

From Adversity into Integrity (A Dedication to Outcasts)

I was a child born into a family of three children, consisting of two sisters and myself. I was a child of many different creative thoughts and ideas. I was never neglected as child, but I often felt misunderstood, instead of my parents dealing with the issues unilaterally. I was always polite and above board, insisting upon honesty and respect from my fellow person. My mother was really the driving force in the family, being able to effectively co-ordinate any family business with relatives concisely. A significant proportion of my identity and make up was based on her.

My sisters were close to both parents and I felt a sense of competition to gather who had achieved the most in the family. I was definitely a late bloomer, but everyone said I had great potential to achieve that I felt was not properly valued within the family context. I began to develop coping mechanisms in an adaptive sense to counteract my sisters' somewhat contrived ways. I was different to them and others in that respect. I was a quiet, bright, sensitive and articulate sort of a child who possessed great empathy and compassion for the lesser off and unfortunates in our society. I realised that persons who are devalued in society by the corporate world have their own intrinsic worth. Some families who simply do not have the abundance of monetary outlay are not necessarily bludgers, but victims of a selfish and insular world of work we live in.

Some families are economically isolated in the community and are rather isolated from any meaningful and worthwhile social and/or community based activities or programs. I had from birth appropriate values and morals to ensure my wellbeing through life. I found through experience that the persons who led a fulfilling life were those who adhered to strict principles in their life. My father was a fairly rigid man who wanted the best for his children ideally; however, it seemed different for me, as during my cognitive and social development into adulthood, we grew apart. He often would take me on camping trips but it seemed difficult or problematic to form an appropriate attachment with my father. The girls seemed to undermine my ability to create a long lasting bond with Dad. He always used to watch me play at sporting events connected with school that made me somewhat glad but also anxious with his presence. This was primarily to do with feeling the need to succeed and if I didn't, I was deemed a failure in his eyes. Later in life, I learned and embraced that this was my insecurity as a child. My interactions with my sisters were competitive in the eyes of my parents and also seemingly negative with little meaningful positive reinforcement.

At other times of difficulty and need, my sisters proved to be a wealth of support and friendliness that contradicts their critical side at different times. We all came from a good home based on achieving highly and being proud about your rewards and accolades in a dignified and proud manner without displaying any arrogance. The notion was to be happy within you and rightfully so but in a way that was not denigrating or to the expense of another. My mother tended to feel obligated to play peacemaker within the family unit and her marriage to a latter degree because of converging ideas and approaches in respect of how the family would deal with a problem. I had failed to form a proper attachment and bond with my father, as sometimes I would push him away as a child. The girls seemed to get all the attention and I was tired and jealous of this.

Sometimes, it was particularly difficult to get a word in edgewise at the table and I often reacted with being relatively uninvolved with family discussion. My personal reactions troubled a rather unrelenting father, as I would remain silent and indifferent at mealtimes. This reaction angered my father and sometimes he coped with this problem by being verbally abrupt and short fused. This in turn created feelings of bitterness and remorse within myself. At other times, due to the lack of appropriate communication within the family, things were left unsaid and nothing was resolved adequately. The family unit is old-fashioned operating in modern day society. I felt as though things were difficult at meal times within the family as it aroused a build up of resentment between the siblings and mother was designated peacemaker. I felt isolated and also like a

scapegoat in the sense of being a target for my Dad's frustration and preserving family harmony. I believe that our family base exhibits the qualities of being dysfunctional espoused by an inherent lack of proper communication.

I reacted with indifference and was quite vocal and sometimes aggressive when my needs were not met. I sometimes felt I was unnecessarily spoilt just to shut me up. Sometimes I used to wish I was never born into a negative and critical family. Sometimes, there emerged positive things and the family was a wealth of joy and happiness. Even a great reward for success was a hug and a pat on the head. For me, this seemed something false or superficial. Whilst my mother could convey her love, my father remained passive aggressive and distant, unable to open up properly.

Our lives at home were rather disjointed, and love and happiness is based on honest and diligent success that used to reflect the girl's achievements. My progress, whether it was academic or work-wise, was tarnished by some degree of interactional problems, getting someone offside or a battle just to remove uncertainty in the eyes of academics and TAFE teachers. Anyway, my parents did try to instil appropriate boundaries within their children but our siblings had diverse needs and were quite complicated. Our childhood was feeling insecure and loved on a conditional basis, although this is something my parents would vehemently deny. Other family outings to places brought about children who were culturally balanced with a sense of moral propriety. Our family provided the children and me with some positive attributes and helpful ways to manage life's challenges. In other words, whilst our upbringing was fairly protected and sheltered it helped facilitate an awareness of the wider issues in our community and on an international level.

Sometimes, the interactions were dysfunctional, and conflict between the siblings usually resulted in someone getting told off or being put down as punishment. Other times, the expression of anger was treated in a hostile way because it came out inappropriately. My parents never really taught their children to properly express anger so often my sisters would stew on an issue without getting it in the open, as there was no suitable mechanism to express anger. We all learned to survive in a negative way that is reflected in the types of relationships our family has with other people today. Some aspects are clearly helpful whilst others are slow to develop and envisage. Overall, the family unit was responsible for preparing our kids for life's wonderful adventures; although it was difficult when my father's philosophy was '**children should be seen and not heard**'.

I withdrew from a significant family discussion I felt was bullshit and attitudinally and culturally snobby to forming my own opinions and conclusions about subject matters that seemed rather dated or trivial. My father is very much a chauvinistic person and my mother is at his beck and call so he does little in a domestic sense because he is the breadwinner. A great proportion of views are old fashioned and not consistent with approaches to work and family life in a modern sense. I felt I was subject to his verbal abuse and dogmatic criticism that I was not the son he intended to have. My parents were always ethical people somewhat removed from the realities of life. Comments made were often judgmental without taking into account the facts of a particular problem. I felt there was a strong urge for me to have to justify myself to them, as my perceptions were different to theirs. In some cases, it would be rebellious and go against the grain so to speak which aroused animosity among the children.

As a child, I was very competitive with respect to sports within my area, which was applauded by my father. It seemed I received superficial attention from him or I expected too much from him for what he could honestly provide me with. I never really learned the importance of bonding with my father, as I always perceived him to be someone who did not care about me at all. This belief was incorrect through time. I began to attribute blame towards the girls as I felt threatened I was not getting enough attention from my father that they played on it. I soon began to behave negatively and in a dysfunctional way to get people offside in an expression of disgust against my sisters. A

lot of my seemingly maladaptive behaviours resulted from a deficiency with not being happy within my home life.

My relationships with other pre-schoolers were sometimes strained by indifference, as I tended to be intense, demanding attention from others. When I found it difficult to have my needs met, I withdrew into a state of despair and associated negativity. Life seemed bleak but I used my intelligence to work myself around things. It was potentially difficult break a negative mindset. Even at kindergarten, I felt awkward, lonely, self-conscious, feeling I had to prove something. This resulted in my feeling isolated from others to the point of inevitable alienation. Other kids were largely unsupportive and had little compassion for a friend in need. I thought for a long time I was neglected as a child, but at times I refused to have any involvement in family matters. This has been a pattern right throughout my life that I am aware of and receive counselling for. I was always a very academic type kid with bizarre interpretations of events or occurrences.

I had difficulties in interacting with other children at kindergarten from my memories, as I was steadfast and also a bit arrogant at times. I had a lot of hang-ups and insecurities about being the best to look the part for success and realising I was inadequate in my eyes. I was always slow and methodical but always gave an honest attempt to work out matters at home or at kindergarten. Whilst sometimes I was difficult to get along with or embrace, I felt a deep sense of loss because there was evidence of being rejected from my peers at this stage. I learned to adapt to my issues with other kids by being circumspect and up-front in a more socially acceptable and diplomatic way. I seemed to gain the support and recognition from my fellow pre-schoolers by being clever in the eyes of the teacher. Sometimes, I was that complicated, I ended up fooling myself with trivial factors associated with a problem. The adversity to some degree that I experienced was self-inflicted to a certain extent and often associated with inadequate nurturing or failure to thrive as a child.

The main things I worried about were the priorities of life, which were food, shelter, and enough money to pay the bills, and maintaining a sense of morality with our everyday interactions in the community. Our parents, despite some disparities, were consistent with teaching the children about the importance of being earnest and having a dignified sense of propriety as well. My parents were children of a fairly strict religious upbringing where there was considerable tension that was attributed to what denomination of the church one was from. We were all materially catered for but on an emotional level all of us seemed to have to adapt with our personalities to cope with some deficiencies with respect to parental care and guidance. I felt quite lonely and I guess the adversity was the realisation that I could not base my own sense of self-importance on my father's reactions towards me. I needed to establish my own sense of self-derived from different sources. The power struggle to embrace something different was detrimental to my future relationships with others and also girlfriends. My folks were kind and decent people, but honestly out of touch with modern day realities of life. The inner conflict I felt was intense that it created difficulties with interacting with people because I simply drove them away. I did not mean to do this, except to say it just seemed to be an instantaneous reaction to a perceived threat or put down from outside.

The adversity was the struggle to gain the sense of self that seemed to be restricted in my sheltered upbringing that incited a somewhat rebellious response in me. We all were taken on outings and family events including birthdays that helped us to shape and define our identities, except me. Our family often travelled overseas to the United Kingdom and Europe as my father works in the mining industry. There is a great demand for travel and I guess living practically everywhere in Australia has thrown a real 'spanner in the works' so to speak. I could not adjust to relocating interstate and having to make new friends all the time, as I was not that versatile. The girls leaped at the possibility but for me, the new chances seemed more than overwhelming, it was devastating.

My days at school were characterised as fairly normal with some behavioural issues accompanied by teasing on a regular basis, as I was intelligent as reflected in my marks. I formed an intellectual study group at school that was relatively close knit and had some interesting debates. I also had a strong desire to be accepted by the less intelligent roughies in the school. I started to become bored of my true friends and I ditched them to be in with the cool dudes. This was short lasting as they used me for their scheming purposes and somehow turned me against my peer group. When I finally decided to leave the roughies, my original peer group rejected me personally. I felt alone, ashamed and disloyal to classmates that were really genuine until I turned against them. I was later felt I had to maintain a tough exterior to conceal my anxiety I felt from student torment.

My relations with my father had become strained as the problems at school were coming home and did not gel with my father's intolerance and own work issues. We were all from Melbourne except my mother was born in Sydney. I managed to finish my Higher Schooling Certificate and I worked in a bank and other hospitality areas with some degree of difficulty. At this stage, I was in a fairly intense relationship with a girl I truly loved and admired from Geelong. Things were beginning to slowly breakdown and the process of readjustment to a new life in Perth was overwhelming. I applied for admission into University in Perth, as finding work without a tertiary qualification was not really a viable proposition. I had lost most of my school friends in Melbourne and things were not on a solid base like they should be to prosper. I attended a University in Perth but I was not really well at all. I had suspicious thoughts about everyone and felt uncomfortable experiencing intermittent panic attacks. I felt too ashamed to discuss this with my parents, as I was too proud to share this information.

I knew a friend from Tasmania whose sister lived in Perth so we used to socialise a lot with his friends and other university students in W.A. I began to develop a serious drinking problem that caused significant disruption with my family. My sisters were at school and I was clearly a rebellious son with animosity towards his father, who was seemingly out of control. I was alone, feeling neglected and sorry for myself and was lashing out at anyone or anything for my own inadequacies. The culmination of life events triggered by different manifestations resulted in me having a nervous breakdown that was compounded by alcohol abuse. The end result was me doing some off-the-wall eccentric things in Perth and I ended up being scheduled into a Perth psychiatric hospital suffering from **Bipolar Affective Disorder** or another name for the old term, **Manic Depression**, or a mood disorder which is now treated by appropriate medications.

Surviving the wrath of being in a mental hospital following a breakdown can only be described as relief after being discharged back into the community. The process of tolerating a hospital was a denigrating process after having to put up with excess psychotropic medication to alleviate the symptoms of my condition into more manageable terms. I often resisted treatment so as a patient I was placed in seclusion within the lock up ward until I was more decent to other patients on the ward. They had predominantly schizophrenia and other related conditions. Getting through the issues of the breakdown with counselling in hospital was difficult but pleasing to know that someone actually cared enough to go out of their way for other patients and myself. The process of redefining my sense of self was an arduous and difficult battle ahead. I learned that with insight and perseverance, I could learn appropriate values in society and embrace their importance. I understood with discussions with many different psychiatrists involved in my care, that my illness is organic and has some form of genetic basis. I also had a supportive counsellor and friend in Perth who assisted with the transition into recovery.

I realised that the care for patients in psychiatric hospitals is generally not good and largely characterised by incompetence. Workers do not seem to encourage soul searching to alleviate the impact of symptoms on the patient as well as on wider society. There seems to be according to my observations many ingrained misconceptions and prejudices in mental illness. This seems to justify a worker's insularity with respect to patients with mental health issues. Most staff I

came across were surprisingly supportive but also seemed to treat patient's rights with double standards. Through my experience, the type of care being administered to patients was unjustified and stemming largely from workers personal insecurity and need to control a weaker person. This is why I had little credibility or respect for psychiatric nurses because of the inherent power imbalance. Psychiatric conditions are a main part of life and persons affected by conditions have feelings just the same as the so-called normal person whom appears insular and judgemental. Workers with these sorts of inadequacies should respect the patient's own insights and determinations about what is appropriate for that person's life generally.

The process of rebuilding a person's life after mental illness is very difficult as family members react with negativity, anger and remorse. My family was reasonably supportive but took along time to fully accept the diagnosis and live within its limitations and boundaries. Many families cast a shadow of doubt over the affected person and often live in a shielded world of fear and denial as a means of coping with a problematical scenario in the family. I lived in supported accommodation programs in Perth to housing commission in Sydney to take a step back and redefine my sense of self from a situation of great adversity. Counselling helped together with finding a wonderful mentor friend in Sydney (whom regretfully passed away in 2001) helped me with self-confidence issues to identity formation to redefining my attitudinal self. He made me into a more wholesome and worthwhile person whom I have unconditional respect for.

I have now live back in Melbourne with my immediate family and I have the appropriate supports in place. I attend groups for sufferers of bipolar disorder through ARAFMI (Association of Relatives and Friends of the Mentally Ill) and I am a qualified lifeguard/lifesaver. More importantly, I have successfully completed studies in Community Welfare at TAFE (NSW). I am soon to finalise a Bachelor of Social Science (Social Welfare) degree via distance education. The process of completing a university has been somewhat demanding and tedious, however my determination to succeed has never flagged. My writings are designed to inform the reader of the many significant demands and associated problems when a person suffers a mental illness.

The tole on everybody is substantial but with the right supports and insight ordinary coping of symptoms can be translated into full recovery. The integrity of adversity is reflected in the personal recovery and strength to get back what was once taken away by life's circumstances. We can truly make it back into the status quo with a redefining of values and morals from the so-called normal people and a compromise of interests in a healthy and positive way. Our own perception of ourselves thwarts our recovery so a good self-image is vital to sustain long-term recovery from the adverse effects of mood-swings on yourself and others. Our role in the community is to help remove the stigma associated with mental health issues by emphasising individual autonomy preceding relapse. The main disinhibitor is alcohol as many sufferers do tend to self medicate on alcohol to reduce the negative feelings attached to symptoms of the condition. Many famous persons have had a mood disorder in the past as it affects often intelligent and creative type persons in our society. I sincerely hope my account of this helps others to realise their potential and keeping things in perspective. Your feedback from this dissertation/article would be appreciated.

I dedicate my findings to an old friend in the drug and alcohol rehabilitation sector. His guidance will remain forever as long as I shall live. (14/08/2001) Sydney, NSW.

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