Self-Reflection

Early Life (Birth through Middle Childhood)

I was a baby made to try to save a marriage. While that may not be unusual in and of itself, the rest of the story is enough to be its own telenovela. My birth father thought my birth would solve the marriage issues and my mother knew I was her last and cherished every moment. My father returned from the Vietnam War an alcoholic. They had financial troubles, my father's alcoholism was worsening, and my mother was working hard to establish her nursing career. I am not sure of the year, but sometime before I was born my mother experienced a stillbirth. She was eight months pregnant. Not long after the time of my birth in 1975, my father's alcoholism had progressed to a point my mother could no longer accept. Due to the status of their marriage, their financial status and two older siblings, a previous close to full term still birth, her pregnancy must have been a very stressful one.

The text book references DiPietro (2004), who stated that mothers who experience high stress during pregnancy can pass the stress hormones to the child through the placenta. This hormone delivered to the child at this phase of development can change the child's development in ways that alter how they will process and deal with stress through out their lives in harmful ways,

Another study referenced in the text by Robinson et al. (2011), showed how these stressful events during pregnancy add up. They found that mothers who experience more stressful events had children who managed their stress in harmful ways. This study looked at harmful internalizing and externalizing ways the subsequent children of these mothers managed their stress. This was called a dose-response relationship because for each increased dose of stress there was a corresponding increases response of harmful stress management.

These studies would predict that I as a child of a highly stressed mother would go on to struggle with stress management. I believe their studies are correct and I see myself in their data.

I had various caretakers throughout my life. I know as a baby I was cherished and deeply loved by my mother. I also know that the circumstances she found herself in were beyond stressful and full of uncertainty. I truly believe she did the best she could, but at the end of the day no one can be everyone to someone. I was very attached to my mother but she was distant and distracted with work and her career. She was the primary earner in our family and was a very focused and driven woman. So, because of this our relationship was strained. I did not feel very connected to her in my adolescence and did not seek her out for help. The times we did spend together were few and the

conversations we had were about very surface topic like movies, our household pets, and her work or school.

My siblings were my other caretakers, but they were my first bullies and I don't remember a time when I was very attached to them or they to me. I expand on them as my first bullies later in this paper. They would often be tasked with my care but then leave when my parents left or their friends would come over and I would be ignored. This has continued into adulthood and we do not have close relationships now.

My mother and my birth father divorced when I was three. I have no memories of him during their marriage. I only have one memory of my birth father post-divorce. When my mother re-married, we were stationed in Japan so I never saw my birth father again. I only remember one phone call when I was about ten. I have deep feelings of rejection. I had hoped at his death to get closure. We arrived at his deathbed to support my grandparents, but by the time we arrived he had slipped into unconsciousness and never regained it.

My adoptive father and I had a close relationship, or so I thought. I realized as an adult that there was sexual abuse. When I disclosed that abuse, he lied and accused me of making it up. Then he came up with excuse as to why his behavior was not only necessary but protective. It destroyed my family. My mother believed me and left my father. My sister believed me and had experienced incidences of attempted covert abuse. One brother called me a liar, one did not take sides and one accused me of having false memories. I have not spoken to my father in 10 years or so. I do not have a relationship with the brother that accused me of lying. Now that my mother has died, we siblings are not connected and I fully expect whatever connection we have to eventually die.

Not having memory of this time of my life I can only guess as to the attachment I had as an infant. Based on the stories I have been told, mainly by my mother, I feel that I probably had secure attachment with my mother and an insecure attachment with my birth father. With these experiences, the text predicts that I would have difficulty with attachment throughout my life. However, in chapter 12 (Broderick 2015), the text talks about adult attachment and how usually the childhood pattern of attachment is repeated. The book also states that infant parental attachment can be protective. I find it hard to correlate the two. I feel I have a very loving and stable relationship with my husband. Is this due to some protective feature in my youth or is this due to changing attachment abilities developed somewhere along the way? This same section of the text posits that an individual can change due to life experiences and exposure to new ideas and people. They also state that distance from parents, both physical and psychological, help the individual reconceptualize their childhood attachments. I love this quote from that page (Broderick 2015) "If we think of the parent–child relationship as a child's "first love," it

does indeed seem that love can be sweeter the second time around." (p. 450). I think this sweet quote pulls the two great love experiences of our lives together. First loves are hard and their roads are rough with inexperience and uncertainty, but second loves are filled with experience and self-awareness that smoothed the road and helped the individual to participate more effectively in the relationship. I feel like the is my story.

Very early on my siblings and I were left either in the care of our neighbor or our father. I don't remember these times as I was too young. The stories I heard were horrendous. Once, when my mother needed to go out of town and we were left in the care of our father, CPS was called. My brother and sister were out roaming the streets and a concerned neighbor called. My siblings have told me stories of being locked in the basement by the neighbor. After my parents' divorce, I was left in the care of my siblings that are seven and five years older than me. So, at that time they were eleven and eight. They were my first bullies and I have very few positive memories with them at that time. After about the age of eight I was probably supposed to be in the care of my siblings but they would leave and go off on their own. I was left alone often. It was actually preferable to being with my parents or siblings. When we were in Japan, I would go to a near by church and they would let me roam the building or I would be in the jungle. I did have a few friends and we had some great adventures. When we moved back to the United States when I was ten, I would go to the woods. We lived out in the country and friends were farther away. I spent a lot of time roaming the woods and reading books.

Tippett N, Wolke D. (2015) studied the link between negative sibling relationship and adolescent mental and behavioral health problems. They found that sibling aggressing was strongly linked with at school bullying. Children who were victims of sibling aggression were more likely to be bullies at school. This ended up being very true for me. My bullying that started at home, transitioned to school in an extreme and constant way. I expand on this later in this paper on the topic of bullying.

I have limited memories of my childhood, but of those I remember being alone a lot. My parents parenting style was neglecting-uninvolved. I don't believe this was intentional. They were very busy with work and both of them at one time or another were working and in school. On the weekends we would go camping, but they would go sailing and leave me on shore. I was the youngest by a large margin and I think they just ran out of steam. They did not censor what we could watch or listen to. They were more involved with my siblings' extracurricular events than my own. I remember going to my bothers football games and watching my sister in drill team. I cannot think of a single time they came to see me in band. My parents decided in the beginning of their relationship that each parent would discipline their own kids. We were a blended family of three boys from my father and two girls and a boy from my mother. I don't remember much discipline except being grounded for limited amounts of time and a few occasional

spankings. They were not heavily involved in my school and really never asked if I had homework. What I do remember is cutting myself when I was around fifteen. I remember having stomach trouble around thirteen and needing antacids. I remember a feeling of profound loneliness and feeling like I do not fit in anywhere. I did not fit with my peers and I did not fit in with my family. I know now that I was depressed from a young age.

Agerup, T., Lydersen, S., Wallander, J. et al. (2015) studied the link between parental attachment and child depression. They looked at associations between different attachments and incidence of depression at age fifteen to twenty. They found that children with insecure parental attachment were more likely to become depressed and, in some instances, stay depressed with in the time frame studied and in some cases beyond. I feel like I could have been a participant in this study.

Another study by Sheppard P, Garcia JR, Sear R (2014) looked at the effect of different types of parental make up. My make up was birth mother and step-father. They found that parental investment is diluted when a family does not contain both natural parents. There was a difference in the expected outcome between the two types (birth mother-step-father or birth father and step-mother). The outcome for my situation was expected to be more risk-taking behavior and a faster progression in life history events. This study was true for my experiences. I left home at the age of sixteen and had my first child by the age of eighteen.

For a family with two medical professional parents we did not have a very healthy lifestyle. Not directly. Indirectly healthy things were encouraged. We went camping a lot, so that included physical activity and time spent out of doors, but we also were raised with soda and fast food. My mother had weight issues so there was always diet food in the house. My parents did not drink alcohol when we lived at home. This was because of her experiences with my birth father. When all the kids had left home, they started allowing themselves to have alcohol in the house. My adoptive father became an alcoholic after this time. My parents were very busy with their own things in life and that left little time for us. I can remember taco bell dinners and diet orange Sunkist. I do find it interesting that there was not a more direct association with healthy lifestyle in my family because both of my parents worked in the medical field. My mother was a nurse and my father was an Air Force medic. He transitioned to medical education after he retired and then to science education.

Adolescence and Beyond

Puberty was a very difficult time for me. I had no one to talk to so I had to figure things out on my own. My mother was not very available so I usually had to ask my dad to buy

sanitary pads. A friend showed me how to shave my legs. I have never learned how to do make up or hair. I was a chunky child and I developed large breast early on. I was not a popular kid so whatever attention I received from boys was usually geared toward sex and not relationship. I have had three relationships in my life but many sexual partners. I did not realize until very late that sex was not required. I didn't know I had a choice. My mother had the sex talk with me and my sister at the same time. That meant that my sister was anywhere between twelve to sixteen and I was seven to eleven. It was not mentioned again.

The text book (Broderick 2015) references (Marcia, 1993, p. 8) and her categories of identity status. She developed four: diffusion, moratorium, foreclosure, or achievement. I believe I fall into the last, achievement. This category is made up of individuals who have explored their options, made a plan, and are committed. It also describes individual who are self-made. This was shown to be an indicator of future good mental health. At this tumultuous time in my development I had a deep yearning to understand myself and the world around me. I read about everything from poetry, religion, biographies, and classic literature. I believe that this way of being was a protective factor for me.

My very first bullies were my siblings. I am not sure what made me such an easy or obvious target, but the bullying continued on and was so extreme, to the point of leaving high school after my sophomore year. I can remember being bullied by my siblings for as far back as my memories go. I was never welcomed into their lives and never made to feel as if they wanted me. I was the annoying little sister who was to be avoided, not included and dumped at the first opportunity. I can remember my sister teasing and picking on me. I wanted to listen to my record player and she was not letting me. She recorded herself teasing me. The only time they were nice to me is when they wanted something from me. I can remember walking to school and I saw them as they were leaving to skip school. I wanted to go with them to be part of their group. They were so nice to me and told me how pretty I looked that day and that I should go to school and have a great day and, of course, not tell on them. I had to be about seven and this is still so clear. I still feel the desire for them to accept me and the pain when, inevitable, they not only do not accept me but exploit ways to hurt me. This is mainly true for my sister now. My brothers are more distant and not involved in my day to day life. I have witnessed growth in my sister. It was her experience with her own children's lives, I believe, that have facilitated an understanding of her behavior and the consequences. A study by McGee et al (2011) looked at the association between being bullied and the methods of future stress management. Would an individual internalize or externalize? (McGee, Tara Renae, et al 2011). Their study did not support the theory of wide spread mental health issues for individuals who were bullied, although there was found to be a difference in the way males and females respond. I found this very surprising and went on to do more research. I found another study by Lereya, S. T., Copeland, W. E.,

Zammit, S., & Wolke, D. (2015). This study looked at individuals who were bullied and who are bullies and they found that both sets of individuals were at an increased risk of mental health issues. The study ended with a statement that said that any victimization leaves the individual at an increased risk of mental health problems. I believe that my experiences of being bullied as a child did greatly impact my mental health negatively. I internalized, as evidenced by my early depression, and externalized, as evidenced by my sexual promiscuity and leaving home at an early age, this pain.

I had always had a passion and natural inclination for science. I wanted to be a marine biologist probably due to spending so much time by the ocean in my childhood. Also, my parents were divers and we snorkeled and swam regularly. Cousteau was a big hero in our family. When I finally had the opportunity to go to school, I already had 3 kids. I choose general biology, not sure of where it would take me. I thought of going into neuroscience, because of a class in my undergraduate, but did not think I would be able to be a competitive student with the limitations that a family life would put on my time available to devote to that discipline. By the time I returned for graduate school, eleven years later, my life had left me with a larger drive to deal with people as a whole more than their parts. By this time in my life I had learned about counseling and its role in helping people live the best every day life. My experience, up to that time, had taught me day to day contentment is an invaluable gift.

My mother was one of the most important people in my life. We had a difficult relationship. We were very distant until I disclosed my father's abuse. My parents were already having major marriage issues at the time and had for a while. This information sent it over the edge and my mother left him and moved near me. This was a wonderful time of closeness. It is the only time we had any real relationship. Unfortunately, she had a cancer reoccurrence a year after she move and fought cancer for the next 9 years. I was her primary caretaker for the first 6 years and part time for the last three. She is a great part of who I am. I see her in myself and my sister all the time. Our love of books, art, gardening, animals, and travel. She has shaped the best and worst parts of me.

My children are another set of people. They have each changed me as a person and my life as a whole in their own individual ways. My first two boys were born at a time of great stress in my life. I was in an abusive relationship and with out the drive to protect them I am not sure I would have left that relationship for just myself. My next child was the realization of a dream. The concrete proof that I could have a "normal" life. I was happily married and we had just bought our first home. I felt like his birth was a sign that life held good things for me. My fourth boy was my rainbow baby. I had a still birth six months into my pregnancy and thought I was being punished for previous sins. The birth of this child was the gentle mist after the storm. I cherished my time with him because I had been taught by life by that time that things do not always work out right and, when

they do, you should enjoy ever minute. My next boy was the reaffirmation of life. My mother was in the midst of her battle with stage four cancer. His birth was the light in the dark. My last child (for now) is my adopted daughter. She is the result of ten years of hopes, dreams, plans and plan revisions. I am not sure of why I felt it absolutely necessary for me to have a daughter. I guess I could psychoanalyze myself and say maybe I want to right my mothers' wrongs or maybe give someone else the mother daughter experience I did not have. For whatever reason, she is here and I am forever changed by the experience of being a mother.

My husband is the person who has changed me the most. He accepted a broken and needy person into his life. I am not sure he understood then what that would require of him, but

he has fused my broken parts back together with more love and patience than I ever thought was possible for a person to possess. We have been married almost nineteen years and I have watched myself grow the most with him.

I have a much healthier lifestyle now than I did as a young adult. I started smoking when I was fifteen and was drinking somewhat regularly by sixteen. I basically drank only soda until after cancer. Now I try to eat mostly health food. I struggle with activity due to chronic illness (fibromyalgia, an autoimmune disorder, and peripheral neuropathy) and I struggle with food issues probably due to depression and anxiety. So now I only drink soda at most once a week, I count calories, and I try to make the healthiest choice available to me in the moment. I have to be careful not to put too much stress around food as I have found I can quickly create some very unhealthy association very quickly.

The text (Broderick 2015) references a study by Felitti et al., (1998). This study looked at the effects of childhood stressors and development of unhealthy habits that lead to diseases in adulthood. They found that there was a high correlation between the number of these childhood stressors and the development of unhealthy habits that lead to diseases. I feel that I am like the people in this study. In my life, I have not managed stress well. I have also had many more stressors than the average person and I did develop diseases as the study predicted.

In my youth I had dreams of winning a Nobel Prize. Today my goals seem to change depending on the day. On good days I want to conquer the world. On bad days I cannot get out of bed. I would like to raise my kids, have some kind of career, and small positive impact on the world. I used to have big plans and desire to have a larger impact, but I don't think that is

possible anymore. I am trying to accept the reality of a modest life with smaller more realistic and manageable goals

Life was pretty easy ten years ago. It was just me and my little family making our way through the world. Then I disclosed my father's sexual abuse to me and my world exploded. My mother came to live near me and for a year life seemed it would go back to normal. Then she was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer and everything changed. I was her full-time caretaker. It was a privilege to care for her in her last years. I would never want to give those years up, but the cost was high. Life was already pretty stressful with having two special needs children, but once she was diagnosed life got much harder. For two years she could not drive. I spent every day, all day taking her to doctors and the store and being her nurse and companion. Then in 2011 my own health changed when I was diagnosed with cancer. Today I struggle greatly with post cancer issues, fibromyalgia, peripheral neuropathy, autoimmune undifferentiated connective tissue disorder, cervical dystonia, depression, and anxiety – dealing with all that and trying to find my place in my family and my desire to work.

It is hard for me to imagine that I will be older. My cancer was not found early and my risk for reoccurrence is high. I feel like I will die young and that contributes to my anxiety and fear of missing out on those experiences. I don't think I will get the retirement experience with my husband or grandmother time with my younger kid's future potential children. So, I try not to think about that future. I keep myself busy with nearer term goals, while in the back of my mind, deeply hoping for those experiences to be mine.

Because of my experience with cancer I was forced to confront my mortality. I have never been scared of death. My mother taught me that. She was the greatest adventurer and from an early age I can remember her saying that death was just another adventure. At her end I do believe she was a little scared, but also there was peace and a longing to be out of pain. Mercifully, in her end she had a stroke and, as far as we know, was not aware of her end. Because of my cancer, I have had conversations with my husband. I want him to do what is easiest for him. Dying is really about the living not the dead. I'll be beyond caring. It will be his burden to bear and I want him to do what is best for him and our kids.

Lo, C. (2018) looked at how the age of a person, when exposed to their mortality, impacts their ability to adapt and raises questions about their life value. They found that the younger individuals were less equipped to face their mortality and that they would need professional help to navigate the complexities of facing the end of life existential and developmental hurdles death provides. I found this to be very true. I was floored by my diagnosis and was left bereft in its wake. I am doing better now, after four years of

counseling, but nowhere near where I think a person would be who dies at an advanced age. There is something about the process of aging that prepares a person for death. I agree greatly with the article that those of us faced with an early death need professional help to guide us to the acceptance that age freely provides.

***THÔNG TIN LIÊN HỆ**:*

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