[Theme music]

Hannah 00:05 Hello and welcome back to another episode of Sharing things. I'm Hannah, your host for season six and I'm excited to share the next uplifting conversation from members of our University community, exploring the little things in life that connect us.

This episode features Dhardon, a PhD student at the University of Massachusetts and human rights advocate, and Gloria, a recent master's graduate in Africa and International Development. Thank you both so much for joining us today. I thought we would start just getting to know each other a little bit better before we get on to the objects. So I wanted to ask each of you, and I think Dhardon, I'll come to you first. I wanted to ask about your first experience of Edinburgh, since this is what connects all of us. Yeah, what do you remember about the first time you came to the city of Edinburgh?

Dhardon 00:53 Yeah so it was back in September 2006. So this was the first time I was stepping out of India, my home country, being away from my family and friends and stepping into a very strange unknown land. And I thought I would see something very London-ish and English and then to see-- surrounded by these huge mountains actually reminded me of my original home country, that's Tibet. And I do know some people do refer to Edinburgh as the-- as replicating a lot of aspects of Tibet, the highlands and then when I got into my dormitory, it was close to Princes Street, to be surrounded by those mountains and then the Edinburgh Castle looming large. I think it really helped me feel at home, you know, it's a really strange land. I've never been abroad on my own, we didn't have a single fellow Tibetan in the entire campus. But what made me feel at home was those, those mountains and, and the castle that very much replicated the original palace of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, that's the Potala Palace in Lhasa. So I think that kept me going for the next two years, I would say.

Hannah 02:16 I love that-- that picture that you've painted for us, that's really beautiful. Just like coming to a completely different place and still finding those pieces of home. And I was wondering, also, if you can maybe tell us what, what was it about Edinburgh that has stuck with you since you've left and whether you've ever visited, if you've ever been back?

Dhardon 02:37 When I left Edinburgh, it was early 2008. So now it's been a good 14 years, and I haven't been back. But that's always on my dream place to visit. I think when I was in Edinburgh, as someone who didn't find any kind of cultural reflection, you know, I was constantly struggling to feel at home, feel that sense of belonging, and it was those-- it was actually the landscape that offered me that spaces of comfort. But now 14 years later, having travelled so much and been in the US for like last eight years or something I'm still raring and daring to go back to Edinburgh, because I have changed as a person, right? Much, much more mature. And now I think I want to give something back to those landscapes that gave me so much. So I think that feeling would be very, very different. But what I really liked about Edinburgh was I think this was one place where there was history, beauty, and a lot of mysticism / mysteriousness, right, it's a city that never ceases to surprise you, you know? Now I've travelled so much and every time I go to New York, it's the same old tall buildings in Manhattan and the ferry ride and all of that. But Edinburgh is-- I feel something or maybe it's the Harry Potter connection or something, there's so much to explore. There's so much-- so much surprises, and I think I left it half way I would say, I didn't experience it fully. And now I want to come back and relive those moments in a much more satisfying and in a much more fuller manner. I think that would be my, my to do list.

Hannah 04:33 Yeah, I wonder how it will have changed for you when you arrive back like you said, you're, you're a different person now. So I wonder how your experience of, of Edinburgh will be different as well. Yeah. Okay, so Gloria coming to you. You might share with us what your first impression of Edinburgh was?

Gloria 04:52 Yeah, I love Dhardon's story because I've already been able to find some similarities with myself. So when I came to Edinburgh, it was also my first time coming like really-- going really, really far from home. So I've previously like been to the East African countries, you know, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, but I've never really gone this far. So there was like, lots of expectations, I was unsure, you know, whether it was gonna be a really big city, obviously, I've been on Google seeing all the lovely images. But when I arrived in Edinburgh, surprisingly similar to Dhardon, I also saw some similarities while I was driving from the airport, just like you know, on the roads and the landscape as well. So I really love that that was a central theme for you, because I also really love the landscape. And in Kenya, there's lots of really lovely mountains you know, a really lovely countryside and I could see you know, highlights of that from the city. And there's, you know, similar parts of the city, also here in Edinburgh that reminded me of Nairobi. And apart from that, as well, apart from the landscape, I got a really warm welcome. I came in November of 2020. And I was like two months late in arriving in Edinburgh, because most people are already coming in September. So I had like three students, you know, who already started, they came to the airport to pick me up so I didn't have to feel confused, like what's happening because you're already like really nervous, you're wondering, you know, how things are going to be so I got three people to welcome me. And I remember arriving at the airport, I was quite confused because it was like, November there was, you know, a bit of like, sunshine, it was like really bright out but it was also cold at the same time. And it was the first time to actually feel that where there's like, bright sunlight but you 're freezing. Because in Kenya, it's obviously you know, a lot of like, sunshine, it's mostly warm all the time. So I was like, trying to understand what this weather was about, like, how could I be seeing so much sun but not actually feeling it on my skin?

Hannah 06:49 But I wonder if-- I guess if it wasn't the weather, what was it about Edinburgh that got you to stay? Why are you still here?

Gloria 06:58 Similar to Dhardon, I really fell in love with, with Edinburgh, I don't know, I just, I love the landscape. I love how you know, you can be the city, you know, and 10 minutes out, you're like in a lovely park. And it just has you know that diversity. I also love how it's not extremely busy. I know that you know, after like I graduated, and most people are looking for things to do. There's like lots of opportunities, like in London, like some of the other cities in England, and I've been to, you know, London in December and I knew for sure like I enjoyed my visit in London, but I knew I actually didn't want to live there. I was just like, 'No, this is not for me'. Like I love the pace in Edinburgh. I love how it feels somehow like community because you're coming from outside, you're not a local here. But I think because of just the size and the pace of things, it does feel like a place you can settle in, it feels like a place you can call home. So those are some of the aspects that just made me really feel like this is certainly the place that I wanted to stay in. And, and the same things around just the beauty of the place, the charm, I think the buildings, these things will really, really draw you in. And I've heard people say this a lot about Edinburgh, like, you know, you come to Edinburgh, and then it just-- it just never leaves you, you're still holding on to it even when you go. Now I understand that because previously if someone said that I wouldn't know what they meant.

Hannah 08:20 Yeah, I totally agree. I feel like no matter where I go, after I finish my studies, I'll always have Edinburgh with me.

[Theme music]

Hannah 08:32 So, I think we can yeah, move on to the objects. So, Dhardon, I wonder if you could tell us first about your object and explain what it is and why you decided to bring it with you today.

Dhardon 08:45 Surprisingly, when I thought of an object, I thought it would be something very tiny that I could bring here. And finally, the one thing that I cannot miss mentioning is the table. It's actually a table-- it's actually not a single table, there are three tables, they look very similar like the same design. I think on three counts, they mean a lot to me. First things first is this is something very Buddhist. So if you go to the Himalaya region, I would say every home will have that table. And especially in Tibet, my home, home country, this table you know if you look at the image, it's mostly in-- it's painted in red colour, because red means karma in Buddhism, and there are yellow aspects to it also which is again a colour that signifies with this culture. But more about it is that intricate design, the artists they work really hard on making that one table. It's beautifully handcrafted and unique artists, carpenters and then you need a certain Monk and a scripture to really refer to when you design that table. So it's basically a labour of love, I will say. Why this is really important is first things first, let me go with something very tangible, material is-- yes, it's red, it's gorgeous, it's got intricate designs. And in that design, the one I have actually has a very peculiar kind of an image of a snow lion, which is a mythological animal of Tibet. It's actually a national animal. But it's mythological because it no longer exists, but we believe that once it did exist, and that's why Tibet always called the land of snow and we believe that the snow lions were always guarding Tibet, because it's the roof of the world. And it was kind of really cut off from the rest of the world-- cut off as in we intentionally didn't want to keep ties with this world, we were very protected by the culture, especially by the Buddhist culture. We know when the whole, you know, during that whole colonial period, we even resisted the British expedition that came to Tibet in 1904, you know, but in 1959, everything fell apart, Chinese occupied Tibet, and then we have this current modern history, right. So the snow lion was always believed to protect that beautiful land of snow, which is, I think, predominantly Buddhist and then now the modern version of Tibet is because now whenever you mentioned Tibet, you always hear China, you know, so either in antithetical terms, or I don't know there, there is some connection because right now it's a crisis. There's a -- it's a conflict situation, because China as the aggressors that occupied and Tibet as the one occupied. But yes, we do share cultural history, political history, I would say, a Tibetan King actually married a princess from China. So this-- we go back, we go way back, you know. So now the image that I have on my table is the head is the snow lion, the only Tibet-- Tibetan, and the body is actually that of a dragon. So when you say Dragon, it's always China, and I think this is really meant to symbolize the two factors that contributed to what we are facing today, the present crisis, but trying to also kind of bring harmony in that conflict, you know, conflict, crisis doesn't necessarily mean it's always bleak aggressor/victim or victor/vanquished. Not necessarily like that, but you know, I'm-- if I were to look back, I'm a product of this conflict and a crisis, and I'm proud of that, you know. So I think having that on that very important object in our home also shows how resilient we are, you know, and how we tend to look at our aggressor in a very different way, as someone who kind of is constantly teaching us something, you know, always making us-- get up nine times. And so what the snow lion had and the dragon body, there are two of these animals here. What they are holding on to is something very, very precious that's called the symbolic wish fulfilling gem. It's called the Norbu in the Tibetan language, it's one of the eight auspicious signs that Tibetan people really revere. And the Norbu actually signifies something that fulfils your wishes. So it's a wish fulfilling gem. And then on top of that design, if looked closely, is wood carving and the image that you get it looks like a little kind of a 3d with the 3d effect, it's that of the lotus. So lotus in Tibetan Buddhism means compassion and, and also resilience because in muddied waters, it stands tall and beautiful, right? It's unaffected by the chaos that’s around and in Tibet, because they cannot keep a picture of the Dalai Lama or they cannot call him by his name because you might face arrest. They call him as the Lotus because you cannot be punished for liking a lotus. So it's called Padma in Tibetan language which means the lotus. So, so there's compassion right at the very top on the table and then there is the snow lion figure that's protecting. There's this dragon who you want to get angry, but is embedded into that snow lion figure protecting the symbol of the wish fulfilling gem. So in that sense, I think it has deep cultural/religious and historical significance as well, that kind of really takes you to the past, but makes you aware of what the present is. And we all have wishes for a future, right?

Hannah 14:12 Yeah, that is a wonderful choice. It's a really beautiful table. It's really, really beautiful. And I like that you draw on the symbolic value of all of these images. I was also wondering, when I saw the photo, I could see that you had things placed on the table and I wondered if those had significance as well. And if you could explain the sort of details of what was sat on it?

Dhardon 14:36 Yeah. When I came to the US, it was a little strange. I was on my own for I think close to six years. It was very difficult. But last year, my parents actually came, came and joined me. So after my parents came, they got a lot of stuff from my home in India, but not this table and we kept saying the minute we feel we want to settle in America, you know, the moment you feel you want be here because we always felt India was a home. So we will bring that table. So that table coming to a home here in Amherst in Massachusetts meant, we as a family felt this place as home. So, means-- my parents are here now, my husband and me, we're here. And I have a little dog, Shih Tzu, who is actually originally from Tibet, kept by Chinese emperors [laughs]. And this table is where you do your prayers, where you entertain guests, you know, even though it has a lot of Buddhist significance. But because we live in a rented apartment, and it looks like I'm going to graduate next May, so I'm not buying a lot of furniture, although all of us, all four of us live together in this 650 square feet apartment, it's very tiny, but we're very happy together as a family with my little dog. And so you know, what we did is, we didn't have an altar, all this while and for every Buddhist altar is the main thing. It's the soul of the house, we didn't have an altar all this while. So after I paid so much to get the tables here, and they came in perfect condition. So we stacked the three tables on top of each other and made an altar. So what you see on the top is the offerings that we make to the gods every morning. So it's actually water in that little container. And it's called, Yonchap in Tibetans. So earlier, I think people in Tibet who were really well off, they would offer milk, butter and all of that. But then when Buddha back in, I don't know how many years ago, 2500/3000 years ago, he had said that, if you really meant it from your heart, a water offering, as-- is as precious as that of, of a milk offering. So-- and Tibet being the roof, the world and the water tower of Asia gives so much fresh water to the rest of Asia and we believe that the waters in Tibet are fresh and pure and sacred. And that's why you will see Tibetans across the world, you know, would offer this water every morning to the gods. And we believe that by doing that we're feeding everyone who's thirsty and hungry. Sometimes you would also kind of decorate it with edibles, because any offering you know, like today, if I buy a box of chocolates, first thing we'll do is offer three of them to the gods. And we believe that, you know, by offering it to God, we believe we are feeding everyone who's hungry.

Hannah 17:31 I see, I see, I'm learning so much. And there's so-- I love how there's just so many facets of symbolism, symbolizing how you found a home in the US and your family is there with you, but also incredibly cultural. There just seems to be so much to it. Yeah. Okay. So Gloria, coming to you, I understand that there is that same sort of similar significance to you with your objects, that being sort of cultural artefact from home, I wondering if you could talk us through what you've brought with you?

Gloria 18:00 Yes, I'll go ahead and talk about my object, which is this bracelet, actually. So this bracelet is, is, it's jewellery from Kenya. So typically, I think when most people see this, if you've been to Kenya, if you've kind of been to East Africa, it will be something that you know, is quite familiar for you before. And I brought it for several reasons. So I think it represents a lot of things. I think the first thing usually I know people will talk about culture, but that's probably like, somewhere on the lower part of my list. The first part for me why I selected it is because I thought it was really a great representation of my personality. So I really love colour. I love you know, colour in the house. I love colour in clothes, I've always loved just having all these different pieces, I think it's you know, colours really bring life. And these bracelets and like the necklaces tend to have, you know, a really nice combination of those. So that was just definitely one thing that represents my personality. I'm also quite big on like jewellery. So I love a lot of like rings, bracelets, necklaces. And if you see me on any day, I'm going to have a couple of those things [laughs]. So that's another area that I you know, I just need it really covers as well. And then the other thing I think similar to you it does represent a piece of home and you talked about how hard it is to be able to bring the tables you know, across country. So certainly when I came to Edinburgh, I only had like my two suitcases and that was pretty much it. So I'm not able to like bring all the things that you know, I had back home and certainly things like jewellery, those small, small knickknacks or things that you're able to carry around. And for me, I probably have these bracelets, like because I have a couple of them, I probably have one on like a couple, you know, different times of the week. So it's something I'm really able to carry with me. It's not something that's like in the cabinet, you know, that's just pulled out occasionally. I think I wear it quite often every week, I'll probably have it on a couple of days. So it's definitely a piece of home, it reminds me of just the culture back home, even if I'm not necessarily, you know, able to be there frequently. So that's kind of the other reason where-- why I selected it. And I think now the final reason, which is like a grounding reason, most people will usually you know, you know, choose this first will be now the cultural factor. So, this bracelet is actually from a tribe called the Maasai tribe in Kenya, the tribe is in Kenya, but it's also in some of the East African countries. And they are the ones who make these beads. They wear these beads as part of like their day to day dress code. So for them, this is not necessarily like an exotic thing. I know, sometimes when I'm on this side of the world, people will find it so fascinating. They're like, wow, what is this, but like for the Maasai people, this is like part of your everyday outfit, you probably have like a ton of the bracelets, you'd have several of like, the necklaces, and they usually will represent different things, people will wear them for different reasons whether it's for like good luck or protection, for beauty, there's all those kinds of things. So culture is definitely a big piece. And apart from just these being like, a representation of like the Kenyan culture, the Maasai culture, beads I think are a very kind of grounding thing across, you know, different African cultures. Many other ethnic groups in Kenya also have beads in different, you know, things people have beads in their clothes, in their belts, you know, they use it for like, things that they decorate the house with. So beads is really something that cuts across several other ethnic groups in Kenya. So I knew that yeah, it will definitely be a grounding thing in that sense. Yeah. And I think it looks really lovely. I think, every time I look at these beads, because I have a couple of them, they always just still surprise me with their beauty. Like, I never get tired. You know, as much as I'm Kenyan and I have so many of these beads, and I see them every day. I just love how it's always surprising to me, the patterns, every time I feel like I'm seeing something new, I still find it lovely every single time.

Hannah 22:03 So I feel like there's, I mean, there's many connections between the objects that you've brought with you, but specifically that connection to home. And also, the aspect of them being like really beautiful pieces that a lot of work has gone into.

Gloria 22:19 It's interesting how when you actually leave your home country, for me, I don't know if this is the same for everyone else. I feel like I'm learning more about my country from being in another place because I feel like people ask so many questions of things that-- I don't want to say that I would-- I was taking for granted, but probably you know, like, like I said similar things with like the beads, because everyone just has them you know, they're available. Kenyans in general also have like, the beads we wear of our national flag. And that's really like the brand that everyone tends to have. So when you come here, it's not the daily norm for everyone else. So people want to know, like, you know, where is this? Where are these beads from? Who made them, like why and, and so that takes me back to like just me having to reflect on some of the things that probably I never had to think about at all back home. And maybe I'm not able to do that here and not necessarily from like a sad point or anything, but I think just celebrating something that you can only see now that you've stepped out of it, right? So when you're stepping out of a you're just looking back able to see, just different things in a, in a whole new light, different perspectives. I think that's the first thing that I'd say, learning more about my country and just like appreciating things more, celebrating them more, reflecting more. Yeah.

Hannah 23:32 Yeah. Do you feel like-- I know that when I leave Scotland, I suddenly feel more Scottish, in a sense, I feel more attached to that identity. And I want to make sure that like no one, no one gets it wrong, no one mixes me up. Do you feel like that when you-- now that you've left Kenya, do you almost feel like you're more attached to that identity of being Kenyan?

Gloria 23:57 I do. Yes, I do. And that's another perfect example of just this whole story. I think when you're Kenyan, it's like, it's not quite unique, right? Everybody else is but like when I'm on this side of the country, it's like, yeah, you kind of want to defend the position. And it's funny you even said that, because when I was a student, and obviously I met people from all sorts of countries, other African countries as well. And you know, when people have this debates about like, oh, this country is better than Kenya on this, and you would find yourself almost being defensive. Like, 'wait, what? No. We do this better than you', like, it's something that I would never have had to do before because, you know, we'd have other debates in Kenya. But now when I'm here, I'm just like, trying to like, you know, have that defensive position for Kenya, even without realizing it, right. So, yeah, you're right [laughs].

Dhardon 24:44 You know, I took a course here on African Studies, and I had a very close friend, Pempo. She's from Ghana and every time Pempo would make an argument to the class saying, hey, Africa is not a monolith. There's so many cultures and histories within Africa [laughs]. You know, Africa is not the United States of America. When you're out of your land/that space that you belong to, you become more protective. Because I think that really becomes your identity, right? A very close, important friend of mine wrote poetry where he said, but under strange circumstances, I was born in India, brought up like an Indian, there are times when I feel more Indian than a Tibetan, but I dream of dying in Tibet. But I think that was very much me.

[Theme music]

Hannah 25:39 Now, so I'm gonna move to our final question that we always ask our guests, which is, if you could describe your objects, or explain what it means to you, in one word, what would it be? Maybe I'll come to you first. Gloria.

Gloria 25:56 Thank you. That's, that's always a hard one. You know, when you're trying to find one thing, to represent a lot of things. So I cheated on this and just decided to use the word versatile, which means many things. And obviously, I feel like for, for the bracelet, it represents so many things, as I was just talking earlier, there's like culture represented there, there’s arts, you know, it's a very artistic piece. It's still like a decorative piece as well. It has lots of colour, it also represents, you know, businesses for people. This is like, how many, many people will make their money. So this is like, some women's, you know, activity or like, some men do this. And this is how they fully make money. So I feel like yeah, it has that aspect as well. It represents stories too right? You know, if you have this bracelet, for whatever reason, it's carrying so many stories, whether it's from the people who are making them, whether it's like the stage of life you're in, whether you bought it to represent, you know, either like peace or like good luck, or whatever that is, so I feel like yeah, it has, it has so much. Having, having the bracelet on your arm, it's like, you know, a little piece of adventure, right? A piece of home and on all these different things. So yeah, my word, word for it would definitely be versatile.

Dhardon 27:12 Yeah, I think I would very much like, like to also echo what Gloria said, means so much, so much, cannot mean a single thing, right. But then, if I were to choose one word that would sum up all that aspect, I think it would be gratitude. Much like the central symbol on that table, a wish fulfilling gem. I think that very table/that really valuable object signifies a wish fulfilled. And I think I've stopped asking God for anything else. Once this landed in my space here in, here in the US, so I think gratitude, gratefulness, I think is the biggest blessing and has taught me how to always count my blessings and not my sorrows.

Hannah 28:01 Gratitude. Also, very fitting word, I really like both of yours. I think that's a wonderful way to end this. Thank you both so much.

Dhardon 28:09 I'm grateful to you for this opportunity. I feel so blessed because Edinburgh is very close to my heart. It really shaped who I am today, you know, so thank you too. And thank you, Gloria, lovely talking to you and hearing your beautiful, powerful stories.

Gloria 28:23 Yeah, you too. I really loved listening to all the rich stories. I've learned a lot of new things today, which I always like. So thank you so much for just generously sharing.

[Theme music]

Hannah 28:43 Thank you for listening to Sharing things. Remember to subscribe to make sure you never miss an episode. And check out our website to learn more about the guests and even take a look at their objects. See you next time.

[Platform One theme music]

Kate 29:11 I hope you've enjoyed meeting members of our University of Edinburgh community. To connect with more, join Platform One, our online meeting place for students, alumni and staff of the University. To find out more search Platform One Edinburgh.

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