

Abby Hanley

JMC 3023-001 Feature Writing

March 8th, 2023

Repairing the Roots of Trauma

There comes a time in every young adult's life when they stand at a crossroads and must decide which version of themselves is worthy of pursuing.

I found myself facing this reality much earlier than others due to the circumstances surrounding me as a child. My reality appeared as a never-ending cycle of screaming, threats and unpleasanties. No amount of toys in the world could distract my young mind from truth.

Trauma is a word that tends to slice through people like a knife. It forces feelings and emotions to the surface that have often been buried so deep that they simply appear as distant memories. This universal theme of trauma tends to parallel some of the most profound and transformational moments of a person's life.

As children, oftentimes, our frame of reference for what is "normal" and "ok" is skewed by other people. The naivety of children's mindset is a double-edged sword that can be either beautiful or dramatically taken advantage of.

From as far back as I can remember, my father turned into a different man when he drank alcohol. The bubbly, energetic and kind soul I knew in my daily life was replaced by a hostile, callous and emotionally abusive alter ego with just one sip.

Positive core memories were overtaken in my mind by malign moments between my father and me. At the beginning of the week, he would be gentle and kind with his words and actions. Bringing my older brother and me a new toy to play with. However, things could change at the drop of a hat and result in catastrophic arguments and fights. My mother, older brother and I each thought it was only us receiving this brutal treatment which resulted in allowing the cycle to continue longer than it should have.

His words pieced me like a bullet, direct and hard. The impact of his drinking silenced the light in me and left me feeling unable to find my voice.

Without even realizing it, these moments became the new normal. The toxic environment changed my view of life at a very young age.

My mother eventually saw the adverse ripple effect of his alcoholic nature and kicked him out of our house. We had all gotten used to the never-ending reality of walking on eggshells, so the newfound quietness brought up many buried demons.

At such a young age, you can't help but resort to confusion. How do you grow up and become who you are meant to be when there are constant memories holding you down?

In the next several years, I walked through life full of hatred and was constantly exasperated with anyone or anything around me without addressing the deeper cause.

We all have wounds. These wounds vary from person to person and are often hidden. To heal these wounds, we must find the roots and repair them. Oftentimes, these roots can trace back to our childhoods.

Personally, my wounds extended back to my earliest memories and overtook the narrative of my childhood. I look back at pictures where I was smiling and laughing, yet have no recollection of that time. The young girl I see in the photos and videos seems to be a distant relative. I allowed specific negative experiences to overtake my entire being and determine the person I was.

I pushed away anyone who tried to get close and transformed into a shell of a human. I normalized my trauma and refused to address my experiences as I felt voiceless in a noisy world.

Around the time I was 18, I turned to therapy as I was simply drowning in life. I hated who I had become and, even more so, how I treated others. I was cold and lifeless towards even the most simple of daily tasks, never knowing that that was not how people usually feel. Part of me always figured everyone walked through life as a ghost feeling nothing. I had no idea what happiness or peace was.

When my therapist first mentioned the words PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), I was almost offended she would say such a thing. Yes, I had negative past experiences, but in my mind, PTSD was something military members or true war heroes experienced.

Over time, my therapist helped me realize that any time of abuse is a form of trauma and can result in PTSD. She confronted me with the fact that I would never become the version of myself I was yearning to be without properly addressing those wounds.

Traumatic situations do not define us, they mold us. It is your job to determine how much power those situations hold over who you are and aspire to be.

I had allowed my past to define who I was. At that moment, I chose forgiveness, compassion and grace. I finally saw myself for the very first time.

While it was not easy, I turned to things that helped repair my broken roots. Over the years, I became obsessed with reading myself into an alternate reality. I could spend hours reading and learning about various stories and characters. So much so

that I began to yearn to write for myself. Writing became an essential part of my healing as I was able to find my voice that refused to be silenced finally.

I quickly found that I want the words I write to hold power for others. I want others to see that they, too, can find their voice in writing.

However, growth is nothing without obstacles. It wasn't until my young adult years that the ramifications of my past with my father came to a head. All the work I had put into my new heart and mind was put to the test as he quickly found his way back into our lives.

In his five years away, my father got sober and found the Lord. My forgiving and gentle mother welcomed him back into our home and lives without hesitation. It appeared effortless for her to forgive and forget the sins of the past. Nate, my older brother, and I were faced with our old nightmare, which had a new and upgraded face and personality.

This new reality quickly brought back every sentiment and memory I had worked so hard to bury away with anger. I was faced with a new and improved version of the man who silenced me all those years ago.

A part of me wanted to run away and protect my newfound peaceful bubble. The other part of me wanted to yell and scream to prove that that little girl he once knew had found her voice.

However, instead of reverting to anger, I chose empathy, understanding and kindness. I decided to honor the version of myself that I had worked so hard to become.

Over the past couple of years, my father and I have slowly but surely allowed both of our roots to heal. We have watered our own personal roots as well as each other to build a solid foundation. I have found a friend, mentor and a healthy relationship in him that I never thought I would attain.

While we can't change the past, making a choice to forgive others will ultimately free yourself.

Healing and growth are never linear, and it all starts with a daily choice. A choice to wake up and continue to work to be the version of yourself that you can be proud of. While this work has no end or finish line, it is making an effort to show up and at least try.

I currently have a picture of my younger self taped to my bathroom mirror to remind myself daily who I am working so hard for. For that little girl who was silenced. The life-long effects of my trauma are vast and real. I find myself questioning even the purest people's motives. Every decision I make in my professional career and personal life is aimed at making the younger version of myself proud. The little girl who was once

so heavily influenced by the circumstances around her has transitioned into a woman who does the influencing.

The process will never be easy or perfect, but neither is life. To be human is to be imperfect.