

A Real Mother's Embrace: Reflections on Abuse and Recovery

A warm breeze gently blew across my face as I was swinging on my porch, thinking of the visit I was about to endure. I had to face the same uncomfortable wait for my caseworker every Tuesday. Just thinking about what was to come made my eyes feel fuzzy and my head spin as fast as a tornado. I closed my eyes and tried to make that feeling go away, but fear of my biological mother just made the spinning faster. At that moment the front door swung open and my foster mom appeared. She gave me a toothy grin as she walked towards me and asked if the spot next to me on the swing was taken.

"No."

"Well, I think I'll sit down next to ya', good lookin'." With these words she sat down beside me, swinging her arm around my shoulder. We sat there in silence together for about five minutes, although a day's worth of thoughts passed through my mind. Why did I have to go see the person who had made me fear almost all women for the first six years of my life?

I saw the car coming from about a block away. The sun was shining brightly off the silver paint. In my mind the car was coming towards us very slowly, like a hearse carrying someone's remembered relative and friend. I felt very alone, and very much like I might soon be the person in the back of the hearse.

The car finally arrived, pulling up into the long drive and honking while the driver waved enthusiastically at us through the window. I gave a fake smile and waved back, slowly getting up. I liked my caseworker, who



by then I simply called Aunt K, but I would be lying if I said that I enjoyed seeing her on those terrible Tuesdays. She opened her car door, and walked up the six concrete steps before stepping onto the light blue wood of the porch that creaked and moaned even under the petite frame of Aunt K.

"Hello sweetheart, how are you doing today? Are you a little uneasy about having to see Mama Cathie for the last time?" I was excited that this would be the last time I would ever see my bio-mom Mama Cathie, but very nervous about having to see her at all.

"Yes, but I don't want to go." I said this in a very meek voice, and then looked down as I smoothed my blonde hair out with my left hand. As I stood there, water began to swell in my eyes.

My foster mom brought her mouth close to my ear, and said, "Sweetie, I will be right here waiting for you when you get back." She accompanied these calming words with an embrace that was bursting with love. After my foster mom released me, Aunt K took hold of my hand and led me from the porch, away from my soon-to-be-legal family, and to the passen-

ger side of her car.

"I love you Aaron. I will be standing right here when you get back." My foster mother said these words as I lowered myself into the form-fitting seat. As we began to back out of the driveway I gave my soon-to-be adopted mom a last glance, and an emotion swelled inside of me the likes of which I had never before known. I did not want to leave my foster mom. I pushed the foreign feeling to the back of my thoughts, focusing instead on rolling the window up and

down as many times as were possible in one minute. A block away from the only true home I had ever known, I quickly looked out the back window hoping I would get to see my foster mom just one last time.

The ride to my biological mother's apartment was quiet. I stared non-stop out the window at nothing in particular. Honestly, I only remember seeing one sight, and that is a little boy about two or three riding his tricycle while his mother stood watching and smiling. I felt anger towards the little boy that he had a mom and I might never know what having a real mom would feel like.

I do not really remember the car pulling into the building parking lot, or the walk into the building, up the stairs and to the door with the number five hanging from a nail. What I do remember is the look on the face of my bio-mom as she gazed through me.

Her exceptionally plump face was framed with her stringy strawberry blonde hair. Her already tight mouth was now a hardly visible line above her four chins. Her usually very pale complexion was a beautiful shade of

scarlet, and her eyes scanned me with a lack of interest.

"How many times have I told you to call me before you come!?! You know I never remember these visits, and I just called your aunt to come take me to get some fast food. Now I have to call her back and tell her to forget about picking me up for an hour!" My bio-mom roared these words at Aunt K, who kept a pleasant smile on her face until Mama Cathie was done with her tantrum.

"Cathie, we have these visits the same time every Tuesday, and the fact that you can never remember is exactly why this is the last time you will ever have with your son." Aunt K was a woman with a big and very powerful heart, which oftentimes made her forget about what she should and should not say.

"I am sorry Cathie, but you should know better than to say something like that in front of Aaron." For the first time my bio-mom actually looked at me.

"That is right, this is the last time I will get to see him, isn't it? Well, might as well get this going." She said this in a very different tone from her previous comment, a tone lacking any emotion.

Mama Cathie stepped aside and allowed us to come into her very untidy apartment. There were boxes everywhere. This apartment was her fifth in about a year, and quite noticeably she was about to make the change to number six. The odor of cleaning solutions and air freshener made this more obvious, since Mama Cathie's apartment usually smelled musty with a lingering trace of french-fries.

Mama Cathie planted herself on her stained loveseat. Aunt K took her usual spot in an antique rocking chair positioned in a corner so that she was out of sight but not out of ear-shot. I sat myself on the floor in front of the loveseat and began playing with a frayed string of carpeting.

"I think the reason I forget about these visits is because they are so boring. I need to call my sister. Aaron, bring me the phone!" I slumped myself onto my feet, and retrieved and handed the phone to Mama Cathie.

"May I please use the bathroom?"

Mama Cathie huffed as she said, "I suppose, but don' make a mess,

I just got the thing clean." I quickly walked to the bathroom, and shutting the door behind me allowed my six year-old heart to release the emotions that had been swelling inside of me. The tears streaked down my face, some going down my nose, others dripping into my silently sobbing mouth. I stood there quietly, with the only sound to be heard the constant running of water in the broken sink. My face was burning, especially the scar on the bridge of my nose where Mama Cathie had once hammered in a nail as a punishment. I had similar

greeted by my mom and dad. My dad put his hand on my head, and messed up my hair. I gave my mom a hug, and she held me tight. As we stood there, the unknown emotion finally gave me a name—love. In that split second, my young heart began to let go of the pain. I now allowed myself to feel what a real family felt like. I finally allowed myself to let in the love they had been trying to give me. My mom squeezed me harder as the tears poured down my face and my body trembled. In that embrace, I let myself have my real mom.

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scars all over my body, but this one was different. This scar becomes deep red whenever I am very sad or angry. At that moment I had no idea of what I felt. I wanted my bio-mom to love me, but I also wanted her to never want to see me again. I sat down on the toilet lid, and tried to make the drops stop from streaming over my face. At last, I dried my face with the newly washed but vomit-stained yellow hand towel. I flushed the toilet, walked out of the bathroom and down the sparsely lit hallway, and found myself again face to face with Mama Cathie.

Mama Cathie stayed on the couch as Aunt K and I walked out the door. We said goodbye the way two people do who have just met, but will never see one another again. I was finally free of those terrible Tuesdays.

The ride to my foster home was a long one. I was anxious to see my only real family. The emotion that I had felt before leaving my home was very strong now. My heart was beating a little faster than usual, and all I could think of was needing someone to squeeze.

We finally pulled up into my driveway and there she was, exactly where she said she would be standing. Next to my mother was my father, both smiling at me as I emerged from the car. My two brothers came running from around the house, and greeted me with an atomic wedgie. I walked up the six concrete steps, and was

Tragedy and trauma walk hand-in-hand in the lives of so many youth today, particularly those who are involved in the child welfare system. A pressing question is how to help a young person overcome that trauma and lead a successful and happy life. That answer is as varied as the forms of trauma the youth must face. All people have some form of trauma in their lives: No single person is immune to tragedy. The challenge in life is overcoming the tragedy and facing the trauma in a way that allows us to resolve the conflict within ourselves. Here are some of the ways that I was able to overcome the tragedy that I faced so early in my life, and more importantly, the ways that other people helped me to face and overcome the trauma.

The first event that allowed me to have a chance was when my biological mother saved me from an even more abusive situation than I had to endure when living with her. After I was removed from my mother's care, I was sent to stay with her parents in Montana. That soon escalated into a very volatile placement. I was beaten every day in addition to being sexually molested by my grandfather. My biological sisters learned these behaviors and soon started to physically abuse me as well. My biological mother came to visit and, realizing the severity of the situation, had my sisters and me removed. The woman who tormented me in one form or an-

other for much of my childhood was also the woman who gave me my first real chance at hope.

The second string of events that helped me have a fighting chance was being accepted into a very loving family, and the court's decision to look for adoption to be my permanency rather than reunification. The story above details my internal struggle to find a real mom and family, but the true reason I was able to let in my new family's love was the support that they had set up around me. Having a stable and reliable support system is absolutely a necessity for any child and especially for a child with a traumatic history.

The first of those supports was simple but very effective. I always got into trouble when I had the time to think of a way to cause mischief, so my parents got me heavily involved in sports and other activities. I played soccer, football, baseball, basketball; I wrestled, and was in Cub Scouts. When I became a little older I realized the importance of staying busy and with the backing of my parents I began to volunteer and try to give back to the system that had given me a second chance.

Another support that my parents found for me was a therapist. Carol was her name, and she was one of the biggest influences in my life. She was the one who started having me write down or draw my feelings. I had a terrible temper as a child, and I would fight for no reason in school. Carol helped me not only to recognize what made me angry, but also to identify why I was angry. She was one of the first to make me face my past trauma and realize that the pain did not define me. I saw Carol for several periods over the years. At first, she helped me deal with the adoption and the feelings that those terrible Tuesdays would stir. Then she helped me to overcome my anger and violent outbursts. The last times I saw Carol were when I was fourteen and fifteen. I started to have flashbacks of the abuse and neglect I endured as a toddler. Even before the flashbacks I remembered events from when I was just barely two. I would always have the memory of making my grandfather angry, but the memory always stopped when he would grab me.

When the flashbacks started they were more like continuations of those memories. I started to remember the room my grandfather would use to beat me; to remember my sisters spinning me by my hair until chunks would rip out. When I went to live with my parents at the age of three, I had several bald spots on my head, and my hair was partially stained red from all the blood. Carol gave me the insight into my own emotions that allowed me to break down the feelings



and deal with the specific emotions associated with the memories. This skill is one that I use today.

Possibly the most important aspect of what made my situation a success was the fact that my adopted parents were so supportive and consistent in my life. Rick and Cheryl Weaver did not back down from any challenge I would throw their way. I tested those expectations every day and in the most extreme ways I could think up. They were consistent with what the expectations they had of me were and even more consistent with the punishments when I did not follow those expectations.

My parents also pushed me every day to be a better person, whether by signing me up for sports at an early age or making me sit down and fill out applications for volunteer and leadership positions when I would have rather been out playing football. They always had my best intentions in mind. They were great models for me to learn from about being a responsible and caring adult. I am the

person I am today because of their guidance, acceptance, and love.

None of these traits my parents instilled in me would have been helpful had my parents ever given up on me. One of the most detrimental parts of foster care is the way that children are passed around. A young person does not know where they fit in or who they are, and without a stable home this often leads to more serious problems. My parents made a commitment to me the minute I became their foster child to provide for me what every young person deserves.

Another part of the healing process for me was being allowed to just be a kid. I knew abuse and hate when I was placed into foster care and had no idea that a hug could feel so right. In my grandparents' home I would be beaten for being too loud or for not sitting completely still. The first time I played with my adopted brothers they screamed and yelled and fell down all over. I expected at any minute someone would come running in and beat them severely. The longer that did not happen the more fun I started to have and before I knew what I was doing I was also screaming and jumping around.

The most important factor that I have detailed about how to overcome trauma is that I had help. I would not have been able to do any healing on my own and thus I would have become a negative statistic about foster care and adoption. The more supports we have around youth and the more outlets the youth have, the better their chances for being successful. Internally I had to make the decision to let people help me, and that decision took time and patience on everyone's part. Looking at my life now I understand the worth every child has and the potential that could be unlocked just with a little understanding and patience, and a whole lot of caring. I now try to make a difference every day in a life, and I would not have that opportunity had I not had the support and love I needed.

Author

Aaron Weaver is guest editor of this issue of *Focal Point*.