

# The Venn Diagram of Self and Society

Iva Welbourne

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Growing up on a farm in a small rural community, I was driving a tractor by the time I could reach the pedals. In high school I would drive the combine after school in the fall for my grandpa, plow with my dad in the spring and rounded up cattle with my cousins in the summer. My community was close-knit and like-minded. Yet, despite my love of agriculture and deep respect for the traditions I was a part of, I wanted out. “Out” being the most important factor for me, I decided to attend the college that had offered me the best scholarship. Little did I know this was the first of many valuable opportunities the liberal arts had to offer me.

Having no reference for the trajectory of my life beyond agriculture, I let the liberal arts guide me. I took a class titled ‘The Writer in Society’ my first semester where we were asked to write an essay defining happiness. This is when I first started examining true fulfillment and seeing my future as part of something bigger than myself. What good is happiness if it is not shared with others? Would only serving myself be a truly sustainable way to live when there were many others who needed help? The career options I had been considering before college began to feel one dimensional. I was no longer looking for the ‘least painful’ ways to make a living, I was searching for more.

I took many other assorted classes. Unlike many other institutions where I may have taken a class or two outside my focus and moved on, the departments I became involved with at Truman became intertwined in my search for a career. The pressure to be ‘just one thing’ was off, I was able to explore my passions freely. I tentatively became an agricultural science major but still saw many moral obstructions based around the environmentally and ethically unsustainable agriculture systems I had grown up around, not knowing what was missing. One of the core classes that changed this was required in my curriculum, ‘Ethical Issues in Sustainable Agriculture’. This class’s scope was community oriented, considering the Kirksville community while also recognizing that we are a part of a larger, global community. Previously, things outside the United States and overseas felt abstracted and removed from myself. I began to develop stronger empathy towards cultures I had never personally encountered and a responsibility toward those who were being overlooked in the food system. I found answers I had been searching for when considering solutions to poverty, food insecurity and degradation of our natural resources. As I was introduced to local farmers modeling ecologically sound systems, I began to feel more hopeful about the trajectory of agriculture. Not only do we have the ability to feed the world, we can fight climate change while doing so. Using the earth has the potential to be a deep, mutually beneficial relationship between nature and humans. It was this class that also introduced me to the writer Wendell Berry, who put into words a major catalyst for my eventual decision to volunteer abroad, “A community is the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared, and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other's lives.” Especially in 2022, after living through a world-wide pandemic, I know that this is as true globally as it is locally.

Because of the nature of the liberal arts, I was able to include studio art classes to count toward my major. After all, ceramics are made of soil, and fibers are from plants! I was able to

explore even more deeply our interactions with the planet, sculpting naturalistic forms and sketching 'en plein air'. I noticed details that had previously escaped me, simply looking at a tree or an ant or blades of grass. My horticulture professor that same semester brought up the theory of Plant Blindness, "the inability to notice or discern the plants in one's own environment", because of the overwhelming number and lack of knowledge about them. As I became able to name, file and distinguish between plant species, I was able to artistically represent them more accurately, with a deeper understanding of their importance and role where I found them. Somewhere along the line I began to understand how deeply connected our species is to the things that I was representing. Community encompasses even more than just humans.

During these crucial semesters, I was slowly being shown places that my overlapping interests converged. Involvement in service opportunities within the community, arts and humanities classes, my work with the greenhouse on campus and my original love of agriculture found the Venn diagram sweet spot when I was encouraged by a professor to look into the Peace Corps agriculture and environment sector. I came back to the question posed my freshman year: Would only serving myself be a truly sustainable way to live when there were many others who needed help? Because of the ways my higher education has been intertwined with the area surrounding me, I have realized that serving those around me is serving myself. I am a direct beneficiary of the betterment of my community, including the flora and fauna surrounding me.

This thought process brought me to taking on a research project focused on tree health around town. I was able to make connections with people working in our city hall and use their software to map trees in the right-of-way and provide care suggestions. I am now working on presenting this data and providing an updated 'plantable tree list' to improve diversity, native flora, and aesthetics of our area. This example of hands-on, professional experience has provided me with many tools that I will need in my next chapter of life. Joining the Peace Corps, I am expected to be able to physically implement my knowledge in a professional way and I am confident in doing so.

Attending a liberal arts institution has afforded me countless opportunities to learn about myself, grow as a person, and critically discern the world around me. I have developed a drive to learn and serve my community and am able to define what that is. Three years later, I can now say that I know what makes me deeply fulfilled and have been given the tools to achieve that. I hope to pass on the privilege and education I've had to others who may not have had these opportunities during my service in the Peace Corps.