

The Middle Way of Sustainability: A Journey from Academia to Conscious Capitalism

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Abstract: This article traces the evolution of MoonPads, a social benefit company founded by the author, weaving a narrative that spans personal experiences, academic pursuits, and a commitment to sustainability, social equity, and menstrual justice. The article explores the interconnected journey from childhood influences, through academic endeavors in sustainability education, to the entrepreneurial realm, shedding light on the intersection of gender equity and environmental sustainability. MoonPads emerged as a response to period poverty, seeking to provide accessible and eco-friendly menstrual products while challenging societal stigmas surrounding menstruation.

Keywords: Sustainability, Buddhism, Conscious-Capitalism, Menstruation

meg ferrigno has spent the last two decades working on issues of cultural and environmental sustainability in Tibet. Learning from the Tibetan nomads and their work with sacred lands, she began a nonprofit called [The Pureland Project](#). Recently she began a B-corp to focus more deeply on the intersection of gender equity and sustainability: [Our MoonPads](#).

My parents planted the seeds for my sustainability journey at birth; I inherited their love for the natural world as they dabbled with homesteading on a retired farm in Upstate New York. This love for nature brought me to live, study and work with Tibetan nomads for the last two decades. The nomads helped me build an increasingly intimate relationship with the Earth and its waters through sharing their spiritual reverence for human-nature connection. It is from these influences that I became a self identified (and certainly-externally labeled) environmental extremist- going to all sorts of lengths to avoid waste and toxins for the benefit of the Planet, all sentient beings and myself! I have always been concerned with the unintentional harmful impact that humans have on the planet when simply living a “normal life”. Tibetan nomads were not causing much harm through their simple, natural lifestyle and quite frankly a lack of access to toxic products and the “privilege” of partaking in consumer culture; their culture is more about survival. Unfortunately, my dissertation concluded that the survival of the Tibetan nomads is greatly threatened by unintended consumer culture impact which causes acute symptoms of climate change to threaten this ancient culture. I began the work of my nonprofit the Pureland Project a decade prior to my doctoral studies, but my research led me to advocate for Tibetan nomads even harder, fighting for their sustainability, encouraging resilience. Formally studying Sustainability on the Tibetan plateau was due to my undeserved privilege and I honor the access to Traditional Ecological Knowledge and spiritual practices that the Tibetans have trusted me with.

Mindful of my white-bodied, American passport-holding privilege, my journey through academia was always guided by the question: How will I have a beneficial impact rather than a negative one? When I was introduced to the sustainability education doctoral program at Prescott College, I felt like I was coming home. Surrounded by like minded social and environmental justice advocates who shared a commitment to a sustainable lifestyle. My classmates and I focused on walking our talk, mindful of our own impact while consuming copious amounts of literature about the climate disaster. Our cohort collectively decided to take a service learning detour to connect with the meaning of sustainability education. Together we built rain catchment systems, engaged in beach cleanup, supported local nonprofits, and held one another accountable with love and respect.

When I entered the sustainability education program at Prescott College I was working with the University of Pennsylvania’s Netter Center for Community Partnerships. I was optimistic that Universities could lead the way where the government wasn’t. But as I read Mckibbin, Hawkings, and Shiva I recognized that I must do more. Required readings weighed heavy on my mind, each day sifting through new data evidence that we are beyond our planet’s tipping point actually led me away from academia, because I was looking to have a deeper impact. While universities hold an incredible amount of knowledge, my research at Prescott demonstrated how siloed that knowledge is. Barriers to University access keeps the majority of the world in a purgatory of unaccredited knowledge. My dissertation: *Perspectives from the Roof of The World: Tibetan Nomadic Perspectives on Climate Change* attempted to amplify the Indigenous knowledge of the Tibetan nomadic people and their relationship with the natural and spirit world. I entered the program expecting to exit with a “scientific” study around climate change in Tibet, rather than an ethnography of water spirits. However, the further I dove into academia, the more I

recognized my privilege being part of it, inspiring me to bring those unheard voices into my dissertation. Fortunately, Prescott College was supportive of Decolonizing, Indigenous and Feminist Methodologies (Denzin, 2008). Professor Stuckey's "Being Known by a Birch" (2010) was of indispensable inspiration on decolonizing my own work. My dissertation shared the complexities of a culture in transition, faced by the lure of modern life and the Tibetan nomads' faithfulness to the earth. My research shows plenty of contradictions, and yet has one firm conclusion: Tibetan nomads are witnessing devastating changes to their homeland and it is threatening their way of life. By the time I graduated I was bubbling with urgency, and ready to act.

Much like my academic journey, my entrance into entrepreneurship was not planned. In reality, while my research fired me up, receiving my doctorate changed very little in my daily life. Today I have the very same job at a nonprofit that I had during the program. I spend significant time and resources maintaining my connections to Tibet and the nonprofit that I founded to support its people. It was however a Midwifery mission I organized after my graduation that led to my most surprising pivot. While the Pureland Project hosted two American Midwives in Tibet, I discovered the very taboo, undiscussed issue of period poverty. The midwives were seeing that 95% of the patients had preventable infections that could have been solved by simply having pads. Immediately my team and I bought hundreds of thousands of pads and panties, distributing them until I realized I was breaking my own rule... I was buying and sharing single use plastic! Since I am a menstrual cup user, I had not even thought about what pads are made out of... but like most things we don't think about, they are made of plastic! There I was trying to solve one issue while creating another. This quick, cheap and easy approach to development is all too common and I caught myself redhanded not thinking of unintended consequences to my period poverty "solution". A truly sustainable solution is rarely going to be quick, cheap and easy. My team spent months scouring the Chinese market for eco-friendly options that our friends without running water could use, and came up empty handed. We tried to then make our own, and failed, then eventually we turned to a manufacturer to produce compostable pads. After each batch we received feedback and changed our designs until landing on one that the nomads really love. It was in that development stage that the pandemic hit and I was stuck back in the United States. Having some down time, away from Tibet provided me the opportunity to reflect and research the issues and solutions in my homeland.

The pandemic had a way of bringing things to the surface, one thing that came up for me was a realization, that I too, a privileged American had also experienced period poverty. It had taken me two years to actually remember, my memory refusing to grasp my embarrassing menstrual history. But during the pandemic with my life slowed down, I was able to recall two years of my undergraduate career when I was actually rolling up toilet paper to use as pads because I was putting myself through college and I didn't have enough money to buy both my required textbooks AND pads! This sparked a deeper question- what other menstrual issues are being dealt with in the closet of shame, and how prevalent are these issues? Here are just a few facts:

- 2 in 5 American menstruators has experienced period poverty (forbes, 2022)

- The majority of pads and tampons on the market contain plastic
- A high percentage of menstrual products contain PFAS or Dioxins (Forbes, 2021)
- The majority of menstruators are unable or unwilling to use reusable menstrual product
- Each pad will likely take ~600-1,000 years to decompose
- Period poverty disproportionately impacts bodies of culture (1)

Just as Climate Change disproportionately impacts more bodies of culture, likewise, period poverty also disproportionately impacts menstruators in bodies of culture.

While sitting with these facts, and my own remembered experience, I made my biggest pivot yet and decided to form a social benefit company. I realized that while I am a minimalist at heart and in practice, the average consumer is not making eco-friendly, healthy choices. Conscious consumerism is challenging because firstly the market lacks eco-friendly options, and secondly consumers are not aware of the negative impacts they are making when buying something toxic, because they don't know that it is toxic! Due to this ignorance and a desire for comfort and convenience during the most uncomfortable time of the month, we found that most menstruators simply aren't ready to adopt a zero-waste approach to menstruation. Persistent factors like stigma-driven perceptions of menstruation, an attachment to convenience, and entrenched cultural norms mean that the majority of modern menstruators aren't comfortable using reusable menstrual products. I was forced to reconcile the hard angle of my personal convictions in contrast with the reality that attempts to impose these convictions on others would NOT create the widespread change towards sustainability that is the heart of MoonPads' vision. It was a necessary wake-up call, urging me to find a more practical solution. My Buddhist studies guided me to recognize and adopt a "middle way of sustainability", as I came to call it.

The middle way is a Buddhist principle inspiring a life practice that is between extremes. In an increasingly polarized world, I find that this approach is useful for all work. Part of my personal extreme practices include not having children and avoiding plastic like the plague, but I have no expectation for others to live a zero waste lifestyle, go childless or have a doctorate in sustainability! My middle way approach to sustainability acknowledges that the most significant impact will be achieved by meeting people where they are. It is crucial to find the sweet spot where people are comfortable adopting new, sustainable behaviors. Therefore, considering the obstacles in the adoption of reusable menstrual products, I embarked on a new mission: provide people with disposable menstrual products that are free of plastic and harmful chemicals. My market research affirmed that menstruators are indeed motivated to use products that are safe for their bodies and the planet. MoonPads was hence born out of my middle way practice; while it is a compromise on my personal convictions and personal choices, it is a strategic step towards achieving a greater good and a more sustainable world. The data hasn't changed and all signs

still point towards vast areas of the Earth becoming uninhabitable, due to rising sea levels, drought and crop failure in the near future, but, we can each make changes to help lessen our unintended negative impacts. My approach to sustainability education shifted from solving the issue up in the ivory towers, to taking the choice back to the people.

My journey with MoonPads is driven by a commitment to justice for the planet and for the people. Menstruators make humans, and hopefully we will save them, recognizing that small decisions make big impacts. My time spent in nomadic Tibetan culture gave me high-definition insight into the intersection between sustainability and gender equity. Menstruators who live in remote parts of the planet disproportionately experience the harmful effects of climate change and globalization via the increased often unregulated distribution of plastic and chemical-ridden products. Period poverty is a huge perpetrator of gender inequity and needs to be addressed NOW- but increasing access to menstrual products that are harmful to bodies and the planet is the OPPOSITE of a sustainable solution! The social enterprise element of MoonPads directly addresses period poverty by operating on a “buy one, give one” business model: for every box of pads or tampons that we sell, we donate a box to a menstruator in need. By offering plastic-free disposable menstrual pads, MoonPads aims to address both environmental and social concerns. By reducing plastic waste, we contribute to a healthier planet, and by providing a safe and sustainable alternative, we empower menstruators to make informed choices about their health and hygiene. Everyone should be able to manage their menstrual cycle with dignity and confidence, without further contributing to environmental degradation or jeopardizing their health. While the change might not be happening from the ivory towers, my coursework in sustainability education prepared me to do the stigma smashing educational work that MoonPads does around the intersection of menstrual and planetary health. We actively engage in educational campaigns, not only in Tibet but also in other parts of the world, including the United States. It is impossible to have healthy bodies on an unhealthy planet.

The path from my non-profit work, to academia, to creating a social impact business was full of some sharp turns, but it all feels aligned with the intent to have a positive impact. While my current focus on sustainable menstrual equity is within a for-profit structure of MoonPads, I certainly call on my non-profit partners to assist in doing the distribution work and challenge academia to research and publish more on menstruating bodies and the impact of plastics, chemicals and hormones that we are encouraged to use by doctors and society as a whole. All three sectors that I have traversed on this journey have a crucial role in creating a more sustainable and JUST world. No matter the sector or educational level, building a sustainable and equitable future requires continuous learning and adaptation. As my personal journey continues, I am excited to see how MoonPads can evolve to further address the needs of menstruators. It is a journey towards a future where everyone has access to safe and healthy products, and where sustainability and social equity go hand in hand. This is the work before all of us regardless of what path and lifestyle we choose. I invite readers of this journal of sustainability to reflect on our own extremism and think, how might we find a middle way to work across sectors to better serve this beautiful, abundant Earth?

End Note

(1) *bodies of culture* is a term used by Somatic therapist Resmaa Menakem to refer to anyone not considered white, the term is more inclusive in ways than BIPOC and acknowledges the embodiment of race and culture and doesn't otherize.

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