend,

Works Cited

Leonard, Annie. "Story of Change." Story of Stuff. 2012

Robertson, Margaret. *Sustainability Principles and Practice*. 2017