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Under The Same Sun

Two neighborhoods shared the same sun and yet experienced it differently. In the summer, the heat settled over my dry Jordanian neighborhood like a heavy blanket, but it landed unequally. One side of the street was sprinkled with large gated homes, giving a sense of security with palm trees reaching the sky, walls thick enough they can leave frozen meat cold effortlessly, and shaded courtyards, leaving a nighttime effect.

The forgotten other side was the remnants and old memories of unfinished buildings, destroyed window panes repaired with dirty and worn-out clothing, grey and lifeless concrete walls, pressure cracks leaving a pattern in the wall and little protection from the elements. Walking between them, I began to realize that wealth is not limited to lifestyle, but it shapes how people experience the natural world itself.

The ragged lower-income neighborhood, the environment presses in constantly. The sun relentlessly beats down directly onto bare concrete, which absorbs heat during the day. Dust drifts through the open windows, settles, and overcomes the colors on furniture, leaving a dry, gritty taste in the air. The hum of struggling air conditioners fills the streets, fighting an unfair battle against the unforgiving heat. Touching the walls feels like touching a hot stove, and shade is scarce and sacred in a climate like this. A glance away, elegant and wealthy homes are well insulated, windows sealed, and courtyards cooled naturally by plants. Sounds are silenced and isolated, the air filled with the weight of moisture, and a jolt and relief floods the body stepping into the shade.

The most significant result of a simple glance was not just the difference between the neighborhoods but what it revealed: wealth informs how people relate to the environment. For the wealthy individuals, nature is filtered and softened and kept at a comfortable distance; for others, it is unavoidable. People view wealth and the environment as disparate issues, but most fail to realize a wealth gap is also an environmental gap. Economic status determines who can afford shade, installation, and protection from the heat, and who must endure environmental stress directly. The realization sculpted how I think about environmental responsibility; environmental harm is not distributed evenly, and neither is environmental comfort. Conversations on conservation often highlight preserving land or protecting endangered ecosystems, but they rarely address how human-built environments expose certain communities to greater harm. Protecting the environment also means protecting people from environmental extremes, not just preserving nature as a concept separate from human life.

Author Joy Harjo illustrates, "It's possible to understand the world from studying a leaf...It's also possible to travel the whole globe and learn nothing." Her words spotlight that true understanding comes from close attention to detail, not from societal concepts such as distance or privilege. Experiences arise and rush to my head. People living in run-down homes are forced to notice the environment every day, the torturous scolding heat, the infinite unforgiving dust, the sun's endless greed, because they cannot escape it. Vast wealth on the opposite side allows individuals to remain insulated, both physically and mentally, from these powerful forces. Harjo depicts that deep understanding comes not from how far you go but how close you are able to observe.

Author Aldo Leopold echoes this ethical warning when stating, "The last word in ignorance is the [person] who says of an animal or plant, "What good is it?" critiquing the tendency to value nature only for its usefulness. I saw firsthand how poorer neighborhoods are treated in Jordan. Since they hold less economic value, they are often considered less worthy of elegant, luscious trees, vast and open green space, or environmental investment, which only mirrors the ignorance Leopold voices. Paying attention to these minute differences can be upsized and lead to significant environmental justice simply by noticing. The sun may shine equally, but its effects are shaped by human actions. If we truly listen to what the land reveals, as authors Harjo and Lepold urge us to do. We begin to see that caring for nature also means caring for the people most exposed to it.