

One Experience

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“The trouble with essays is that they always have to sound like God talking for eternity, and that isn’t the way it ever is. People should see that it’s never anything other than just one person talking from one place in time and space and circumstance.”

Robert Pirsig

On the night of February thirteenth of 1991 at Saint Vincent’s Hospital in Portland, Oregon, Jim and Kathy were prepared for their second child to enter the world. After about six hours in labor, Kathy’s doctor said, “Alright, looks like this baby is ready to get out!”

“Yeah, let’s get this over with.”

“But, wait...we’ve got only a couple more minutes until midnight. If you want to wait, you two can have yourselves a Valentine’s baby.”

“Okay, sure.”

Now, I can’t say exactly how the dialogue went because, well, I was the baby waiting to exit the womb. A few minutes after midnight, I was deemed a “love child,” born on Valentine’s Day, named Kristina.

I was the accident, or more kindly, the joyful surprise that was born sixteen months after my older brother, Ben. After seven years of moving around suburbs, and the birth of my little brother, Willy, my family settled in the city of Lake Oswego.

A large suburb that sits on the southern margin of Portland, Lake Oswego is a predominantly white city. Since it’s birth in 1847, its non-white population has grown only to hover at about ten percent. There was something rather embarrassing about all of this (to me, anyway), but most of its inhabitants took these racial facts in jest. It was such a joke, or an ignorantly considered fact, that the youth began a nickname that was passed down the ages - “Lake NoNegro.” It was all fun and games, and even the few black kids whom I knew from this town enjoyed using the alternative name. After all, it wasn’t entirely a lie.

Since white settlers, mostly those on the Oregon Trail, displaced the Clackamas Indians, Lake Oswego has largely developed into a retirement community and nesting grounds. The parents who live here typically come from some of America's finest universities, and are CEO's, doctors, and lawyers, or hold other high-paying positions. What draws most of these parents to L.O. is its nearness to the city while it maintains a sterile and safe environment. Families here also enjoy the man-made lake which sits at the center of this forested area, and the astute academics and athletic programs. Lake Oswego High School is a public school, but is esteemed for its rigorous curriculum, which resembles that of a private school. Because the parents value the education of their kids, and conveniently make millions, the school is endowed with resources that the government simply cannot supply.

My parents were among some of those who valued good education, mostly because they hoped to give their children more academic opportunities than they were offered. Considering their circumstances, I believe they are very fortunate to have had the ability to provide this. My father, born in Santa Rosa, California, did not grow up wealthy, and did not graduate high school. He attained his GED, and was to become a modest businessman. He thrived on adventure, and his father's spontaneous entrepreneurship. Their last, and most successful endeavor together was Monje Forest Products, which sold lumber to small over-seas countries with a small crew of six loyal employees. My dad also inherited his mother's genes of addiction, which nearly killed him shortly after Monje Forest Products took off, only two years after my birth. After a near-death experience with speed and cocaine, and with a painful love for his wife and kids, my father went through a treatment program and remained in recovery programs to maintain sobriety.

He first met my mother in Honolulu, Hawaii, where she was born and raised. My mom was nineteen at the time, my dad, twenty. Six months after, he helped my mom escape the tight grips of her Filipino parents, who immigrated to the US shortly after their arranged marriage. On top of their limited assets, my grandparents brought with them loads of emotional baggage, limited education, their first-born son, and Filipino values and traditions, which all seemed to work against my mother as she grew up in an American setting. From the kitchen, bound to her chores, she watched her brother receive practically all of the family's limited income for private school, music lessons,

his first car, and college tuition. My mom was not allowed these privileges, which she knew was the Filipina tradition, but they were far more strict than those family traditions of America. To put some distance between her and her painful childhood, and to be free of the isolated island's expensive living, she migrated to Oregon with my father.

During my early years in Lake Oswego, it seemed like myself and the rest of my family didn't fit in. Financially, ethnically, socially, and by our outward appearance, I always had the idea that we were of the minority. Our first house here was a duplex that my parents had invested in years before they started reproducing. The small structure was built in the fifties, and is a turquoise piece of confusing geometry, with English Ivy spread across the front yard. It sits in one of the strangest streets of Lake Oswego.

Most suburbs are built on a model of "separated land use,"¹ and Lake Oswego stays true to this model, especially with the curvilinear streets that bend around the many hills and deposit their traffic flow into the main connector roads. Sitting adjacent to I-5's entrances and exits are the city's business areas. A five-minute drive down one of the main roads, one will find the neighborhoods, and on the way to the grocery store, one will pass the high school or a primary school hidden behind hundred-year-old evergreen trees, or a giant lawn that the city has turned into a park. Within the residential areas, there seems to be even more separation by size, quality, and the year in which the homes were built, with the exception of the neighborhood we lived in. The street this duplex sits on is a tiny offshoot from one of the major intersections on the main road. However, it is very small, and it seems that no one really knows about it. At the center of this neighborhood stands two multi-million dollar homes, and dispersed around it, the value of the homes significantly declines. The majority of them are out-dated condos, duplexes, and a small apartment complex hidden in the overgrown and partially paved-out gully.

For the most part, my life here was not good, as growing up was made confusing by unaddressed traumas and those typical falls of innocence, but it wasn't entirely bad

¹ This term describes the traditional model of American suburbs taken from a lecture by Sociology Professors, Lars Christiansen. Augsburg College, 2012.

either. Surrounding the neighborhood is a thick layer of woods that served as a playground, and there was always something to keep me occupied. I lived here until my freshmen year of high school, and up until that point, I had always felt like an anomaly to the town. My skin color was different, I wasn't exactly as thin or pretty as I thought my female peers were, and my parents were poor (or so I thought, relative to most of my peers). I wasn't proud to be half Filipina, mostly because I sometimes showed up to school with rice on my shirt from the morning's breakfast, assuming that this was not the typical American breakfast. I was jealous of those peers whose mothers coddled them and called them "sweetheart," which wasn't normally in the blood of a Filipina mother, or any mother, for that matter, who lacked intimacy with her own mother growing up. These loving gestures I yearned for were compensated for by my father, who valued me as his 'one and only baby girl.' But he could never be a mommy, and he didn't even graduate high school, like most of the fathers around me. From those early days, I began building the behavior of identifying myself by those traits I didn't have. I would size myself up using my peers as measuring sticks. I developed a weak *homophily*.²

For a while, I held anger towards everyone in my grade, claiming that because of my differences, I was always excluded. Physician and social scientist, Nicholas Christakis and another social scientist, James Fowler, might have refuted this, though, with their claim that "we control how central we are to [a] social network."³ Perhaps this is true. To constantly be naming differences between others and myself did not make for good social skills. However, in grade school, when close friends abruptly stopped talking to me, or others in junior high began false rumors about me, I decided that it was because of one of those objective conditions listed above that I wasn't accepted. It only took a couple repetitions of events like these to develop in me an "anticipatory survival strategy."⁴ Essentially, I developed an unbending fear of others, and made close ties with only a few others I knew I could trust. Psychologists may call this "social anxiety" or "phobia." I believe it was merely a natural mechanism developed to keep myself safe, an evolutionary skill of all things living. To do this, I seized control of my social network

² Homophily is "the conscious or unconscious tendency to associate with people who resemble us," as described by Nicholas A. Christakis, and James H. Fowler in *Connected*.

³ This quotation is from *Connected*, under "Rule 1" in the first chapter.

⁴ This is from page 2 of "Suspended Identity" written by Thomas J. Schmid and Richard S. Jones. The two describe anticipatory survival strategies as "protective resolutions."

by choosing “how many people [I] was connected to...how densely interconnected [my] friends and family [were]...and how central”⁵ I was to the Lake Oswego social network, which remained small, low key, and under the radar. In such a town as Lake Oswego, where rumors sustain life just as much as the air we breathe, I preferred this.

After my freshman year of high school, my family moved once more to a larger house just five minutes up the road. Soon after, and after many years of anticipation and excitement, the government gifted me with my driver’s license, my father’s recently dead friend passed on his car to me, and I was finally able to move around the suburb and the rest of Portland on my own. As I matured and my awareness grew, it hit me that my parents were not so poor after all. We aren’t upper class like many, and are not lower class like many more. But my parents have enough to support their three children, with other luxuries such as car insurance and a tank of gas every-now-and-then. Even after my father’s company came to an end in 2008, he was able to find, by virtue of a close friend, a new job that immediately began paying him just slightly under what he was making before.

Suddenly, one of my chief reasons for disliking the community became my own hypocrisy. I wasn’t as much of a minority as I had always thought, and my family’s ‘poorness’ was merely smoke and mirrors. By this time, though, my identity of being “different” was hard-wired, and there were plenty of new differences between the majority, and my small social circle. My girlfriends and I didn’t listen to VH1 top hits, we were the only few females on the high school’s snowboard team (with about forty-five males), and we never stayed at the school dances for more than five minutes. We sought out drugs just as much as we did alcohol, an attribute that is not wholly accepted in Lake Oswego females. The accepted stoners, the ones who even turned into novelties of the school for their drug use, were only males. With our growing cleverness, friends and I claimed our “uniqueness” as a superior trait in this city – a tactic to comfort ourselves.

⁵ See note 3.

As for academics, in grade school through high school, I mostly didn't care. Teachers didn't teach what I thought was important: social skills, kindness, happiness, and peace of mind. I didn't understand how geometry, world history, grammar or science could be applied to my life. Alfie Kohn, writer and advocate of progressive education, is accurate in saying that "my love for learning [had] been kicked out of me by well-meaning people who used bribes or threats to get me to do schoolwork..."⁶ I didn't like earning bad grades, but with each "D", I read, "Stop trying, you idiot!". It's not that I had a lot of pressure at home, for this was an arena in which my parents were the most lenient. C grades were graciously acceptable, "as long as you did your best," dad would say. Most of the academic pressure came from simply being a part of the Lake Oswego school district, starting with "Talented and Gifted"⁷ in primary schools. Often, the TAG students received negative feelings of being an outsider, or a prideful air is added to their strut, which follows them into the days of high school. As for the general population, I often heard students complain about how their parents might respond to their B-. A's were not just a good grade. They were expected. We were taught to climb a mountain so as to ignore the different routes available for travel, the joyful sights along the way, and to set our sites only on reaching the top.⁸

What this produced was a set of kids "addicted" to earning A's, and being trained by their parents to get into Yale,⁹ driven by strong egos. In this model of training, it always seemed that competition trumped cooperation, and work and stress were demanded over fun. Only those who excelled received the attention, and were given more opportunities, implying a sense of fixed intelligence in everyone.¹⁰ So much for the idea of "no child left behind."¹¹

Nearing my graduation, I set modest goals for college. Part of this was influenced by an ambition that arrived too late to look into colleges, and complete applications.

⁶ A quotation taken from Alfie Kohn's *Punished by Rewards*.

⁷ A program often found in primary education for those students who seemed to excel academically.

⁸ In reference to Robert Pirsig's *Zen & the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Chris and his father, Pirsig, hike a mountain, and struggle to get along as Pirsig wants to enjoy the scenery, and Chris, driven by his ego and what he was taught by boy scouts, only wants to reach the top as soon as possible.

⁹ Summarized from Alfie Kohn's *Punished by Rewards*.

¹⁰ A "fixed" intelligence is what Carol Dweck describes as the "Entity Theory" of learning that students take on in the classroom. The opposite of Entity is Incremental, which suggests that intelligence can, and will grow.

¹¹ Reference to George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act in 2001.

Also, my parents, lacking their experience in higher education opportunities, didn't encourage me to search for a big college that would fit well with me. Instead, they softly nudged me in the direction of community college. By graduation, I was registered at Portland Community College.

In the school's newspaper during graduation week is always a list of the colleges and universities that the year's graduates were to move on to. The most popular ones are usually University of Oregon or Oregon State University, and then the big universities of California. There are many who get into Yale, Harvard, and the like, and only a couple, such as myself, who attend Portland Community College, which I must admit, was a bit embarrassing for me. I found it difficult to realize that measuring my circumstances by 'goodness' is complex, and is strictly relative to my surroundings. In another, less wealthy city, this list in the newspaper might have been shorter, dominated by community colleges, and I would have been rewarded for not dropping out of high school. Tending to my wounded ego, I would defend that I was going to be taking the same class at a cheaper price of similar or better quality. And this is exactly what I did, for the most part.

My first year at Portland Community College was truly a great experience for me. Their classes are small, the professors are intelligent, engaged and more interested in students than their paycheck, or reaching the top of a system. I was "doing my generals," but really I was taking classes with the intent of finding what I was most interested in. Writing classes were the foundations of my class schedules, with some arts and sciences on the side. To my surprise, I was thrilled to be there. A love for learning was thrust back into my body, with a strong kick that winded me, and I was making A's, save for one B in Advanced Algebra. Perhaps, as Alfie Kohn might have said, this happened because my academic choices were now mine.

At this time in my life, my older brother, Ben, had also been attending Portland Community College. However, he wasn't exactly passing his classes, and couldn't find a fitting direction to follow. To remedy this confusion, and to follow what his friends at the time were doing, he enlisted in the US Army. Perhaps, had he chosen to do this at a

time in history when there wasn't a war going on, I wouldn't have been so angry. Not only do I have my strong reservations about America's Military, but to have entered it for reasons that had nothing to do with the war, or the world, seemed like an irresponsible decision. As a sister, I could have shown more love and respect for his personal decision, but I fearfully jumped to the conclusion that something bad would happen to him and was angry that he would have made such a big and life-altering decision which seemed based on self-confusion.

As it turned out, something bad did happen to him, and he was never even an official soldier. While Ben was in basic training, he became ill with what doctors initially thought was pneumonia. None of the antibiotics given to him worked, and his condition worsened to a loss of sensation in the feet. After two weeks of medical investigations by several doctors in the intensive care unit, he was found with a rare disorder called Guillain-Barré Syndrome. Its causes are generally linked to the immune system's exposure to foreign antigens. The doctors concluded that Ben's case was caused by the immunizations given upon enlistment.

Fortunately, my brother's case was caught and arrested in its early stages. Untreated cases typically end with paralysis of the entire body, many other organ complications, and sometimes death. Still, Ben was no longer fit to participate in training. He was sent home on medical leave for rest, and to rehabilitate his numbing feet. Several months later, after his physical therapist deemed him able to become a soldier, he returned to basic training with high hopes to graduate. However, he simply was not capable of meeting the physical expectations of a fit soldier. Ben was discharged after a long year.

I have to say, in the end, I was happy to know that Ben's chances of going to the Middle East were non-existent. Imagining him in a dangerous war was sickening. But his goal to become a US soldier was the first ambition I had yet seen him take action on, and seeing his opportunity being taken away from him was just as sickening. After he returned for good, I observed how the military and his new circumstances changed him. He used words like "civilians" rather than just "people." He spoke with more assuredness that really didn't resemble confidences as much as it was a reflection of the strict and shameful discipline he received. His fuse to anger had become even shorter than it was before, and his explosions were more aggressive, nearly violent. Like a

prisoner recently released, Ben “simply [couldn’t] return to his old self.”¹² His identity, which he suspended prior to basic training, could no longer be reached. I don’t think it is fair for me to entirely blame the military for my brother’s changes. However, I can’t imagine that any of this would have happened if it weren’t for his minimal involvement. To this day, just over a year later, he is still in physical therapy, working to restore complete function and feeling. He is now in school again on the G.I. Bill, working toward an Engineering degree. Some money for school seems like a fair compensation.

After Ben came home, I didn’t help the situation, as we picked fights with each other. The both of us have our sibling resentments, and these seemed to be amplified at this time in our lives. He was angry about his new circumstances, and I was filled with anger because, well, that is commonly the primary emotion of someone addicted to heroin. By the time Ben returned, I had successfully become an hourly fiend of the drug, in less than a year.

My drug use started in junior high, sustained a steady and slow growth rate in high school, and took off just after my high school graduation. It seems I received those chemical dependency genes passed through my father’s blood. I went from a gallon of booze every month or two, to about a gallon of cheap whiskey a week. My parents would ask, “how can you drink this much if you’re not even twenty-one yet?” I told them, frankly, that drinking before the age of twenty-one in America is simply a norm, regardless of the fact that it is illegal, or more curtly, “yeah, it’s the government’s way of turning its kids into criminals.” I went from smoking weed and other drug experiments on the weekends, to a daily habit of joints and bong hits, and weeklong cocaine or hallucinogenic benders if my schedule and finances would permit, and it all happened quickly. This was a sudden shock to my body, to my psyche, and to my friends and family.

My drug networks expanded, social circles collided with each other, and drugs seemed to be an affluent commodity, always presented in variety. My end goal was to get high, and to do so with others who enjoyed the activity as much as I did. I made

¹² From page 9 of “Suspended Identity.”

some friends through the activity, but I found that my acquaintances through drugs were just as important. I made a plethora of “weak ties”¹³ with other drug-lovers, drug dealers, and drug producers, who were all able to facilitate to my desires, and I to theirs. The Portland drug community is vast, often has many different intersections, and adds an important layer to the culture of Portland, and also, the United States.

While this conduct can be attributed to many things, such as my genetics, my knack for solitary dwelling on emotional traumas, and my general beliefs about life, I think there were also other forces at work, such as the objective conditions around me. Certainly, I had a hand in changing these, but some of them, which reinforced my identity as a “druggie” seemed to flow freely into my life as my networks expanded. When I was young, I didn’t wish to grow up to become inebriated constantly. However, I was moving into a social realm whose fellowship is based on inebriation activities. As John Dewey says, “Conduct is always shared...It is social, whether bad or good.”¹⁴ We didn’t just come together with our own isolated behaviors. Our conducts were reinforced by each other.

After my second year of college began, I was living with friends, and all of this conduct started getting in the way of every other good thing I had in my life. I stopped going to classes, quit going to work, ran out of money, wasn’t sure how I’d pay bills, and my health was visibly diminishing. To my retrospective gratification, my parents were soon to catch on. They kindly offered me help, and threatened to terminate my car insurance if I refused their offer. So far in my life, this intervention marked one of the most important turning points of personal dignity and self-respect. I would either accept their offer, or I was going to shun them even more, and continue on a quickly steepening slope down the scale of human value.

I chose the former, and through a series of memorable events, ended up in Minnesota at Hazelden’s Center for Youth and Families. Before going, I had no real conception of how the idea of drug and alcohol recovery has evolved. Since the birth of AA in 1935, the government and medical community classified addiction as a disease, treatment centers have opened up, and long strides have been taken to help more people

¹³ Taken from *Connected*, chapter two, under the section titled “The Strength of Weak Ties.”

¹⁴ From John Dewey’s *Human Nature and Conduct*, 16.

afflicted with chemical dependency and addiction. Unfortunately, the best quality of help is more available to those with money.

Minnesota, I think, is most developed in this arena of recovery. The Hazelden Foundation was started here, and has spawned several locations across the country. Sober living is thick around the streets of Saint Paul, as well as Minneapolis and surrounding cities. And Augsburg College has a sober living program, called StepUP, offering support for sobriety in a college setting. These developments are all of the twentieth and twenty-first century and will hopefully continue to play a healing role in a sick society.

At first, Minnesota wasn't appealing to me. I wasn't interested in being cold all the time, and didn't really have a clue as to what this place was like. The professional referring me said, "It might be better for you to recover in an entirely new setting, you know. Many professionals suggest that you change everything, which does include surroundings. Remember, this doesn't have to be permanent." I really wanted to show him my middle finger at the time, not appreciating his attempt to control my fate. But now I feel compelled to return to Oregon to give him a hug.

This man was right. Because my drug habits "incorporate objective conditions in themselves,"¹⁵ I'm not sure that I would have been able to entirely give up all those habits the were making me sick. I don't think that I would've been able to even pinpoint those habits had I remained in the objective conditions from which they were born. What I wanted was to magically become a flower in a desert.¹⁶ But, to turn into this flower, I could not have done it on my own, in those conditions that were obviously not giving me the nourishment that I needed. After I moved to Minnesota and began meeting people in a recovery setting, I have felt more comfortable and at ease than I ever have.

In a sense, this affliction was a psychological issue. But because behaviors and thinking cannot exist independent of a social environment, I confidently argue that addiction is even more a social issue. Not only was I sharing conduct with the peers I was around, but it seems like, while I would complain over shots of whiskey about the governments' greed, gluttony, self-righteousness, closed-mindedness, etc, my addiction emulated those same behaviors.

¹⁵ *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey, 19.

¹⁶ Dewey, 20.

I think that these behavioral manifestations are not strictly seen in addiction. An individual is a direct product of their community, their community a product of the greater community, and all of it, a product of the world. Individuals are merely microcosms of situations that the human race is going through, who either perpetuate a circumstance, or work to change it. With that in mind, I can't understand society without an understanding of myself. I can't entirely know myself if I don't understand the greater whole. I am but a single tiny piece of an unfathomably large machine, with the power to influence the greater whole in any way I choose.