[Theme music]

Hannah 00:07 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 Kim first ever Provost of the University of Edinburgh, and Alan, author and former literacy tutor. Thank you guys for joining us today. So exciting- I thought we would get started with a little intro question to get to know each other a bit better. So I wanted to ask you, Kim, what your first experience of Edinburgh was, if you can remember your first impressions with the city, what you were doing?

Kim 00:50 Well, I think that's a really interesting question because I, I've kind of got two experiences of Edinburgh. I've got the one-- I was born here in The Simpsons, just down the road and I lived here until I was kind of 21, and I did a degree at Edinburgh. So I've got all those experiences of growing up in the city, and exploring it, you know, as a kind of young adult, and then that formative experience as a kind of undergraduate at the University and that opportunity that that education afforded. But I've also kind of more decades than I wish to reveal have a kind of new experience of the city, which is coming back in my new role as Provost, and discovering how it's both the same and different, walking past those same buildings and bars that I used to haunt as a student. And so my experience of coming back to the university in a leadership position instead of as a student, but at the same time continuing to remember and re experience those, those experiences I had as a student, so I'm having quite a complicated kind of re-experiencing of Edinburgh at the moment.

Hannah 02:13 Is there anything that surprised you about coming back that felt different? Or that you're surprised that felt familiar?

Kim 02:19 No, I haven't, I haven't kind of felt, I haven't felt surprised by anything, what I've just felt is a kind of just a kind of sense of feeling comfortable and easily just kind of really easily settled back into being back in the city. So it's not, it's not surprised me, you know, as I kind of just mentioned, what's, what's been really kind of interesting has been the reawakening of memories, which I haven't really considered for years, and which were about my early, you know, kind of childhood and as a university student. And that's been a kind of, really, it's been a really fantastic experience. And I think it's really, it's really helpful in this role, because it also connects me to being a student and thinking about students at the university, and their experiences aligned to mine. And really making sure that my thinking of the way I support the university in this really exciting new role has students right at the heart of it. So I think that's a really kind of nice thing for me is to be reminded of my own experiences, which connects me to the experiences students are having in their first you know, sometimes even first time at the university.

Hannah 03:40 And, Alan similarly, I believe you also were born and raised in Edinburgh. Is that right?

Alan 03:46 That's correct. Yes. In Granton, down by the Firth of Forth.

Hannah 03:51 Do you have any early memories of growing up here? Or maybe your first independent experience of Edinburgh when you kind of like grew up and then kind of felt like you're able to make your experience of the city your own in a way?

Alan 04:04 Probably in our teens we remained in Granton and Leith when we were young. And then when we got to about 17 18, and we could legally drink we started coming up to Edinburgh and getting to know the paths Cafe Royal and places like that. And, and that was really Edinburgh just opening up for us, because our parents tended -- because they came from Leith-- they tended to shop in Leith and live in Leith. So there wasn't really that main contact with Edinburgh for us to be honest, and that was the start of it.

Hannah 04:39 Interesting. So you felt like you were sort of entering the city a bit later in life rather than feeling like you were always a part of it?

Alan 04:47 Absolutely.

Hannah 04:47 Yeah.

Alan 04:48 Absolutely.

[theme music]

Hannah 04:48 Okay, so I thought we would talk about your objects that you've brought. I'm going to ask you first Kim to introduce your object. What it is, why you brought it with you.

Kim 05:01So I'm going to get my object out of my pocket. So I brought, I brought a coaster and one of the reasons I brought this coaster is because I'm still slightly in kind of transit to Edinburgh. So a number of my very precious objects remain in Cardiff where I was working before I took this job. But this coaster is part of a set that I always have in my office, and the coaster is pictures of Skye. And this one in particular I've brought is the Cuillin, Cuillin mountains. And I brought this because it A) every time I, you know, put a cup on it in my office, it reminds me, of the beauty of Scotland, outside of the beauty of Edinburgh, and that the country that I that I was born in and that I feel connected to, but also because it reminds me of other things. So the coasters were given to me by a wonderful, really close friend, where we-- our kids were in nursery together-- and who has you know, we've grown them up together and we've spent time together. But we've also spent time as families in Skye and we've swam in water, looking over this mountain, the boys have paddle boarded, looking over the Cuillens. And so it kind of reminds me of both this, and that sense of peace that it gives you when it's not hammering it down, right, as well as just the importance of friendship, and families. But the other reason I brought this is also because it was I hadn't spent much time since I was a child on the west coast of Scotland. And we started to do that, when my-- for family reasons, we had to come up to Edinburgh a bit more due to illness. And it was really difficult to go and have the normal type of holidays we would have so we'd come up to Scotland, we'd take a holiday in Scotland, and we'd go and see family members at that time. And it was on those visits where I started to feel kind of reconnected to Scotland. And I started to think about the possibility of coming back to Scotland. So this also feels really important to me as an object because it was about that kind of change in thinking and that reconnection to my country. And the idea that I might want to return when I've been away for kind of so long. So it's kind of a really important object for me and signaling all those things that are important for me about who make me who I am. And also that moment that led me here to the job that I've now got, and, you know, walking around the city and thinking, you know, how amazing is it that I have this fantastic opportunity to give something back to the university that I you know, I was educated at, but also the city that I was born in. I love that that's an amazing explanation. And it's a beautiful coaster. I love it. I'm wondering, you said a lot about family and friendship and exploring your own, like your home country and having the opportunity to see it more while you were away. Like what was it specifically that drew you back? I think I think that's a really great question. I mean, I'm not sure I know the the answer to it. It was just a kind of, I mean, I'd be interested in Alan's thoughts about this actually, it's a kind of-- it was a sense. It was just a kind of a sense of feeling. There was just something about being blown away by this scenery, by feeling, you know, I mentioned feeling at peace, you know, swimming in the water, these amazing vistas and just feeling at home. And it's not that, you know, I lived in Cambridge for a long period of time, I lived in Cardiff for a long period of time and it's not that those weren't great cities to live in, and I didn't have great experiences, but I'm I'm not sure did I feel as settled there, as maybe I feel here? Yeah, I, it's really difficult to put into words. It was just a kind of a sense of a feeling of reconnection and I'm not quite sure how that happened, or why.

Hannah 09:29 Do you relate to that Alan?

Alan 09:31 I think I can see that. I think homesickness, excuse me for calling it that, I think that sense of belonging that hits you is almost undescribable it's so powerful, and kinda eats into you over a period of time and then you move. I think that's what happens to many people and not necessarily to Kim, but it sounded a bit like that. She was she'd been in Cambridge she was in Cardiff, happy enough that something was happening and it might just be that Edinburgh, that thing that can come into you about this place. It is quite a magical place, I think.

Hannah 10:07

Yeah absolutely.

Alan 10:09 It happened to me when I was in the south of France, busking years and years ago, suddenly, one night I had to get home. I was hitchhiking so it took a few days, but I was really happy at the time and it just happened. Oh, I need to get back. It's kind of strange, very strange, but mystical almost. [theme music]

Hannah 10:34 Was this any way connected to your object? I know, it's a French--

Alan 10:38 It's slightly connected. It's a French opinel knife, which I had no intention of bringing up till three weeks ago when I was on holiday with my Grandsons in Ely, in Fife. And they found it in my satchel, and one's ten and one's seven and he produced it and he said, "Granddad, what are you doing with a knife?" [laughter] And I said, "Well, it's a long story guys you better sit down". And I told them the story of the knife. And after telling them the story, I thought, that's the object, because it's really a bit of my life through an object. So that's why I chose the knife. Do you mind if I start with the first stanza of a poem?

Hannah 11:22 Of course, I would love that.

Alan 11:23 Because this morning as I was thinking about this and nervously worrying TS Eliot came to mind it's the first stanza of the Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock:

Let us go then, you and I,

When the evening is spread out against the sky

Like a patient etherized upon a table;

Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,

The muttering retreats

Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels

And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:

Streets that follow like a tedious argument

Of insidious intent

To lead you to an overwhelming question ...

Oh, do not ask, “What is it?”

Let us go and make our visit.

So this knife and I go back to when I bought it. So I bought it in St Tropez because I was living with a bunch of hippies and my friend Fred van Hout-- a dutch man-- and I were busking and others were selling dope and others were selling denim. And they asked me if I would be the cook, and bottle washer. So I needed a knife. So in St Tropez that night I went to the market and bought myself this opinel. And that was 73. In summer of 73, amazing things happened. And that came into its own with the cooking and opening mussels and opening oyster shells, and all the rest of it. But by seven-- and then I got homesick [laughs]. And by 74 I was back working as a joiner. And by 76 I met my partner, and my first son was born and we started camping and taking our camper van. And the knife was with me all the time, doing everything, again, cooking camping and cutting ropes, and also working at the joinery. It was never out of my pocket to be honest. My second son was born in 83 and that continued through to 1988. When the government made a law, the Criminal Justice Act said because that blade is three and a half inches long, and over three inches, I could no longer carry it. It was illegal. It also locks open, and that too makes it illegal. So it became redundant. Really, just like that. Then in 1990, I left the joinery and came to this university, which I've got to say I loved and did an English Lit degree. But while doing an English Lit degree I did-- I studied History of Art, and was lucky enough to be given a wee studio at the top of Old College to do because I was interested in art and the opinel came out of the satchel and I started sharpening charcoals and pencils. And then that was that really, from uni onwards, I became a professional, as they call it a Family Literacy tutor. And there wasnae much need for a knife, especially in Pilton [laughs] and couldn't have carried it there and er basically that really was the story of the knife and it's it's lain redundant more or less since then in my satchel and my son phoned me last night to say "Dad you're not going to believe this" -- he lives in the Scottish Borders-- "I've just bought an old brewery and it's hundreds of years old and it's gonna need a lot of joinery" and I thought that fits.

Kim 14:58 I am interested in how you managed to carry it in your pockets all those years given its looks pretty lethal.

Alan 15:04 Yeah, it's lethal, in fact, in 1985 I think it was the Victoria & Albert Museum that did an exhibition of the 100 most important creations by humans in the world. And that was one of them, the French opinel knife because it's made with Swedish steel, high carbon Swedish steel, and it's really sharp. So it's great for joinery. But it's interesting when something you love becomes illegal. [theme music]

Hannah 15:34 And I was wondering, if Kim you could talk a little bit about what it's been like to sort of, I suppose you're, you're returning home, but at the same time, you're creating a new life? And, and what that's been been like for you, if that makes sense?

Kim 15:48 Yeah, I mean, that does make sense, actually. And I mean, I've thought, I've thought quite a lot about that. When I was thinking about, you know, that kind of reconnection and I really liked the way that Alan talked about it kind of eating away at you, because that kind of was what happened for me. It wasn't, it wasn't immediate, I wasn't there I've got to go home now, it was kind of just this thing that just started to kind of become more prominent in my thinking over time. But in thinking about that return, I mean, I'd spent 21, I spent 21 years in Edinburgh, before I left, I had all those memories from that time. And, you know, some of those were very wonderful memories. Some of them were, they're harder memories, you know, loss of family members, and so on. And I remember when thinking about coming back to Edinburgh to hold this job, just you know, how exciting that job was. So it felt the right time in my career where I had this, I had this sense, I wanted to go back to Scotland, but also a kind of worry about how would I handle coming back to Edinburgh, and, you know, dealing with some of those harder memories, you know, seeing, you know, people I'd lost, who I loved around every corner, or you know, going round and remembering well, this is when this is when we did this? And oh, I remember that trip to there and they were no longer there and could I could I cope with that emotionally? Would that be too hard? And that was also partly related to the pandemic because I, you know, lost my mum, just at the start of the pandemic and I hadn't been back to Edinburgh very much during that time, and certainly not in a kind of the normal way you would visit. And so I did have this kind of, you know, worry about, would I be able to kind of handle also those emotional memories on top of all the exciting ones you have, when you return, you return to a place and to a, to a city. So it wasn't, it wasn't all kind of easy. And I-- kind of thinking about how you make new memories, you make a new life, it's a new way of being somewhere and so I had to do a little bit of kind of cognitive work on myself when I returned I was not returning as the same person I was before those memories. I would in time become comfortable being back and I would make new friends, I would do new things, I would be in the city in a different way and that would be a new set of memories to to add to and augment the ones I had before. And so it was quite a kind of interesting moment. For me, it was not just, I want that sense of wanting to come back, that opportunity, you know, the ongoing kind of stress of applying for a job that you want, and not knowing if you're going to get it and then getting it and thinking oh my god, what have I done? [laughter] But also how do I-- what's the new way I'm going to live in Edinburgh? How am I going to be? What's my memories of that going to be? So yeah, kind of layering on top of my experiences before but recognising that not all of them were good experiences. You know, there was hard experiences in there as well.

Hannah 19:04 Yeah, so kind of balancing carrying those memories and those people with you while also giving yourself like the freedom to create new memories and new relationships.

Kim 19:15 Yeah, absolutely. And seeing that as-- seeing both of those as a positive and that they'll come together. And you know, at some point I'll look back, you know, on my life and they'll come together, and that you can also handle the more difficult ones, you know, the kind of round the corners memories where you're, you suddenly get, you know, that kind of sense of loss, you know, suddenly overtakes you because there's a memory you've triggered that you would not have been because you're no longer in that in that city. And in actual fact, it's been that's actually been much easier than I had anticipated, which I think is because I recognised it might happen and I kind of thought about how I was going to manage that. And I think that's true of all of us, isn't it? We're not just-- we're made up of many kinds of episodes and memories and events and experiences and relationships through our life and they, they kind of build up to help us kind of become who we are. But then also to kind of think about how those are integrated as we're refreshing ourselves almost, I suppose in some senses, that's kind of what's happening to me, you know, completely new role and a new-- back in back in Edinburgh.

[theme music]

Alan 20:28 I'd already made a change when I was 40 and deciding what I wanted was to learn more. I was always interested in literature. So I fought my way through college for a year, didn't quite get enough certificates to get me in to the uni but I talked myself in and got in and, and then the learning really took place a completely not-- I don't mean from the physical to the to the theory, I mean, more from an actual learning, especially with subjects like literature, where you're, you're dealing in character all the time, you're dealing in characters that have gone wrong, characters that have gone right, and you'll remember and all the people you've you've worked with, and all the people you know, and yourself. Some of the tutors were absolutely amazing, because I think I was older. I think they felt they could-- we could -- they could relate, and not really, I think they were interested that I joined and that I should be there in the first place. And, and we had some amazing conversations up at the David Hume Tower, overlooking seventh floor was the literature department, overlooking this, the times I have stood at a window with a tutor looking out on the city, and over Granton and Leith and discussing how I felt standing there. And one question that was put to me once by a tutor was when I was in my fourth year was, do you now, feel as if you're part of the elite? I won't even tell you how I answered [laughter]. And then that became very complicated. Well, that became very complicated in my study because, psychologically speaking, I became completely lost. And I was very fortunate sitting in the refectory one day, when one of the young students I'd met, one of my pals, she was Emily from America. She was about eighteen and she said, she asked before I was feeling alright, and I said, "Yeah think so". She says, "well, I'm not sure. It's time you went-- I think it's time you went to the bicycle repair shed", and I said "but my bikes okay". And she says, "Yeah, but why don't you just chum me over to the counseling department" and so I ended up getting six weeks counseling at the counseling department to try to-- what was happening was I was I was splitting. I couldn't quite marry the joiner with the learning. And they were so helpful it was unbelievable. I mean, it started, it started a journey or another journey of, of getting to know myself, which I'm still on. But that was amazing! Because where I came from, at that time, counseling was something that was for other people. But young Emily put her foot down and said you're getting this.

Hannah 23:21 Do you feel like you're at a point in your life now where you are able to carry both aspects of your identity, your role in literature, and your role in your joinery and practical skills with you? Yeah, so you had to go back to your roots, essentially at the same time that you're here creating--

Alan 23:33 Absolutely they had almost fixed that by the time I left to be honest. And then I did have to get cognitive behavioral therapy to fix it in place. But then it was fixed in place. It was a journey, but it was fixed in place. And that's not-- the problem I'm having now is not geographic. I'm now getting old, I'm retired, although I'm writing books. That's a new country, that somewhere else that you have to try to-- that's as big as going from joiner to literature tutor or whatever. Now I'm having to learn to be old to walk around a park, and nobody speaks to you. I mean, it's a whole different world, to become invisible, and speak to a lot of old people who'll tell you, unless of course, you want to force yourself on people. But if you just when you're younger and you're living your life, you see people stopping and chatting and you've got the kids with you and all sorts of different stuff goes on, as you've seen about sharing with through the children and all that stuff. When you're getting old, I'm 70, when you're getting old it's a different world you're inhabiting. So you've got to learn that and I'm in the process. I think I'm doing well actually! We've talked about it a lot - my partner and I - you know how it feels to be old. The interesting thing is when I left uni, and studied to be a family literacy tutor the first school I worked in was my old primary school. And I remember parking my car and getting out the car with my briefcase and I didn't want to cross the playground because I thought I was going to get a row from the headteacher! And I was going to meet the headteacher to say "Hi I'm Alan and I'm a family literacy tutor from Moray House lalala". And it was really, really difficult. But it had to happen for me to make that final shift. Absolutely!

Hannah 25:34 -- a new life for yourself.

Alan 25:36 Back to the place I could see from the window in the uni, where the guy said you're one of the elite, well, there I was back in my primary school.

 [theme music]

Hannah 25:46 You've come back to university, of course, but you're in a very different place in life than you were before. And it's also sort of an aspect of education that you both share, in a sense, that you've both been in the educational roles, what is that like going from learner student educator, and now in a more upper level role? [laughter]

Kim 26:12 I mean, I think there's two things. I mean, I'm really struck by the way that Alan is, you know, talking about his experiences of going to Edinburgh. I mean, I can't imagine that sense of dissociation, standing on that tower, looking at where you came from and having taken that step into education that, you know, when he was older, um. You know, I went into education when I was younger and when many people did that, but for both, Alan and I, you know, I think we're talking about it in the same in a similar kind of way, which is that it was absolutely impactful, that time at Edinburgh, that opportunity to learn, and to be educated, and to have the time to think about what that meant for where we wanted to go. I mean, I, I kind of, I didn't do as well in my highers when I first sat them, I needed to resit them, I kind of snuck into the university, at least that was my perception. I didn't know what I wanted to do and out of it, I discovered that I was, I really enjoyed psychology. I was good at it. And having discovered I was good at something having not been very good at anything before I thought I'm not letting that go, right! And so it was a very, in terms of kind of education and learning, it was a very important moment in my life. And it's clearly very important for Alan as well, even though he went to university later and came through a different pathway that then led to where we both ended up. In, in my case, you know, although I now have my upper level job, and I'm wondering what we're going to call the Principal, this isn't [laughter] So no, no, I have now have that job. And I feel very humbled, very humbled to have that, you know, that responsibility of supporting the communities that make Edinburgh that helped both Alan and I, when we went and all those students are to have, you know, came to university at the same time and before, before us over the all those years, it's a very, you know, I feel that responsibility, very strongly to do the best I can, for the university, but I also think it's still a job of learning. I'm still educating myself, and I'm learning about things I will not have been exposed to, that will be different from what I've been exposed to before. So you know, there's an educational component to the job. There's also a learning component in, you know, leadership and bringing together communities, and how you work with the values of the university and you respect that, to help really give our students the very best educational experience they can. And our staff, the very best experience in being a member of the University, and thinking about that as, as a community, and what my role is in shaping that and helping, you know, ensure the ongoing success of the of the university. So, you know, although it's, it's a senior role, I'm also just one member of the University out of many others and, and all of them are as important if probably not more important than me. And it's really about that, that sense of community and, and continuing to remember what being at Edinburgh does, how it changes people, the opportunities it gives you. And also that as Alan has kind of really powerfully articulated that we put in place all the different mechanisms of support that you might need at any moment in time to help make the right you know, help make those changes in your thinking in your educational understanding in the way to network and, and draw on those opportunities so that people are successful, and that anyone can come to Edinburgh and have a fantastic experience.

Alan 30:25 In relation to that I was lucky enough to study to become a practice learning tutor in community education. So I was tutoring students from the university who were studying community education out in the field. So that was an amazing experience because community education students are all bolshie. And but they come with so much so much stuff, so much politics and excitement. And it was really a practice learning tutors job to make sure their experience in the field was worth it that they learned from and so it really upped our game, we had to, we had to really know our stuff, to get fourth year students, community education, students coming in to work in the field, enough learning to be able to go back to the to the uni, and share it and get their exams and stuff. But that was, that was probably one of the best experiences from my role as a community education worker.

Hannah 31:27 So there's an element of like, learning as you're educating others, or as you're contributing to students experiences, you're also learning and growing as it goes--

Alan 31:37 Absolutely! I would say probably, if we're open, we learn from everyone we meet, I think, I really believe that, whether it's someone behind a till in a shop, you know, I think if we're op-- if we are open minded, you know, as Socrates would say, you know, we learn to live, I think I think that's true.

Hannah 31:58 Do you think there's anything that you've learned from the object that you brought the knife, do you think there's any lessons that you've taken from that, and your experience with it?

Alan 32:08 I suppose I learned more from the Grandchildren. Because after I told them the story, they were fighting over who's gonna get get the knife left in my will. [laughter] And so they saw, what I saw in them, was the importance of the knife and other stories. So I learned then this is, and it was then that I decided this, this is the object as a, as an intrinsic importance to who I am.

Hannah 32:39 And Kim, I suppose your object illustrates the like the intrinsic importance of, of what Scotland means to you, and, and having that place in home. And we're like we're getting towards the end of our time. So I wanted to ask if, this is the last question that we ask all of our guests is if you could sum up what your object means to you in one word?

Kim 33:02 That's a really difficult question. I want to distract us by saying I'm really glad that you answered the question about your will, because I was wondering that actually having one knife and two grandkids, [laughter] so erm I can imagine there's going to be a tussle.

Alan 33:18 Absolutely! And my money. [laughter]

Kim 33:24 Probably more than the knife you know

Alan 33:26 Absolutely.

Kim 33:28 I think for me, for me, this just means just feeling content. When I see this, I just, I used the term peace earlier. And I'm not sure that's quite right. But it's just that sense of just feeling content when I I see this.

Hannah 33:45 and what about you, Alan?

Alan 33:47 I think for the reason I brought it. It says life to me, I would use the word life because all the varied things I've been lucky enough to be able to do as in cook for the hippies or busk round the street or all the amazingly varied life I've had. That was there a lot of the time. So I would say life.

Hannah 34:08 I love that. Those are both excellent words. And thank you so much for joining us for this conversation today. I really enjoyed it.

Kim 34:14 Thank you, Hannah

Alan 34:15 Thank you Hannah.

Kim 34:16 And thank you, Alan.

Alan 34:18 Thank you, Kim!

[theme music]

Hannah 34:26 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.

Kate 34:36 [theme music] 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. [theme music].

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