



**‘Letter to Ísland’** - Reflective poem as sample of autobiographic work presented at the Nordic Academy of Management in August 2024, Track 1 - Volcanos, climate change and female thinkers

# Shape Shifting

## An Autobiographic Journey of Sustainability Transformation

*What if it is me?*

What if *I'm* the one, the part of an organization, an advocate, a 'leader' who is driving change to create desirable futures such as a fair and just world both socially and environmentally?

This is a question I began asking myself while conducting research on so-called 'change agents' in and beyond organizations for sustainable development. Looking for suitable study participants, I started looking for myself, or rather individuals such as myself. I want to learn more about people who already care, who already educate themselves or who hold knowledge or wisdom on sustainability issues and are trying to do 'good'. Individuals who proactively aim at facilitating sustainability transformations in the scope of their personal as well as professional capacity. I want to understand what makes people, just like myself, care and go above and beyond. I want to shed light on what happens inside of us when externally all sails are set for change.

For this quest, I required 1.5 years, a small research fund, and external encouragement to recognise the value of my own experiences. Today, I employ a range of reflective practices, both individually and within coaching and group settings, to gain deep insights into my research question through an autoethnographic and autobiographical perspective.

*How might we (re-)shape individuals' cognitive frames for sustainability transformations in and beyond organizations?*

I write in my roles as a researcher, educator, founder of a non-profit organization, woman, friend, partner, daughter, aunt, and many others. I write from an understanding of research not as an objective, impersonal, distant device, but as a profound inward and outward journey that might provide us with answers, but more importantly, space for transformation. But what does that look like in practice?

In this piece, I specifically explore my sustainability journey and the external stimuli that have potentially led to internal cognitive and emotional shifts. This exploration is anchored in a timeline exercise that I developed and have utilized with over 40 individuals, yielding profound personal insights. My process involves revisiting photographs from past experiences, reviewing old notes, personal LinkedIn posts, and interviews I have given, among other sources. Engaging with memories from past experiences allows the emergence of a series of critical incidents which contributed to the shaping of my sustainability perception. To deepen this introspective journey, I also engage in individual coaching sessions, which allow me to further examine and reflect on my boundaries, obstacles, strengths, and perspectives within the context of sustainable development.

The primary objective of this study is to explore the internal cognitive and emotional processes of individuals driving sustainability transformations. In this piece, I provide first insights into how personal experiences shape sustainability frames. While my lifeline and the connected experiences are obviously unique, I present myself as an individual case study, opening new avenues for research at the intersection of emotion, cognition and sustainability.

This research is grounded in theories of socio-cognitive frames and reframing processes, particularly within the context of sustainability transformations. Drawing from sensemaking theory and cognitive framing, I explore how I interpret sustainability and how these interpretations evolve over time. By sharing personal stories, I get to illustrate how emotional responses can serve as powerful catalysts for reframing perceptions around sustainability.

Reflection plays a central role in this, enabling me to reassess my experiences and perspectives while shaping existing cognitive frames. This creates a framework of an individual reframing process in regards to sustainable development.

This research is particularly timely given the increasing urgency of sustainability challenges and the growing recognition of the role that individual leaders play in driving organizational change. As organizations face complex environmental and social issues, understanding the cognitive and emotional mechanisms behind sustainability leadership is critical for developing more effective strategies to meet these challenges.

With this contribution, I further aim to open the discussion on our roles as ‘so much more than just’ researchers. A trained analytical, reflexive mind offers us a great toolbox to not only conduct research with participants but also recognise ourselves as the study focus and practitioners. It allows us to practice vulnerability, humility, and empathy. It allows us to ask deep meaningful questions, not solely to others but to ourselves. It allows us to step out of a passive researcher role behind screens and step into a creator role aimed at driving societal change. Eventually, it shows that we actually care.

## Appendix

Dear Ísland,  
I came here with a busy mind, a broken heart and empty batteries.  
I came here in a shape that didn't feel quite like myself anymore  
or never did.

Funny how sometimes we don't feel like ourselves even though I  
know we are many.

So I came here in this out-of-place gestalt to the land of gods and  
elements; 3 weeks, 20 days, 480 hours, you were all I knew.

And while I might have only seen a glimpse of you, a scratch on  
the surface, a fraction of the whole, I put the pieces together.

Dear Ísland,

You let the winds scream in my face and push me from behind,  
You had sunshine burn my lips and warm my tent for the nights,  
You poured on me, again and again, in a ritual of purification,  
washing away sins and empty thoughts until I was shivering to the  
bones. Baptised like they do in church, nourished by the endless  
lands and open skies.

I passed by your hot springs and bubbly baths that took my breath  
away, literally and figuratively.

I got to climb your highest peaks and rush down same alike.

Black beaches, volcanic rock and glacial ice telling stories from  
the past and present.

I heard the elves and dwarfs whispering underneath the moss,  
behind the foss, where else shall they be, if not here in the land of  
gods and elements?

Dear Ísland,

In my mother tongue, we don't say confident, we say self-aware  
and I'm glad to say this now, my awareness is back there.

A trust in following the flow of life, and winds and faith and  
coincidence, knowing that after all, she takes care of me.

Fumbra, Mother Earth, did her magic, for me, it's an again. A  
forgotten truth that's been buried only to be dug out again.

Dear Ísland,

I'm leaving in a different shape, a shape not so new but carved out  
with nuances and edges here and there. This form might stay for a  
while, or shapeshift just as fast, like water rushing down the falls,  
carrying sand and stone afar.

Dear Ísland,

You showed me many shapes of you and formed a new shape of  
mine.

I thank you for this gifting,

It's been all I needed for a while,  
some Shapeshifting

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