Eco-Imagination through Es-cape-ism Stories: Curriculum for Guiding Students in Imagining the World They Want

Co-created Spring Semester 2026 by Professor Beth Osnes-Stoedefalke in collaboration with students of the course Eco-Imagination for Sustainability at the University of Colorado, Zakaria K., Tiana Brown, Samantha Versie, Ryan M., Ellington Garland, Paloma Torres Lozano, Ruby Simon, J. A., and Balter.
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Guide to Films of Student Stories:

Paloma's video: https://vimeo.com/1198100443?fl=ip&fe=ec

Samantha's Video: https://vimeo.com/1197906660?fl=ip&fe=ec

Tianna's video: https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/1182799202

Sophia's video: https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/1197539937

Ruby's video: https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/1197541657

Ellington's video: https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/1197537035

Supplies Needed: Either several capes or large pieces of cloth to use as capes for each participant- can ask them to bring their own cloth, blankets, or shawls, paper and pens for each participant
Time Needed: 2 hours for workshop and sharing of stories
The Invitation: (read aloud the following invitation or show this 2-minute video that introduces the project: https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/1153800018)

Es-cape-ism
Es: prefix indicating intensification
cape: a garment that extends freely from the neck
ism: suffix meaning a practice, an action, or an artistic movement

Escapism is a project of eco-imagining. It is an invitation to don a cape and escape for a time from the parts of our world that were created from the imaginations of dominators and oppressors. This is an invitation to intensely imagine the world you want, maybe a world of clean water and air, a world of kindness, a world of wonder.
Dip your toes into the word *imaginary*, a noun referring to a collective projection of a desirable and feasible future.
Capes may stir your memories of tales from old worlds that you could use in the imagining of possible worlds. Dig into the fertile soil of your imagination and compost all that needs transforming into rejuvenated nourishment. Play with it all, feel, move, hide, hold, fly.
Like a child, don a cape to imbue yourself with magic, mystery, or superpowers.
Tell a story from this place. Tiny or still, bold or magnanimous. Any story you want. Any story that rises up. **An equitable, survivable, and thrive-able world is possible, but it needs to be imagined into being.**

Stirring it Up:
Read some of these words of inspiration to get your creativity flowing.
Ruha Benjamin from *Imagination: A Manifesto* (inside book cover)
"We have the power to use our imaginations to challenge systems of oppression and to create a world in which everyone can thrive. But obstacles abound. We have inherited destructive ideas that trap us inside a dominant imagination. Consider how racism, sexism, and classism make hierarchies, exploitation, and violence seem natural and inevitable—but all emerged from the human imagination.
The most effective way to disrupt these deadly systems is to do so collectively. Benjamin highlights the educators, artists, activists, and many others who are refuting powerful narratives that justify the status quo, crafting new stories that reflect our interconnection, and offering creative approaches to seemingly intractable problems."

"Harnessing Cultural Power" by Favianna Rodriguez from *All We Can Save: Truth, Courage, and Solutions for the Climate Crisis* (page 123)
"The power of culture lies in the power of story. Stories change and activate people, and people have the power to change norms, cultural practices, and systems. Stories are like individual stars. For thousands of years, humans used the stars to tell stories, to help make sense of their lives, to orient them to the planet. Stories work in the same way. When many stars coalesce around similar themes, they form a narrative constellation that can disrupt business as usual. They reveal patterns and help illuminate that which was once obscured. The powerful shine in one story can inspire other stories. We need more transformational stories so that we can connect the dots and shift narratives."

***Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, by adrienne maree brown**
"Imagination is one of the spoils of colonization, which in many ways is claiming who gets to imagine the future for a given geography. Losing our imagination is a symptom of trauma. Reclaiming the right to dream the future, strengthening the muscle to imagine together as Black people, is a revolutionary decolonizing activity."

***At the end of this PDF, enjoy examples of students' stories and illustrated notes that convey the spirit of other readings that stirred us up for our collective imagining!**

Creativity Warm Up:
-Standing in a circle together, have each person introduce themselves with their name and a gesture that expresses how they are feeling right now. After each person does this, everyone repeat that name and gesture, and then the next person introduces themselves the same way until everyone has done so.
-Standing in a circle together, have each person finish the prompt "What if…?" Example, "What if access to health care was seen as a fundamental human right?" Or "What if military bases became art centers?"

The Prompt:
Using these prompts, ask everyone to write a one-page story that imagines into being the world they want. (either make a copy of this prompt for each person or write these prompts large so everyone can see them while writing their story)

*What is a special place?

*What do you want to protect?

*What threatens what you want to protect?

*Make a fantastical embodiment/manifestation,
character/force of what threatens what you want to protect.

*What special or magical power does your cape give you that helps you have the courage to meet that threat, to listen to it, to understand it, work through (or if necessary) against it, to transform that threat into something entirely new that is a win-win for all?

Feedback on First Draft of Story in Pairs:
Everyone gets with one other person. Seated together, each of you, one at a time, read your story aloud to your partner. Directly following, the partner should verbally share what stood out for them in that story, what powerful impressions they got from it, or feelings they felt while listening. Then share any "what ifs" you might have about how the story might be improved or expanded, for example "what if you clarified where the story was taking place sooner?" The person who wrote the story can consider any of the suggestions shared with them, but they get to decide if they make any changes suggested. Once the first person has shared their story, then the partners should switch so the other person reads their story and receives feedback.

If there is time, have everyone switch partners again and repeat the above pair/share with a new partner to receive another person's feedback.

Second Draft:
Have everyone write a second draft of their story. Encourage them to consider the feedback from their partner(s). Remind everyone to write their story clearly enough for them to be able to read it aloud to the entire group.

Sharing Your Stories While Wearing a Cape With Each Other:
Invite everyone to use a piece of fabric to wear some kind of a cape for while they tell their story. Ask them to imagine where they might move the cape in an expressive way to help bring their story to life. Give each person time to practice reading their story while wearing their cape. Encourage everyone to explore how they can move with their cape.
Once everyone is ready, have each person stand to tell their story while wearing a cape. Everyone else can be seated in a semi-circle listening and receiving the story.
After each story, as facilitator, ask those listening to say out loud any single words or short phrases in response to the story, for example "nourishing" or "spirit cleansing." Then ask if one or two people would like to say a bit more about the story in response to what stood out for them, or about a powerful impression they got from the story, or how it made them feel. Try and keep the feedback to each story relatively short so you can keep the energy up for each story being shared. You may need to adjust how you share feedback based on how many people you have in your group. If you have a very large group, you could break up into smaller groups that each do this style of feedback within each group.

Reflection and Closing:
After everyone has shared their story and received feedback, have everyone stand in a circle once again. Going around the circle, have everyone share a word or short phrase about how they feel after having heard everyone's stories. Ask everyone to consider inside themselves how they might bring into being some aspect of their story to create the world they want. Congratulate everyone for having created and shared a story about the world they want.
The End of the Workshop and Story Sharing!

Resources:

Contact Beth Osnes-Stoedefalke with questions- beth.osnes@colorado.edu

This offering created through a MASP course at the University of Colorado through the SPIKE Center for Sustainability Education featuring student storytellers imagining into being a more sustainable world.

Sponsored by—SPIKE Center for Sustainability Education, Inside the Greenhouse, Theatre & Dance, and MASP at the University of Colorado

Examples of Students' Eco-Imagination Es-cape-ism Stories

Tiana

I have always been surrounded by women so I have a connection to them. All women. Strong women. Weak women. Brave women. Scared women. In fact, I grew up thinking we were the superior sex. My family was primarily matriarchal - of course the men were the main providers - but the women seemed to always take the lead on everything else. I also went to an all girls high school, so I saw trailblazing women in the making. We laughed and cried together through all stages of life and all stages of feminism. Like I said, I had a connection. That connection pushed me into the lab. My superpower is improving the quality of life for women through scientific research.

I was in the laboratory examining my tissue cultures when that connection started to fade. Pause. Not fade - because it was not an action in and of itself, it was an exterior virus - a force almost. My heart banged against my chest. The last fight I had against this virus was in 1993, when we had finally won and women were included in clinical trials. But it is back, this time with more vengeance as I could hear the voices of all women crying through the line.

I gripped my cape and wished myself into the one place I swore I would never go again. That office. I saw him sitting there, about to put pen to paper - it was the virus. The force that aimed to set women back 1000 more years through exclusion.

We have fought this battle for centuries, so he was no stranger, only this time he had an even bigger aim - to reduce research funding for projects focused on women's health. I could not watch idly as he tried to erase my connection. My community of women.

With the last bit of strength I had left as my connection faded, I grabbed the pen and ripped the paper apart. My invisibility left him in confusion and shock, which made him think twice about the decision. I could then feel my connection being restored - women were safe, they were considered and they were prioritized. With my regained strength, I held tightly to my cape and wished myself back into the lab and continued my research. I hope that was the last of that virus.

Ruby

Life grasps at many what if's. They serve as constant reminders of regret, serving to fill our minds of wonder. Because of this, so many monsters are created; however, the worst of them all is overthinking. It is something so big and horrendous, so much so that it will consume and control you. My thoughts have formulated from something internal to becoming fully external. Things such as men in gear tearing families apart, division between humans, or changes in life begin to turn into this monster that begins to corrupt my mind with ghouls of negativity, almost as if I'm being possessed and forced to watch my vessel endure something out of my control. When I do live as myself, my body and mind begin to feel foreign as I can still feel the "monster" lurking within the back of mind waiting and preying on my mind for the perfect opportunity to feed its greedy desires. It makes me wonder just exactly how I'm supposed to defeat something so powerful, yet unseen. Something untouchable, but leaves an unbearable stain that I'm unable to remove. What's worse is, I'm not the only one who this "monster" chooses to torture. In fact, everyone has one lurking in their mind (some just are more powerful or more tamed than others). People I love are even prone to this. Every interaction, skill, or even ability is questioned by this demon and immediately becomes consumed into something that isn't reflected upon correctly towards the individual, rather it is distorted; almost like looking into a funhouse mirror. The world and its disasters continue to feed my monster and make it grow bigger and stronger, until it fulfills its purpose in consuming me. However, like everything else this monster also holds a weakness. Resilience. Although life holds many negatives, it also possesses so many positives. I desire to live my life, whether it be serving others or myself. The formation of others against the

men in dark gear protesting, fighting and working for what’s right creates all the difference, including taming my monster. When I wear my cape it not only protects me, but others as well. It is a symbol that serves to help others who struggle to assist themselves in a world that continues to take. Others who choose to let their monsters consume them grow to become versions of themselves they live to regret. I choose to live my life freely. It is hard to break free from this monster, as sometimes it's stronger, especially during hard times. That's why it’s important to believe in oneself, and that's exactly what my cape’s job is. It’s a reminder of my struggles and hardships, but also of my successes and dreams. It protects me by strengthening my mind and proving that it’s ok to feel things such as fear or regret, but to not let it consume my entire being, but rather build me into a hero that will serve the better future for others and myself.

Paloma

Our Great Mother loves and provides. She gives herself to feed her

children. She gives and gives, an apple or a seed, bearing the fruit of life.

Another world under the sea, providing magic and wonder. Her children create

inventions, bringing images to life, and the need for green is like a drug. But her

children are poisoned by greed. She gives them water, sister water, and they kill

their sister in pursuit of technology. Drinking water is being sucked up for AI,

devilish images coming to “life”. Creatures are absent of breath, and skinwalkers

pretend to be our friends or lovers. Our mother gave us our brother salmon, and

they killed their brother’s home to make golf courses. Entire ecosystems struggle

for air, their homes are taken, and are replaced with concrete jungles.

But our dance must heal our mother. The spirit of the butterfly breathes

away the smoke. Her wings mimicked a cape, a blanket sweeping over the land.

The butterfly brings soothing warmth to heal our mother. Her cape drapes across

those who are sick, suffering, or in need of strength. The butterfly symbol

changes, transitions from one form to another. Her wings guide humans to

change their ways to work with the environment, and leave their ways of not

caring.

Zakaria

It happened, another mass AI data center factory plan has just been launched in this already contaminated world. All these programs have been pushed time and time again by these large cooperations promising for these systems to help the people and environment but couldn't be more wrong. These projects are what allowed the world to lose all its color, the grass losing its green, the river losing its blue, even the sun looked a lot different then long ago. The pollution tainting the sky a brownish color, while all the clean water is being used to power these massive machines while all the city's electricity constantly powers off. Most living things hardly survive lowering overall life spans and pets couldn't live past 5 years, all their resources going to these massive building projects. I grew up in these terrible conditions, forging my long hatred for these systems and how they destroy our home. The world was giving up and collapsing but it's not too late. There's no other way to save this

world other than my Cape of the New Sky. In this new time of pollution and corruption I realized why I was given this cape in the first place, to restore the earth to be as healthy as it can be! I put the glorious cape on and the cape begins to help me levitate in the air. A sense of longing washes over me while I raise my hand, beginning to clear the rivers and sky. As I continue to raise my other hand the people began to grow more and more sincere for each other finally caring for each other. As my hands raise to the sky the thick clouds begin to separate and bring in a new light.

J.R. A prairie dog curls up in her burrow. She's deep in the ground surrounded by the warmth of her family. Here, they have lived for generations. Here, her little ones will one day grow and have families of their own. Their little paws twitch as they run and play in their dreams. She begins to drift off to sleep, satisfied everyone is safe and warm.

Suddenly she hears the alarm. The urgent chirping somewhere from the surface grows louder as more from her colony join in on the warning. Something is happening on the surface. They are safe in their burrow so she stays still, intending to wait out the emergency. There's a loud thump and a cloud of loose dirt falls onto their fur. She shakes herself off, she's used to dirt.

After a while of silence, she goes up to investigate. The tunnel seems darker than usual and abruptly she comes face to face with solid rock. Her entrance has been blocked by a heavy deliberately placed rock. She doesn't know this though, she only knows her exit has been sealed. She scrambles frantically at the rock. Her nails are useless. She darts off into another tunnel and attempts to access another exit. She is greeted once again by another immovable barrier. Her pups are awake now and they too scamper about the tunnels, eager to play outside but find no way to leave. Their bellies rumble with hunger. They want the grass growing from the surface but there is no way to get to it. She gets to work digging another exit. But everyday after that, every morning she awakes to another hole blocked. She has no way to stop whoever is doing this to her home. She's exhausted from digging every day.

My cape allows me to sail overhead and I catch a glimpse of the person leaving the rocks. With a flutter of my cape I give the little prairie dog courage and strength. For the first time,

instead of cowering down when the alarm sounds from her colony, she goes up. The strength I give her allows her to push aside the rock with a thud. The intruder gasps in disbelief at her strength. The intruder is young and thought it was funny to leave the rocks. They didn't stop to think how it might affect her. I watch them from above, my cape concealing me and give the prairie dog one more gift. The gift of understanding. She looks at the intruder and wills them to understand. To see things her way. To know the fear of finding all her exits blocked and the fear that if she doesn't dig her way out everyday, her pups would starve. To make them feel the exhaustion that comes from moving pounds of dirt with her small body and tiny claws. She does it gladly for her pups, but she doesn't want to live in fear anymore. She forgives them, but wants them to stop. The intruder finally understands. They apologize to her and leave. From then on they never attempted to block prairie dog tunnels with rocks again and they gained newfound respect for the little animals.

Ellington:

The people of the land did not ask to be there; they did not choose the land they were on. But yet they made the best of it. After fleeing their captors, they found a land. This land was dusty and without much life, but yet they made it work. They grew corn, they had chickens, and they had pigs. It may not have been much, but this land was theirs. It was the first thing that they could call their own in this New World. They called this land Nicodemus. The people of this land loved it and cherished it, and it loved them back. It may not have been the greatest, but it gave them a life. Many people would wander through this land, whether they were running away from something or they were natives passing through. This land gave them a place to fellowship, share meals, and share stories. But there were those who believed that the people should not have this land, those who believed that these people were supposed to serve them. So these people had to defend this land with their hearts and with their minds. They had to take up arms because this land was not given to them, just like nothing was given to them. This land was a symbol of their freedom. It was a symbol of their liberation, a symbol of their soul that was taken from them so many years ago. Many pale people rode their horses with torches

and guns, but the men and women defended this land. They kept it, and the land protected them. It brought rain to wash out the thieves. It brought sun to dry out their horses, but this land did not attack. The people who loved it, the people who killed it, and the people who would call it home. It is almost as if the land was alive, in good sense, the love and care that was being put into it, and it could not help but love them back. Many generations had passed in this land; it continued to provide. Many had come and gone for better opportunities, whether it be north to the big cities or out west to the mines. This land stood as a testament to hard work, to resilience, and to the love these men and women shared.

The night air clogged my nose. Officials walked by as my mouth drew in a deep breath, those I have come to see have arrived. As they walked right past me I was suddenly ultra aware of the fact that I was not invisible. One turn of the neck and I was in plain sight. If only I could grab them and hurt them, filling my innermost urges would make me just like them though. With weapons it wouldn't be hard, even though there were seven of them , they weren't strong, just suits with money, but I had to wait and follow the plan in order to bring them all in. I wore my issued tactical uniform, all black, with a shawl of midnight to hide myself and others underneath. I always arrive 15 minutes early to the danger sites to confirm that everything is proceeding in the usual way, meaning the coming and going of the world's most powerful into the rooms of terrified vulnerable children. My fifteen minutes are up and the officials are now inside and past the lobby of the factory. They press the elevator button to go down. No time to waste, I vanish and reappear in the basement. The factory itself, while active, is a front, the basement is where business has to be dealt with. I vanish again and reemerge within a room whose door was locked. On the floor at my feet lay a girl, no more than eight. There was no time to comfort her. I brushed my black shawl over her head as her eyes began to flutter open. I removed the cape to reveal that she had been removed as well. She would reappear at the look out point on top of Mt. Eggbert, my associate will be there with blankets and food for all of the kids that will flash into our spot tonight.

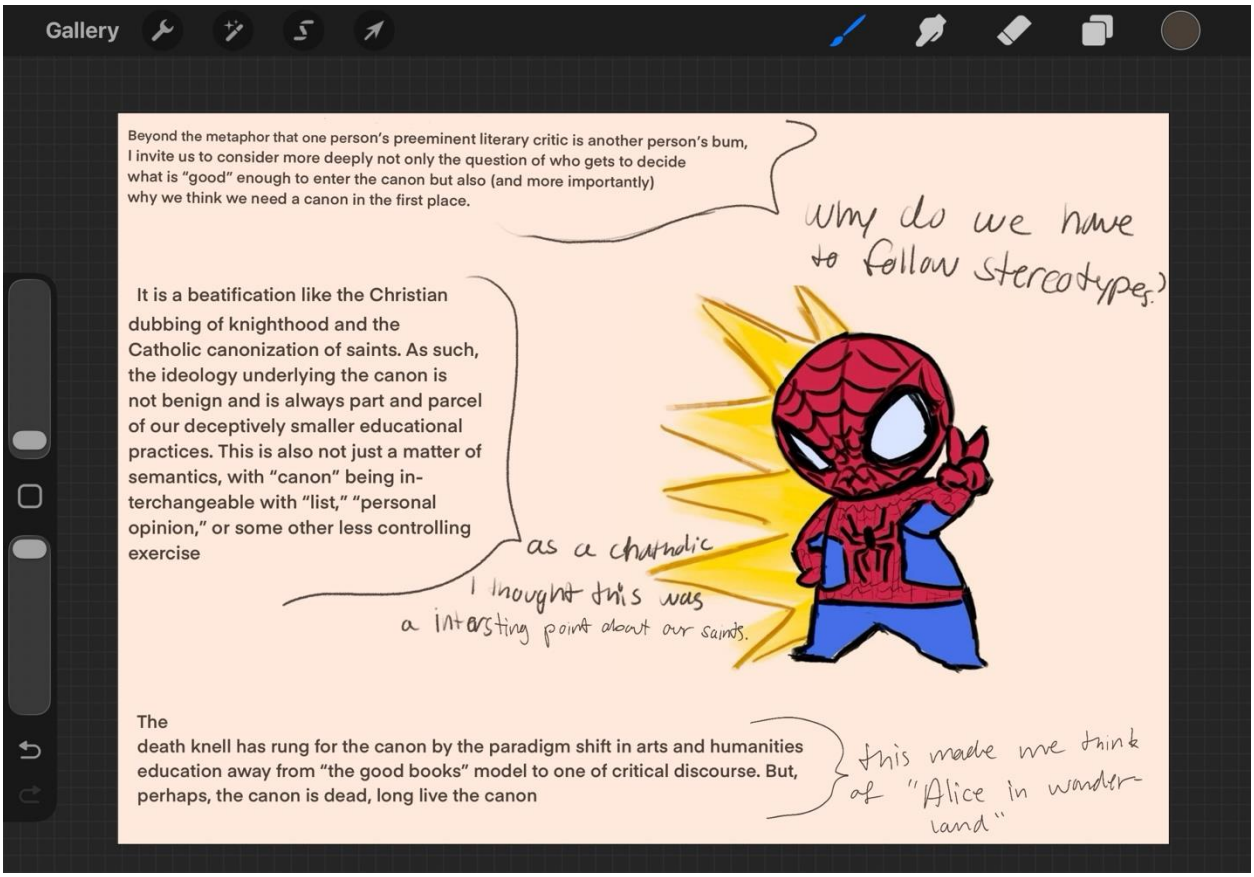
The suits are down here with me now but I can't speed things up, that would be a mistake I've made before. Slow and methodical, no matter what I hear or see. The door next to this room unlocks but I stay put. It closes again and relocks, that's when I appear into it. I shove the suit in front me away and it reacts with a frustrated flail of the arms but my shawl lands over it during the struggle and suddenly the so-called man is gone. This room had another girl, slightly older but I couldn't tell from her emaciated body I knew from the reports I had been given, you never know if the reports are accurate or not until you're there, there are too many missing children to account for in this world. I usher the girl over to me, she moves without thought, right under the fabric, it takes her to the blankets and comfort. Six more suits to send away tonight and following them soon will be the footage from my vest cam, the way we get it done no loop holes can be taken, no alibis, no money to pay it off. In total eighteen kids will appear on Mt. Eggbert within the next hour. These eighteen kids will be ensured life and taken care of until they ascend. This is just tonight, tomorrow there will always be more.

IPC, which stands for the Instilling Peace Cooperation, is an organization that has been protecting everyone's peace, no matter where they are, for hundreds of years. They used magical objects to protect themselves and others from threats, like their magical capes. Each agent from the IPC gets a magical cape. However, as time went on and technology became more advanced, agents started to use those weapons more instead of their magical capes. Except for one agent who still believed in the power of the capes, Agent 2006.

Now in the present time, Agent 2006, along with their team, headed to the site of the biggest threat yet. A monster who lacked kindness and stole peace from others. As they left their vehicle, the agents heard the roar of the monster. Some were scared but traveled on. Agent 2006 and their team surrounded the building as it shook with the monster inside. This monster roared so hard that the bricks started to fall apart. Revealing the monster inside. It began to pick up agents one by one, taking the agents' peace. The reason it took the agents peace was that the monster was the embodiment of a lack of kindness. Eating these agents peace but never becoming full of it. Thus, always wanting more. Agent 2006 knew that weapons alone would not kill the monster. Because fighting fire with fire would only make things worse. With a swirl of Agent 2006's cape, she realized that fighting the monster was not the answer, but instead she could teach it to become kind/ peaceful without taking from others. Agent 20006 called out to the monster, telling it what she had learned. The monster, tired of being hungry all the time, listened to the Agent and took her offer.

As time passed, the monster became kind and peaceful through the education of the agent. The monster helped to restore the peace and kindness from the agents that they have harmed. Along with helping to rebuild the building they destroyed, not only did it help restore the peace of the people, but it also helped to bring peace and kindness to the monster. The agent, now filled with more peace and kindness based on her help with the monster, understood that fighting is not always the answer, but understanding others and trying to help will always be an option. Sometimes, educating people in matters of kindness and peace can solve many issues, no matter how big they seem. Both the agent, monster, and kindness team moved on in a world full of peace and kindness with the knowledge of a wonderful cape that can bring peace to the world.

What Follows are Some Illustrated Notes on the Readings by the Students!



Gallery

"... play is a contemporary world. it's possible artists can be circuit breackers of tragedy, surprising people with alternative ways of seeing."

The way I interpreted this was the artist help lead chang visually. they show what they see, and then show what could be. They are the ones to question "What if".

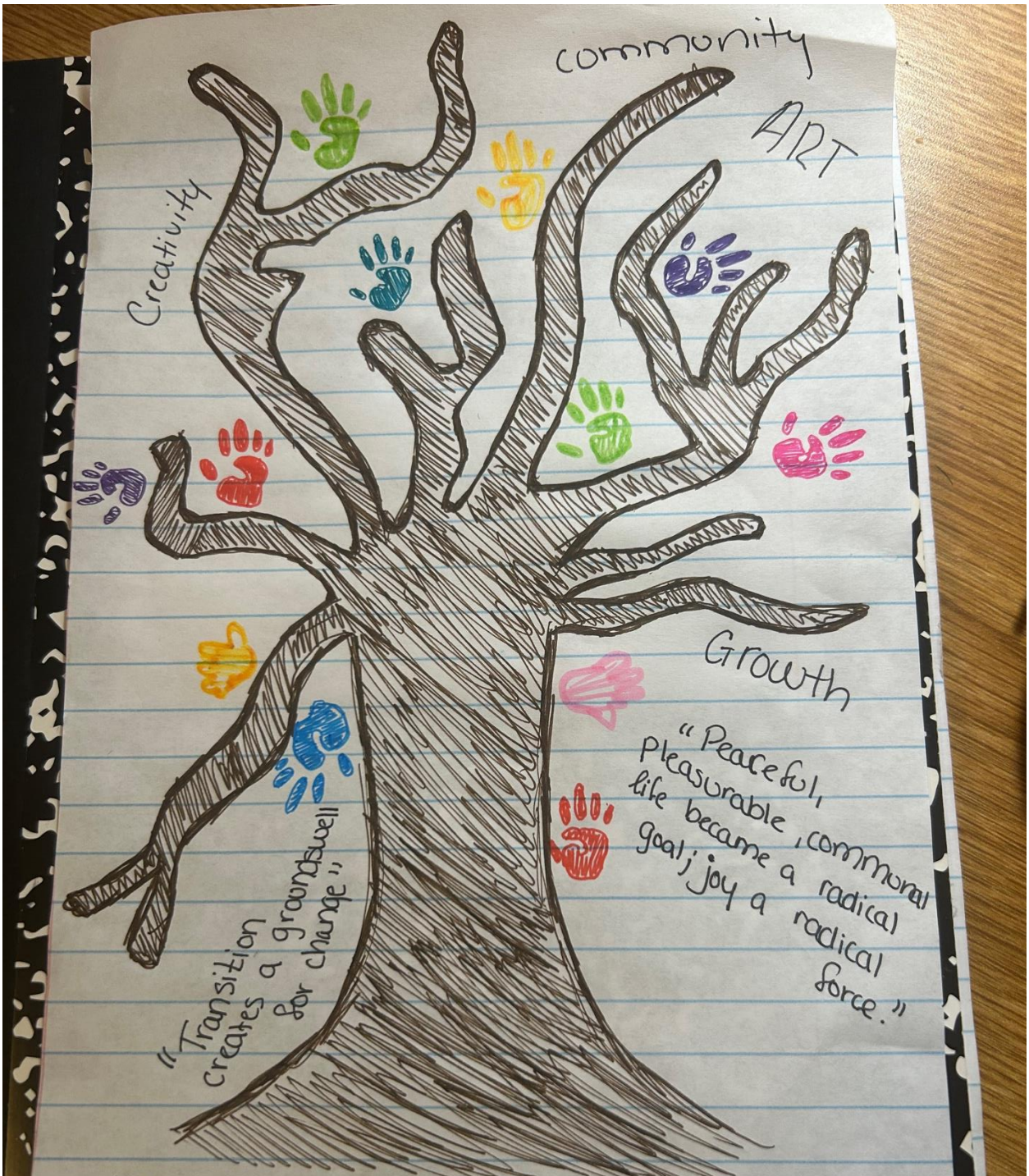
"Empathy and cooperation are key to play. Doing unto others what you would have them do unto you..."

I think to have an imagination you have to have a sence of empathy. This quote also reminded me of a passage from the bible.

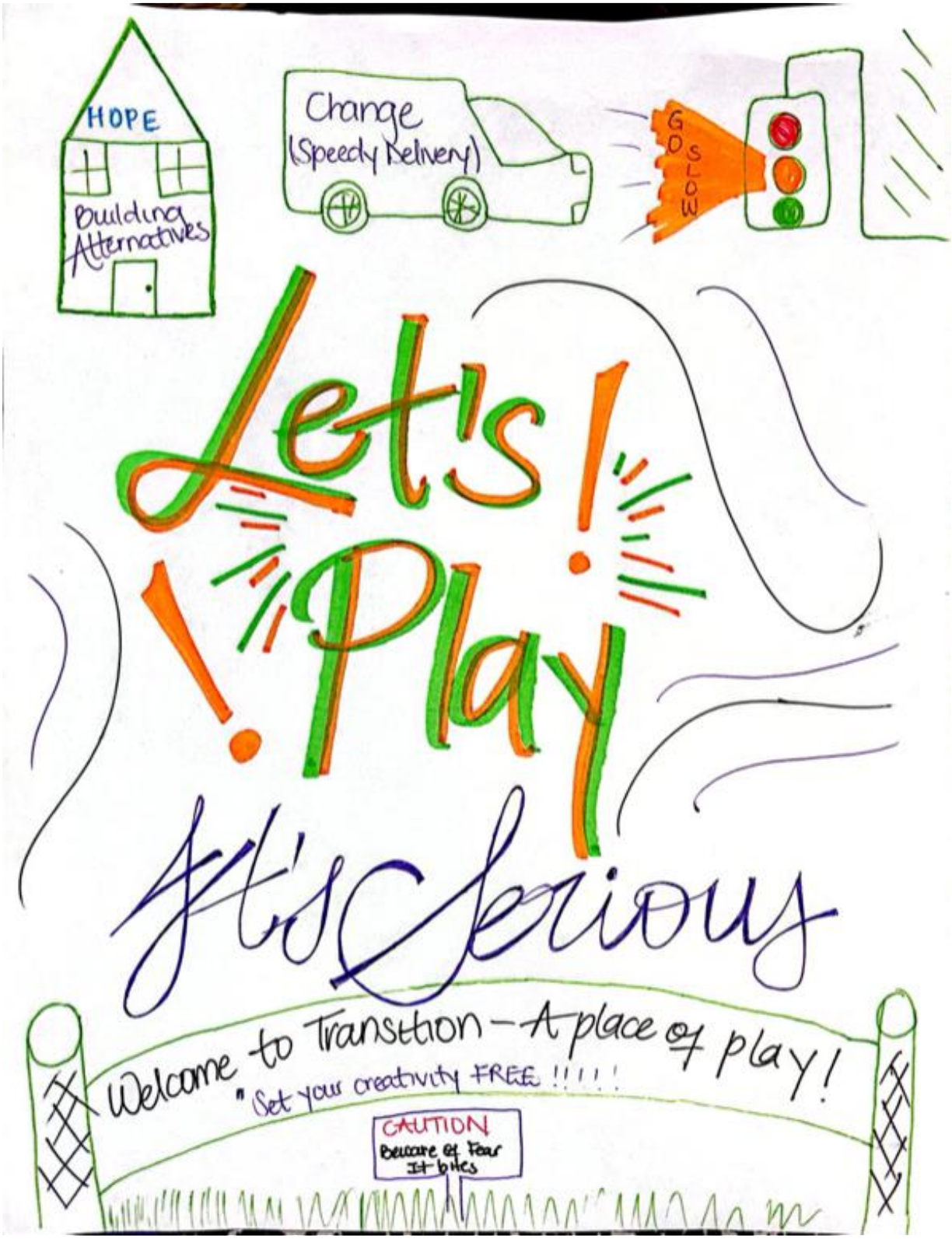
↳ "If you remove from your midst oppression, false accusation and malicious speech; if you bestow your bread on the hungry and satisfy the afflicted; then light shall rise for you in the darkness"
Book of the Prophet Isaiah 58:7-10

"In both I witnessed capacities of the human heart to engage at a deep level with knowledge of global challenges with a yearning for a narrative of change that valued things that mattered most - family, friends, love, justice, connection."

Palma Lyn (Little Bird)



"It is our task... to transform ourselves from mere social creatures into community creatures. It is the only way human evolution will be able to proceed."



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