[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 Niamh, a third year Sustainable Development student, and Nathan, a recent graduate in Zoology.

Hannah 00:27 I thought I'd get started with a little introductory question. So Nathan, I want to ask you first, what your first experience of Edinburgh was?

Nathan 00:38 That's a difficult question. That's like four years from, I mean, ago from now.

Hannah 00:44 It's true.

Nathan 00:45 Because I graduated like three weeks ago. And yeah, the first memory of Edinburgh. It's my first time coming to Edinburgh in September 2018. And as beautiful as the city is [laughter], I--I felt really scared and alone, because I travelled by myself, like I was, you know, stupid enough not to ask my parents to come with me. And I just felt like 'Oh, my God, where am I going? I don't know anyone here.' So it was like really scary for me. But like, it eventually became like home to me. Yeah.

Hannah 01:17 That's a quite a big transition to go through. And the feeling like it's a big, scary city to feeling like it's home. Do you think there was a moment when it flipped?

Nathan 01:28 I think it's like a gradual process. Because you know, as a first year you'd like you don't know yourself, you don't know anyone. And like, there's a journey of like self discovery. And I think it started weirdly during lockdown, my third year where everything was still online. And, you know, I think that's where I had a lot of time for, like reflection, like, you know, what I want, who my friends are. And then I feel like in my last year, that's where I you know, because I know that I was like, okay, so I can know-- you know, who to hang out with. And I think like, feeling of home it's not just like the city but it's like, also the people.

Hannah 02:01 Absolutely. And Niamh, I know you've grown up near Edinburgh. So rather than asking you for your very first memory, I was wondering what your first independent experience of Edinburgh was?

Niamh 02:14 Yeah, that's a very good question. So my first memory was a part of a school trip going to Edinburgh Castle. And then I think my first independent memory, I think just walking onto campus in the first week, and a bit similar to Nathan, you're no longer with your family on Open Day. And you're just sort of surrounded by all these people you don't know. And you're walking into campus, and you have all these ideas of what it might be like. And it's just always so different to what you expect. And I just remember taking it all in and just really enjoying it. And I think that's probably my first independent Edinburgh experience. I was very fortunate to meet Hannah, actually, in my first week, so that made it even better. Yeah. And we had a Sustainable Development meeting, was it?

Hannah 02:58 It was like the first year welcome meeting.

Nathan 03:01 That's so cool, because like, I'm not even in touch with anyone I met in first year like, just gone. But yeah.

Niamh 03:07 But I think that's quite common. I think it's really uncommon to sort of meet people and and have similarities and get on with them for the full experience of uni. I think you meet people later and get to know them. And that's normally what happens, so.

Hannah 03:22 Yeah, I think Freshers Week friends are a bit of an oddity, and you meet so many people that first semester it’s just mental.

Niamh 03:31 Everyone just wants to be everyone's friend. And then you realise you have like nothing in common. But the thing you have in common is Freshers, which is all very exciting.

Hannah 03:41 Yes. It's very fun, even if you forget everyone's name by the fourth year.

[Theme music]

Hannah 03:51 Nathan, I'm going to ask you about your object. Wonder if you could describe it to us, and then explain why you brought it.

Nathan 03:57 Yeah, so I brought two things today. And the first thing it's actually like a notebook. This is-- this notebook is given by my dad when he visited me to-- here for my graduation. But it's not like--it's not this specific notebook that I you know, wanted to bring. But it's like, generally like a notebook that I always use to write my stories and like, reflect, because I've like struggled a lot with my mental health in the last four years. And it-- it's really like life changing when you, you know, rewrite your own story. And then you change the way you see yourself. And then you write it out in a book. And then like, over time, it--it does like show the work. So yeah, the thing that has really been meaningful for me, it's like a notebook in general and like a pen. Because yeah, that's how I started and that's where-- how I got to where I am right now.

Hannah 04:54 I think it's interesting that you brought, am I right in saying it's a blank notebook that you have with you. So that feels very forward-thinking, it feels like, there's a lot of possibilities, like anything could go in there, do you think you'll write about your experiences at some point in that notebook?

Nathan 05:09 Yeah, of course, I always like write something every night, really. There's something I'm grateful for, and something I can do better next time. And I'm sure like this opportunity is like, I'm so honoured to be part of this, so thank you! And I'm gonna write it down in my notebook.

Hannah 05:25 Ah, this is going in the notebook. That's so cool [laughter]. So the notebook has been like a part of your, I guess, your journey, while you're here in Edinburgh, being able to write about all of your experiences, do you think that there's something in terms of like framing how you think about your life, like and maybe taking control of it in a way? Because you get to, I guess, write your own narrative.

Nathan 05:48 Yeah, yeah, that's so true. I think, you know, there's so much power and being able to write your own story, because I feel like, as a high school student, I didn't really enjoy my high school. And there was just a lot of, like bullying happening. And like, I was just in my-- one of my darkest times there. I think, you know, I'm really grateful because I'm one of those people who can get access to like, resources, in terms of like therapists and-- and other kind of-- kind of mental health resources. So you know, being able to write-- rewrite your-- that your story like to-- to kind of like challenge those negative narratives about yourself, and then see yourself in a more positive light. And it's really life changing, you know? Yeah.

Niamh 06:33 Because I remember you said at the start, you were a bit more unsure in Edinburgh, have you? Like, has it been nice to sort of go through your old notebooks and see the progression to how you feel now?

Nathan 06:38 Yeah, it's always nice to look back at, like, where I was, like, four years ago, and like, you know, my thinking pattern and like how I felt at that time. But at the same time, I try not to go back so much [laughter]. Because it's like, you know, like you've overcome, like, a lot of things and those things are not easy to kind of change, you know. And sometimes when I read like, notebooks that I had, like, from four years ago, I was like 'Oh, my God, like life is so different, like from now what it is.' So yeah, it's good to do in moderation. But I don't really do it like a lot of times.

Niamh 07:15 It's kind of like listening to your voice back, I guess [laughter]. I-- I really liked the item you chose, I think that's really cool. I've just started journaling recently. So actually, that's really interesting that it's been brought up. And it's something I think at the start, it feels so unnatural. I don't know, if you've had experiences that take a while to get into and sort of feel like you have more control over it. Because I think at the moment, I just feel like I'm just writing thoughts down. But I really liked the idea of choosing your own narrative. And I think that's what I'm striving for. Did you find at the start that it-- it's, you get used to it and you kind of build it your own way?

Nathan 07:55 Yeah, I get where you're coming from, I think it can be, like, daunting at first to start, because like, you know, you don't really know what to write. And then, I mean, at least for me, I'm not trying to project your experience [laughter]. But I think like finding a framework that works for you is good. I think like, okay, one of the things that I struggled the most with is my race, and you know, as a person of minority being in the UK, where, you know, everyone is white and like, don't get me wrong, I'm not angry at white people. I don't know how--- also, I don't want to be perceived as like an angry person. But when you're like the only one different in the room, or like when you've experienced, like micro aggressions over time, especially like in-- in university as well, when-- at-- at Freshers, I think it was really rough, because most people weren't aware about racial issues. So you-- you experienced that there the most especially in-- in dating scene as well. So I think for me, it was about you know, it's coming back to like changing the narrative. It's more about, you know, you try to embrace yourself, like, embrace your uniqueness. And rather than you're trying to be like someone else, like, I-- at least for me, what works is like changing the narrative around it is okay, rather than seeing of me as someone, as minority who, like people think that I can't speak English, or, you know, not an ideal, you know, Western beauty standards or what some people say, it's more like, hey, you know, this is me, this is my accent. And I define my own beauty and that kind of thing. So you kind of like flip it and like see it from another perspective.

Hannah 09:25 Linking to what you said about challenging other people's notions of you and writing your narrative. Do you think-- do you think it's become like a ritual to do that? Like, obviously, the physical act of writing is a sort of daily practice for you. But do you think it's become that practice of writing your own story, challenging other people's notions of who you are.

Nathan 09:47 Thank you for the question. And yeah, first of all, it has become like a ritual or like a daily practice that I do. You know, when you've been like disconnected with yourself for so long and like you don't see yourself like in a positive light, yeah you see-- you feel that you know, you're not aligned with who you are, and like, what-- who 'yourself' is. And I think, yeah, that's how I, you know, try to you know, like self care, and then just like, a little bit of like ritual at night, and then it--- and again, like I think, like over time, it really helps. And it-- it does, like make me you know have the confidence to empower other people as well, especially because I-- I-- I post a lot on LinkedIn this-- these days, and I'm big on personal branding. And, you know, I feel like as a minority, I feel like a huge sense of responsibility to kind of always, not always really, but like to speak about, like racial issues and to empower and represent other people and like minority groups. Because, you know, I'm not sure if other people-- again I'm not trying to brag or anything, but I feel like really grateful to, you know, come to where I'm at-- the stage right now. And I just didn't think that my life would be like this, you know, like, although it sounds like very cringey and nerdy, but it is.

Hannah 11:05 No, that's wonderful. I'm very happy it is. And it seems like a really powerful thing that you've done for yourself. And for others. It's very cool.

Nathan 11:14 Yeah, thank you.

[Theme music]

Hannah 11:17 Niamh, I know you don't have your object with you. But if you could describe it for us the best that you can and explain why you chose it. That'd be wonderful.

Niamh 11:28 Yes, so I have a sort of electric Christmas tree. And on-- the Christmas tree is decorated with little snowflake lights. And then on the Christmas tree is little pictures of my friends sort of scattered on the tree. And it was made for me, because every year my friends gather together for Friendsmas, which is basically when they all get together, and they cook this big Christmas meal. And we exchange Secret Santa gifts. And it's kind of my favourtie time of the year, it's--it's very happy. And I'd been in hospital for some time. And I hadn't been able to see my friends for a while. So when Christmas arrived, my parents came to visit me in hospital. And they brought along my Secret Santa gift that my friend Allison, she bought me the gift. And she had taken her camera to Friendsmas and she had taken individual portraits of all my friends. And then she printed them out and laminated them and put them into little squares so that I could hang it up on this tree. And I immediately put it up and had this sort of Christmas tree with all my friends on it. And then whenever a nurse came by, or anyone came by, I could sort of chat to them about that, which is my favourite topic talking about my friends and how cool they are. So I think it's quite similar to Nathan, where you kind of identify maybe, as someone in hospital, and you're very much constantly checking in with your body. And it's very much that that's what your main, like identity is someone that's, you know, got this illness and therefore acts this way, or is therefore restricted in this way. But with this people just came in and talked to me about what I used to enjoy doing and who my friends are and what we did together at school or-- in some of the portraits they were pulling funny poses, so they were asking about that. And then yeah, it just it means an awful lot to me, and I still put it up every Christmas. And then pretty sure I kept it up till like well into January at hospital. So I think that's-- I chose that item because I think it's probably my most sentimental item and just the thought of someone doing that for me and also feeling a part of the Friendsmas when I couldn't physically be there. I felt a part of it because Alison was going around taking these pictures of all my friends. So they all knew why she was doing that. And it just made me feel like a part of it, which was nice.

Hannah 13:55 That's-- I love the link as well that you drew between rewriting your own story and like challenging the sort of maybe an identity that you maybe don't adopt willingly. And then you get to sort of choose for yourself. I like that that was a tool for you to do that. You said you still do that. Right? You still every year you do Friendsmas together? Yes?

Niamh 14:17 We still do it every year. And yeah, it's been really nice because I missed a couple of years and I've managed to participate in all of them apart from the COVID missed ones.

Nathan 14:26 The Christmas idea is so cool. Like the Friendsmas thing. Like I've never done that before because I-- I've always been here during Christmas and I'm from Indonesia and I've never really gone home just because it's really far. So like every year my Christmas is always different, you know, with like different people. I think that idea of like, you know, celebrating Christmas with people that you like that means a lot to you. And then you put the pictures up and then he just and then you see like the beautiful kind of memories that he created and that year I think that's amazing, so.

Niamh 14:57 I remember one year my parents FaceTimed me whilst they decorated the tree, so it's quite hard when you're away from your family for Christmas, and I'm sorry that you feel that you've had to go through whilst at uni.

Nathan 15:11 I got used to it, I guess so yeah don't worry.

Niamh 15:14 Do you get to do anything with your friends?

Nathan 15:16 Yeah, we always do. Like, we always celebrate Christmas every year. But I think it's-- it's that idea that you know, like difference doesn't-- different doesn't always mean bad. Because I feel like, every year most-- some friends stay here some friends leave and like, you know, things we do is always different. And especially because the last few years has also been like hit by COVID. So it's more like I don't know what my Christmas fun is this year [laughter]. Whoever's gonna be here like yeah I'm just gonna celebrate it.

Hannah 15:45 It's kind of like a tradition of uncertainty rather than knowing what's happening.

Nathan 15:48 Yeah, yeah exactly!

Hannah 15:49 You know like, I know that I don't know what's gonna happen.

Nathan 15:50 Yeah.

Hannah 15:51 Yeah.

[Theme music]

Hannah 15:58 So I wonder if there's another link in terms of like traditions and rituals, and kind of things that yeah, that we do that kind of bring us together or allow us to reflect on ourselves. And I was wondering, Nathan is there any traditions that you have with people in your life?

Nathan 16:16 That's actually a really good question. I never really thought about it in terms of-- well, maybe I think there's like a big tradition that I celebrate, like, one of them is like the Chinese New Year where everyone cooks together and yeah like we get the-- you know, the red envelopes containing money. Like don't tell anyone, that's the highlight of it [laughter]. But I think I'm part of it, it's-- it's really organising hangouts with my friends. It's just checking in and because especially right now, when, you know, I graduated from uni, and most of my friends are not in Edinburgh anymore. It feels so weird, because well, actually, most of them are gone, like, and it's--it's harder to connect and like to hang out. And like, it's much easier to you know, when you're in the same place together, when you experience some of the same thing-- to make-- like the connection strong. But I think like the challenge is, you know, when people are like, in another country, or like, doing different things. So I think like the tradition like I do, sometimes it really is just chatting with my friends. And then, you know, sending some Insta pictures and seeing how they're doing.

Hannah 17:23 Yeah, just making a habit of that making sure you don't lose that contact. Yeah, yeah. I guess we all kind of had to figure that out during COVID as well, I definitely felt the sense of disconnect. You just end up talking to people so much less often when you're all in your own little boxes, when you can't leave. Niamh, did you during COVID find that difficult to keep up with people like you were talking about your friends, you get together every year.

Niamh 17:48 I guess I was quite practised at it because I-- I used to-- that used to be my only form of keeping in touch with people. And they're all very clever with like, as they showed with the Christmas tree, and they seem to be quite innovative. So we'd still managed to do a Christmas type thing and a Halloween type themed thing. There were so many homemade quizzes. I don't know if anyone else felt that. So many quizzes.

Hannah 18:14 Yeah, I had mine my 19th birthday on-- on Zoom. And I still had a wonderful time and I got rather tipsy.

Nathan 18:23 No, I can relate with that. I had my 21st birthday on Zoom as well. And yeah we played some online games, we played that, you know, the one where I forgot the name of the game, but it's-- it's were we were kind of split into two teams and we have to say a key word and then the rest of the teams needs to choose what word there was.

Hannah 18:43 Yeah, I know what you mean. Is it think Codeword?

Nathan 18:45 Yeah, Codenames.

Hannah 18:47 Codenames, yes, yes.

Niamh 18:50 Cool. I actually I never heard of that before. That sounds cool.

Hannah 18:51 That's a good one.

Nathan 18:52 It's really fun.

Hannah 18:53 Yes.

[Theme music]

Hannah 18:58

You said something about Edinburgh, and how your friends have left. Or you're still here. And I was wondering, why do you-- why do you want to be here? And kind of like continue your story here longer.

Nathan 19:10 I didn't want to like stress so much about thinking-- about finding jobs. I mean, yes, I need to think about it, but I feel like adding that extra element of a new place. I think it's a bit much for me right now. And it's also because I've joined a few societies like in the last semester of university, and one of them is in-- is a rugby group. And it's a Toastmasters like public speaking group. And also like a little bit of church here and there. And I think, you know, knowing that there's some people who are still here that I know that kind of adds a feeling of home as well. And I'm actually working in the Fridge and it does feel like Freshers week again because I've never met any of these people and then everyone is like students again. And it's all so weird, like, you know, as-- because you mentioned earlier-- because the only thing that's common between all of you is probably almost nothing and like we're just in the same place. And it's funny to kind of come back to that similar situation. But now I'm in a more confident stage of it. Because I'm like, yeah, you know what I don't need to be, you know, quote, unquote, needy to always find friends. It's more like finding friends that I truly connect with, rather than you know just for the sake of adding people in my life.

Hannah 20:28 I like that we're picking up on community and finding places and people where you feel like you have a sense of belonging. Yeah, I guess Niamh you talked a lot about your friends. But I'm wondering, in Edinburgh, whether you've had those experiences of like, yeah, finding those-- those places, or those people where you feel like you have a sense of community?

Niamh 20:52 I think like Nathan said, it definitely takes a while, it does take time to serve, as you say, start to feel like home and, and focus on the people that you are surrounded with, rather than the people that you're away from. But I think definitely reaching the latter years of uni, I've found that you-- you really do create, like small little communities. And that's really nice and I very much enjoyed creating that I haven't done so many society things. I've met some really cool people, I've met a bunch of quite like humanity students people, which has been really nice. And one's a singer, one does like a feminist movement thing. And it's just really nice. At this time of our lives when we're all getting really into specific things and streamlining what we like. And it was really nice meeting those people at that time. And I think another cool thing is that I met some people that I knew from primary school, and they now go to Edinburgh Uni and I got to meet up with them and reconnect.

Hannah 21:48 Was it like, odd to be in a very different place in your life and?

Niamh 21:52 We were at Big Cheese, so [laughter]. Yeah, we just danced together. And I was like, I feel seven again, but-- but also not because these weekends aren't J2Os and are we doing different things, but it was really, really nice.

[Theme music]

Hannah 22:13 Your notebook Nathan, is currently blank, you're heading into a new phase in life. Do you have a sense of where you're headed?

Nathan 22:21 Yeah, I think first of all, in terms of where I'm heading right now, and I actually did talk with a Careers Consultant last week, because I got-- I got rejected from a job. And it felt-- it triggered my anxiety and depression a little bit. So it's like, you feel hopeless, you don't know what's going on. But now after talking with a Careers Consultant, and she was like 'Hey, focus on what you can do, rather than what you can't control at all.' So yeah, in terms of like that it's focusing on, you know, the weekly basis, let's say, sending two to three high quality job applications. It's, you know, building my personal brand on LinkedIn. And it's also like connecting with people, like, you know, either in person events or like the Fringe, because like you know, the more connections that you have, you know, the more opportunities that you get as well. But in terms of what I will bring forward from now on, and especially, I think this is a result, not just from my, you know, writing my notebook, but I was matched with a mentor, who is like, specialised in like, minority background-- people with minority background. And one thing that really hit me was what she said about, you have to embrace your uniqueness, because your uniqueness is really your superpower, you know, and I've spent so much of my life thinking that I need to be different. And I know that I'm not like, the most masculine guy in the world. And that though, was like a barrier at first, and because I'm quite, you know, emotional, and I speak my emotions, and you know, because like that toxic masculinity, you're gonna feel like 'Oh, my God, I need to be like, I need to sound like this. I need to act a certain way.' And things like that. So I think it's not just for me, but I think it's also for those, you know, people listening to this podcast, it's like, you know, no matter what your race, gender, sexuality, or like your age, ability and personality, like, try to embrace your uniqueness, because uniqueness is your superpower. And don't ever feel like you're less than others because of the unique qualities that you have. And once you realise this, you know that nothing can stop you in this world.

Hannah 24:37 Very inspirational. I like it. Your uniqueness is your superpower.

Niamh 24:42 I was recently reading a book and it's a bit similar to what Nathan was saying. And it was for chronic pain management, but it's applicable for lots of different things. And it was saying, in this society, we've kind of been quite focused on being a human doing. So we're really interested in what we're doing. We problem solve it. If we feel like we're not getting where we need to be, we're just very intent on productivity and what's wrong and the sort of things we feel that we're a bit disconnected with. But actually, we should be human beings where you really just look at ourselves and accept where we are, and accept, as you say, like the uniqueness and accept the situation. And from there, you can sort of be content and yourself and then keep growing I think, rather than going, oh, I need to be X, I need to be Y. So I think with-- I've had to take a bit of time off for health. And I think this time off initially felt really wrong and really upsetting. But it's actually been really good, because I've really focused on my health and also not felt that I need to catch up with people, which I think is something I felt quite often. So now I'm just really excited to be back into learning, which is really what it's all about anyway, and being back with my friends and still focusing on my health rather than getting really caught up in all the stresses that university has along with it. And I think that's what I'm most excited to-- they're also doing some really cool courses this year. So I'm really excited for those.

[Theme music]

Hannah 26:21 Okay, so final question. What is the final question? The final question is, if you could describe your object in one word, what would it be?

Niamh 26:33 Initially, I thought fabulous, because that's very flattering for Alison, but then I thought, I'm not Sharpay Evans, so I might just go for friendship. Obviously a fan of the F words, but friendship-- friendship seems fitting.

Hannah 26:47 Very fitting, yeah. And I wonder, Nathan, do you have one, maybe off the top of your head?

Nathan 26:53 Well, I think the thing that came to my mind, and actually you talked a lot about this earlier, the one word that I would describe as like possibilities. Because, you know, there's not just one path that your life is going. There's so many possibilities and if you open up yourself to that, like it's gonna be a fun ride.

Hannah 27:16 Yeah. Yeah, I like that. Perfect. Friendship and possibilities. I think that sums up really well what we've spoken about in the past wee while. And yeah, thank you guys so much for doing this with me. I appreciate it.

Nathan 27:29 Thank you, too.

Niamh 27:30 Thank you very much for having us.

Hannah 27:31 Of course.

[Theme music]

Hannah 27:40 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 28:08 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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