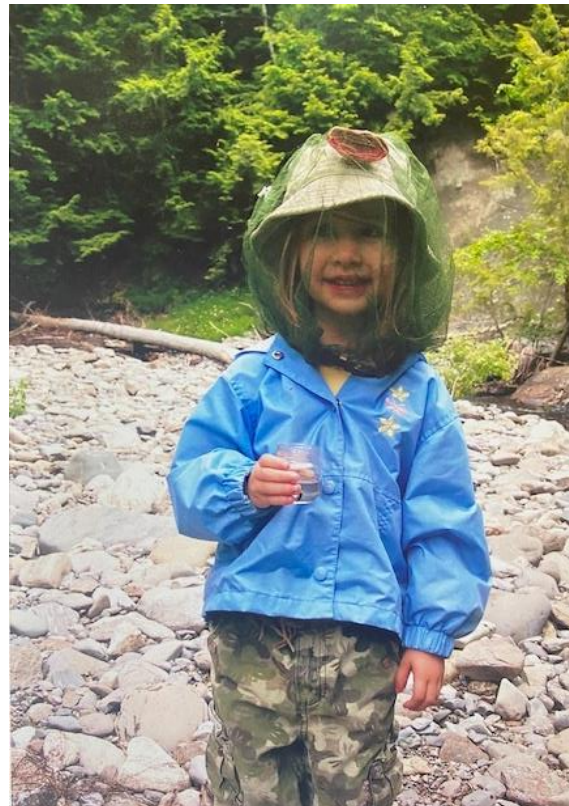


# Iceland, From Behind the Bus Window

By Lillian Bray

This was me when I was about four years old. We lived by a river and I would often get suited up in my adventure expedition attire, and do exactly that: explore. I would flip over rocks and find water bugs (likely what I was holding in the glass jar), I would build rock towers on the shore, I would pretend I was some mythical creature living in the forest. If I had a choice, I would be outside. I was creative and imaginative, like many kids. I was connected with nature through spending time in it. But there came a time that I began to not be as connected with it. The demands of this society soon became demands in my life: work, school, and different forms of technology. A cycle to say the least. In a capitalist, money driven, ever expanding society like the United States, it's almost looked down upon to have a true connection with nature because it's seen as not normal. As I embarked on this trip to Iceland, I kept this in mind: why is caring so much about the environment to a point where it becomes a spiritual connection so wrong in the eyes of so many?



Something I remember very vividly as a child were the long car rides my family took up to our summer camp in Greenville Maine. I remember gazing out the window and watching the passing scenery. Specifically, I remember staring at the telephone lines quickly passing by; I thought they looked like snakes slithering through the trees chasing the car as we drove along. I was tuned into the outside world, I had a soaring imagination, I cared deeply for the place in which I lived. Why was this connection slowly lost as I grew older? I never stopped caring, but in a society that doesn't value or encourage behavior like this, it's easy to forget *why* I cared so much.



The second picture is one I took from the bus when we landed in Iceland. As I watched these new Icelandic landscapes pass by I remember thinking “huh, this is Iceland.” It was dreary, there were no mountains in sight, the sun was hiding, the buildings within the old military base were less than inviting. I was jet lagged and my body called me to lay down, but I couldn’t. I was awake. I didn’t want to miss anything, so I sat by the window and soaked it in. Hope and happiness for the upcoming adventures persisted. Here, my journey in getting the window seat ensued.

The third picture is our first big expedition. It doesn’t look like much from far away, although the ocean behind the bus windows called me with its powerfully familiar sounds. I was excited as I knew I would get to see the almighty Icelandic ocean up close for the first time. The ocean has an unearthly type of power even though water is the most “earthy” resource imaginable. The water commanded my attention both audibly and visually. The ocean's color there is unique; it's not quite that of Maine's ocean color and also not that of tropical water that I have seen in far more southern places. I couldn’t force my eyes to look away. Nothing else mattered but the nature I was about to meet. The ocean has the ability to connect *us* with *it*, you just have to be willing to connect by disconnecting with all else. This is something I began to understand more as time went on.



Oh, to be a grazing sheep, horse, goat, or cow in the Icelandic countryside. To only worry about which side of the hill you want to graze from today and to move to new land when the



farmer guides the way. To have the freedom from the knowledge of human life, how nice life must be. As I looked at the passing countryside out my window seat, I wondered this many times, as did many others on the trip. “If I were reincarnated, I would want to be an Icelandic sheep,” many of us would say. Looking out the window at the animals peacefully grazing, cuddling up next to their mothers, or watching baby lambs jump around with nothing but pure childlike joy and excitement made me peaceful. These quick glimpses of another world brought a smile to my face. As I smiled to myself, I felt happy the animals got to live this incredible life that they probably didn’t even know they were so lucky to be living; but if they did, I think they would have gratitude. Their lives made me reflect on my own. I am extraordinarily fortunate to have the

opportunities I have and to live the life I live. I want to reflect on that more often. I’m grateful these oblivious animals brought this to my attention.

As we traveled to our second hotel, the bus proceeded through one of my favorite landscapes I saw in my time behind the bus window. Endlessly rolling hills of ancient lava rocks tucked away and undisturbed by humans' harsh touch. Mother Nature covered them with the most beautiful green blanket. These moss covered lava rocks were captivating to behold. The shades of green vibrated even in the cloudiest of conditions. They rolled on into the mountains and beyond what the human eye was capable of digesting. They rolled with the sky. I strained to see how far they stretched, but just like seeing the end of the skyline, it isn't possible. I imagined how different of an experience it would be walking through the trails that slithered in between them (it was indeed quite extraordinary). I wanted to reach through the window and touch it. The land looked sacred. My eyes were drawn to this magical moss with all of its caves and neverending shapelessness.



So much life grew from these ancient rocks. This ancient landscape invited my imagination to soar. I wondered if I was missing any hidden people or possibly a rock person. Maybe I wasn't overlooking them, but rather, they just didn't want to be seen. This landscape was like a rocky forest, without trees, without birds, but the possibility of mythical creatures. It seems these types of creatures are the only things fitting enough to step foot on this untouched land. I thought that many Icelanders must have had similar thoughts to this and that is why the Icelandic sagas and folklore involving mythical creatures were created. I wondered what a rock person actually looked like. I pondered the idea of an elf disappearing into one of the many caves this landscape offered for shelter. If I were a mythical creature I would certainly want to live amongst the mossy rocks and never be seen by the human eye either. Gazing out the window in these moments allowed me to disconnect with the reality all around me and connect with the possibility of a different reality beyond the window, one filled with mythical creatures that didn't seem like such a far stretch of my imagination anymore. In these moments, I was able to use my imagination like I once did as a child.

This is a picture I captured as our bus drove through the mountainous countryside. As I was looking out the window, some of us on the bus took notice of this farm house. There was something different about this farm house though: the line of trees just above it on the side



of the mountain. When we asked about this, Oli explained that the trees were planted there to protect the farm house from any potential falling rocks in the instance of a volcanic eruption or earthquake. Oli went on to explain how people live below the mountains everywhere in Iceland and they're not just going to move because of this perceived danger. As I thought about Oli's nonchalant explanation of this. It intrigued me to know that people of Iceland aren't afraid of potential danger, they face it head on. They know the potential of the environment they live in and they've come up with solutions to not incredibly change the land to fit their needs but just add a little bit to it. The people living in this house were not scared of the environment around it; they found a way to live in it without disturbing the nature around them. As I watched this farmhouse promptly exit my line of vision, these thoughts stuck with me. This

farmhouse gave me hope. Why can't we all find a way to live in peace with the land, to accept its capabilities, but proceed with solutions? This farmhouse proved it might not be that difficult.

This is a picture of a glacier I took from the bus window as we arrived in the parking lot. This glacier is maybe the first and last glacier I will ever see. We piled off the bus and began our journey towards it. The hike up to it felt exhaustingly long, then I learned the walk over to the glacier was the beginning of where it had stretched to not more than 50 years before. My emotions overtook my functioning as I met the glacier face to face. To see it rapidly melting away, people climbing on it seemingly without a care in the world, and having all of this devastating information thrown at my face made me feel helpless and hopeless. I didn't feel prepared for how this experience would make me feel. I was staring at this beautiful piece of Earth's history and it was receding before



my very eyes. I thought, how can I have hope? As we re-boarded the bus, I looked out the window to catch a view of it one last time. I began journaling as Oli read the room and began a speech meant to evoke a sense of hope amongst our young minds. He said, "Be brave, don't despair, there is a future even for the glacier." I remember it seemed difficult to truly let what he was telling us below a surface level as a feeling of complete despair loomed over me, but as the day went on, I realized he was right. We have to see the dark things to know and to truly understand their importance. As Oli perfectly explained later that day, caring enough to be moved and undergo this journey of doubt is necessary to reach a meaningful end.

This is a picture I took on our way back to the airport on the last day of the trip. The bus was quiet. There was a sense of connectedness through the disconnect. My fellow peers were looking out the window. It seemed as though everyone was soaking up the last moments of the journey, the landscapes, and the feelings these evoked within them. One of the many ways hope was achieved through me on this trip was simply disconnecting from my phone. I didn't have to



worry what others were doing and I was solely immersed with my own experience with the world. Seeing my newfound friends also looking out the window and seemingly feeling peace brought me even more hope. This sight made me sense that other people might have been feeling similar to me in realizing how imperative it is to take the time to disconnect and be aware of the outside world, which allows us to reconnect with it.

We largely learn and hear news about climate change as well as the sadness surrounding it from reading about it online. It is hugely important to be informed about the facts and the future of our planet because that's one of the ways we progress, with more knowledge. But what's knowledge without hope? Disconnecting with the meaningless distractions of the outside

world to reconnect with nature is imperative. It's essential to see the beautiful things as well as the sadness within these beautiful things. Being aware, being in touch, and being connected makes us stronger people with hope. Never let society or anyone tell you it's not okay to have a spiritual connection with the wilderness, because it's within that when we can truly see the things that are worth fighting for. We must first need to *let go* and reconnect with what's important in order to *fight* for what we know is important.

In Iceland, I always wanted the window seat. I had to soak up the scenery for just a couple seconds before the beauty passed by and I was left with just the picture image in my mind. Over the course of this trip, I've learned many things. One of those things is to look out the window more. To look away would be to ignore a gift being so effortlessly presented to you. It felt insulting to the natural world. In Iceland, the waterfalls, hills, valleys, volcanos, pasture

sides, grazing animals, and distant glaciers called my name and I answered without question. Sometimes when we pass by things quickly, we don't take the time to appreciate their raw beauty. You may only see these things once in your life, so why look away? Why ignore it? Why distract yourself with meaningless electronic activities? Be present and be engaged. So, I'm going to continue to look out the window.

In looking out the bus window in Iceland, a sense of happiness filled the entirety of my body, starting with my heart. It helps me to be present, share stories, listen to stories, connect these stories to what I'm seeing in the outside world. This has brought me to be more in touch with myself and feel my emotions. It's *our* responsibility to reconnect with nature and the natural feelings that it evokes in us the way it did when we were children, but we must find a way to do that in a society that discourages us from doing so. Finding hope is a journey, but it's one that we all must embark upon.

This last picture is one I took through my car window about five days after arriving back in Maine. I had just gotten out of work. I felt tired and irritable. So, I looked out the window. The



moon shined down on me almost as brightly as the sun, something I had missed for the past ten days as it was never truly dark, even at night, in my time in Iceland. The light of the moon shone light on the trees below. The vibrant green color of the trees made me remember how much I love the greens that nature produces. And the power lines...they slithered through the trees. I felt gratitude. I feel connected.