

Roots and Routes: How Food Waste, Borderlands, and a Hawk in the Sky Turned Me Into an Environmentalist



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Prologue: The Smog We Called Sky

I was raised on pavement. My earliest memories have the texture of concrete. I don't remember the first time I saw a wildflower, but I remember dodging broken glass on cracked sidewalks. I don't remember watching birds in the sky, but I remember helicopters hovering over rooftops, searchlights sweeping the dark like they were looking for ghosts.

Before I ever saw the towering buildings of Los Angeles or San Diego, I learned to balance on the uneven sidewalks of Tijuana, Mexico. That was my first home. A place full of contrast—bright colors, loud voices, vendors on corners, and stray dogs weaving through traffic. My childhood there didn't include clean parks or quiet forests. It included grit. Ingenuity. My abuela, a woman who reused everything, long before it was called sustainable. Glass jars became cups. Rice bags became storage bins. Plastic grocery bags were folded and saved in a drawer like precious items.

In the United States, I learned that nature was something people visited, on the weekends, on hikes, behind admission gates. In Tijuana, nature was something we endured or adapted to. It was dust and rain and wind that shook the power lines. It was the shade you chased to avoid heat. It was a neighbor's tree dropping pomegranates on your roof that you'd collect before they spoiled.

We learned to pay attention to the wind, to the seasons, to the sudden floods that rushed through the street with monsoon-like energy. We were improvisers. Urban survivors. We didn't buy air purifiers; we wet towels and laid them at the base of our windows to keep the dust out. We didn't buy compostable utensils; we just didn't throw things away unless we had to. And in that invisible care, that unseen refusal to discard, I see now the roots of my environmental ethos.

Looking back, I didn't know the word "environmentalist." But I knew survival. I knew that wasting was a privilege. I knew that we had to stretch everything—food, money, energy. And I see now that those early lessons were my roots. Not academic. Not ideological. Just real.

The Wake-Up Call: A Burger King Epiphany

My first job in the United States was at a Burger King. I was sixteen. The uniform felt like armor—scratchy and synthetic—but it also made me feel like I belonged somewhere. I showed up early, memorized the register, and took pride in clocking out with my shoes still tied.

But that pride started to unravel the night I took out the trash.

Behind the restaurant was an industrial dumpster. The smell was exactly what you'd expect, salt, grease, sugar, and rot. But it wasn't the smell that got me. It was the sight. Bag after bag of untouched food. Whole sandwiches. Full boxes of fries. Sealed cookies. Milk jugs. All of it dumped because of the timer on the warmer or the sell-by date.

I stood there, thinking about the kids I knew at school who relied on free lunch. I thought about my mom, who stretched a pot of beans over three days. I thought about myself, standing there in that uniform, playing my part in a system that fed some and discarded the rest.

That night, I Googled "food waste in America."

The statistics were violent. According to the USDA and Feeding America, roughly 40% of food in the U.S. is wasted, while over 30 million Americans face food insecurity. That contradiction hit me in the chest.

It didn't feel like inefficiency. It felt like injustice. I started seeing everything through that lens—how fast food trained us to value convenience over care. How the lights in the dining area stayed on 24/7. How no one seemed to ask why we accepted that level of waste as normal.

What I felt wasn't just discomfort, it was the beginning of transformation. A gnawing. An awakening. And like most awakenings, it started with pain.

A Slow Burn of Rage and Realization

What began as an obsession with food waste grew into something bigger. I started noticing excess everywhere. Piles of fast fashion clothing on clearance racks. Broken electronics tossed to the curb. Giant homes with lights blazing all night, even when no one was home.

And alongside the excess, I noticed the erosion.

I saw headlines about whales washing ashore with stomachs full of plastic. About coral reefs bleaching beyond recovery. About oil spills that were "contained" but never truly cleaned up. I saw maps of redlined neighborhoods overlaid with heat indexes and asthma rates. The overlap was perfect. The connection was clear.

It wasn't just that we were destroying the planet. It was who we were letting suffer first.

The rage I felt wasn't abstract. It was personal. It was knowing my little cousins were breathing dirty air because our city had more warehouses than trees. It was watching my parents' electric bill skyrocket during heat waves and realizing they couldn't afford to run the AC. It was seeing resilience in my people and recklessness in the corporations that profited from our survival.

It was infuriating. Not just because it was unjust, but because no one seemed to be held accountable. These weren't just "natural disasters" or "unintended consequences"—they were business decisions. Built on a capitalist system that treated the planet as a warehouse and the rest of us as disposable. My rage wasn't a flicker; it was a furnace.

I wanted to do something. But I didn't know where to start. So I started where I could: with education.

Learning the Language of the Earth

I enrolled in the university and signed up for online classes in environmental science and policy. At first, I was nervous. The textbooks were foreign. The language academic. I didn't see myself in the curriculum, in the classrooms, or in the faculty. But I saw glimpses of my community in the margins.

My textbooks didn't look like my neighborhood. They were full of forests, glaciers, polar bears. But in between the white space, I found myself.

I learned about systems thinking—the idea that everything is connected. That the air we breathe is tied to the fuel we burn is tied to the policy we write is tied to the

neighborhoods we disinvest in. I learned about climate justice and environmental racism. I learned that my story wasn't unique. It was part of a pattern.

I also learned to grieve. To grieve for the ecosystems we lost. The ancestral knowledge erased. The species gone before we even knew their names. I'd sit in class, reading about carbon sinks and extinction rates, and want to scream. Why weren't more people talking about this? Why was this not on the evening news? Why weren't we all in the streets?

And I learned the language to name what I had only felt:

- Urban heat islands.
- Environmental degradation.
- Capitalist extraction.
- Planned obsolescence.
- Ecological grief.

These weren't just academic terms. They were explanations for everything I'd lived through. They gave structure to my confusion. They gave shape to my fire.

I began writing. First in a journal. Then in essays. Then in blog posts I was too shy to publish. I wrote about watching my mom boil water during outages. About watching my neighbor plant tomatoes in cracked buckets. About watching kids play in alleys because the parks were too far. Writing was the way I gathered myself. It was how I put the broken pieces into order.

My rage turned into clarity. And that clarity turned into purpose.

From Consumer to Steward

I didn't wait to become an expert. I became a teacher the moment I started learning.

First, it was my family. I showed them how to recycle better. I explained composting. I organized our pantry so food didn't go to waste. I asked my mom to buy less paper

towels. My siblings rolled their eyes at first, but then I saw them reuse containers, turn off lights, talk about buying less.

Then it was my friends. We started a weekly swap—books, clothes, tools. We volunteered at a local garden. We attended city council meetings. We weren't environmentalists by profession. But we were advocates in practice.

At home, I kept modeling the change I wanted to see. I repurposed old T-shirts into cleaning rags to be used around the house. I cooked meals from scratch. I taught my little cousin how to build a compost bin out of an old bucket.

That's when I realized something crucial: environmentalism doesn't belong to scientists or nonprofits. It belongs to people.

Especially people who have been told they have no power.

The Moment the Sky Opened

We took a group of students to a restored wetland. For many of them, it was the first time seeing nature without fences. The sky was wide. The air smelled like mud and moss. Birds moved freely overhead. No walls. No sirens. No borders.

A boy tugged at my sleeve. "Is that a hawk?"

I looked up. A red-tailed hawk was circling, wings stretched like a question.

"Yeah," I said. "That's a hawk."

He squinted. "I didn't think cities had birds like that."

And that's when it hit me.

We hadn't been deprived of nature. We'd been taught not to look for it.

Since that day, I've seen hawks more times than I can count. Not because they're rare. But because I started paying attention. And because I started believing we were allowed to belong to the sky, too.

I tell people that hawk was a sign. A kind of permission. It was the earth saying: You're not too late. You're not too small. There's still time.

Calling Others In

We need more voices. Not more saviors. Not more whitewashed campaigns. But more stories like mine—like yours.

We need:

- Abuelas who know how to stretch a meal and keep a garden alive.
- Delivery workers who know which streets flood first when it rains.
- Tenants who fight for safe housing and mold-free walls.
- Kids who want to plant trees where there used to be shade.
- Nurses who notice the asthma spikes during heatwaves.
- Bus drivers who know which neighborhoods overheat by noon.
- Teachers who bring seedlings to classrooms and let kids name them.

Sustainability isn't about minimalism aesthetics. It's about resilience. It's about justice. It's about knowing that our communities have *always* known how to live with the earth, we were just pushed to the margins.

There are thousands of people already doing the work. Quietly. With calloused hands and aching backs. The undocumented landscaper planting pollinator gardens. The single mother who bikes to work to save gas. The food truck owner using compostable containers because he wants better for his grandkids. These are the environmentalists the news doesn't cover.

And we need them all. Not someday. Not after certification. Now.

Because the climate crisis is not in the future. It's already here. It's in the floodwaters rising in basement apartments. In the fire smoke choking sky. In the unpaid water bills. In the blackout summers. In the silent grief of watching a tree stump where shade used to be.

And yet, in all that, there is still a flicker. Of resistance. Of beauty. Of belonging.

So let's stop waiting for permission. Let's start where we are. With what we have. With who we love.

The Soil Remembers

There's a thousand seeds being planted. In backyard gardens. In classrooms. In city council meetings. In moments of refusal. In moments of joy.

There's the teenager who designs air-filtering masks for her neighborhood. The artist painting endangered animals on boarded windows. The dad who builds a raised bed for herbs with his kids. The elder who passes on stories of rain patterns and planting cycles.

The earth remembers every footprint. Every injustice. Every act of healing.

So here's what I remember:

- The warmth of the sun on my back as I sweep a sidewalk garden.
- The sound of a compost bin bubbling with life.
- The look on a student's face when they learn that whales once lived free of plastic.
- The joy of growing something from seed.
- The grief of watching it wither, and trying again anyway.
- The sound of my abuela's voice, reminding me: "no se tira nada." Throw nothing away.

My roots are in Tijuana. My route is still winding. But every step forward is part of something bigger. Something older. Something still unfolding.

We don't need perfect activists. We need people who care enough to begin.

And that? That's you.

This essay is dedicated to the children growing up in places where the sky feels too far away. May you find your own way back to the earth, and know it's been waiting for you all along.

About the Author

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I write about the messy, unfiltered reality of self-help, leadership, sustainability, and what it really means to make human progress. No fluff, just real talk.

I was raised in a working-class, binational family between Tijuana and Southern California—places where environmental injustice isn't theory, it's daily life. This story isn't abstract for me. It's personal, it's political, and it's happening now.

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