The Tree of Life by Suparna Kapoor

Developed by Ncazelo Ncube-Mlilo and David Denborough, tree of life originated in narrative practice, to help people tell stories about their lives, identities, strengths and hopes. I have adapted this approach for academic and management education.

I invite participants to draw their trees using chart paper and coloured pencils, giving them 20–25 minutes and explaining what each part represents. They reflect on the values that have shaped them, strengths they draw upon, hopes and dreams they hold, and the legacy they wish to leave behind. I find this particularly interesting with engineering students and others accustomed to logical, structured ways of thinking since this one goes beyond words and analysis, and often enlivens the room.

Participants then share their trees in pairs or triads. Something shifts when people share their stories. They begin to see aspects of themselves they may have taken for granted. Listening to others, they discover that beneath very different life experiences lie hopes, struggles and aspirations that are often remarkably similar. Sometimes, another person's story opens up a possibility they had not considered for themselves.

Having done this activity with hundreds of people, what stays with me is that I have never seen two trees alike. Each reflects a unique form and life, yet sharing creates a sense of connection and common humanity creating something richer. Perhaps this is where hope lies: in recognising our own possibilities while discovering them in others.

Hope in higher education is not about urging people to stay positive, but about creating space for learners to make sense of their experiences and connect with others. As educators, we may not always be able to give people hope, but we can create a safe, non-judgemental space where their stories are heard, possibilities recognised, and hope finds room to grow.

P.S. I have not uploaded an actual drawing of a tree as I do not have permission to share.