

SHARING MY VOICE

Literary Arts – Life Experiences

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Depression has been my lifelong companion. I discovered through years of therapy that the groundwork was laid early in my childhood. Perhaps, my forefathers were predisposed toward depression. Perhaps being torn from our homes following Indonesia's war for independence from centuries of Dutch rule factored in. The trauma of a contentious divorce and being forced to leave my mother's side as a four-year-old was certainly a factor. And there is no doubt that the long hours of forced seclusion in locked closets or dank, dark basements without food or water were factors.

During my pre-teen years, I learned to disassociate – to move my mind to a place outside my physical body. At times, the ability to do so scared me as I had become quite adept at disassociating from what was going on around me or happening to me. At one point, I believed I was going crazy. I tried to control myself, much as I tried to tame an increasingly compulsive behavior of washing my hands frequently. To fight my obsessive behavior, I would close my eyes, grit my teeth, and count to 100 silently and repeatedly. After discovering Billy Graham's weekly radio sermons, I learned to constantly recite the Lord's Prayer silently until I felt the compulsion had passed.

As a young, near-sighted, mixed-race introvert, I struggled to fit in with and find acceptance from my peers. More often than not, I remained on the fringes of peer acceptance. There were a few bright spots – living and working on an old dairy farm, I learned an appreciation for the outdoors, horses, wildlife, and hard work.

I lived in three different households during my last three years in high school. During my senior year, I was fortunate to be taken in by a classmate's family so I could finish school and graduate. That final year, participation in Explorer Scout activities gave me my first sense of camaraderie, acceptance, and achievement. So did involvement in school sports, including

organizing the school's first soccer team and serving as its co-captain. Life had become somewhat more stable.

In January of my senior year, with the permission of a stepmother, I enlisted in the Army. It was 1967, and the Vietnam war was beginning to rage. My 'guaranteed' enlistment Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) was to be a Combat Photographer. This would allow me to explore and hone my newfound photography skills. Earlier that year, Mrs. Phelps, my art teacher, taught me the necessary skills to shoot, develop, and print photographs. Her encouraging words have stayed with me through the years, "You have a wonderful eye for composition, Eric."

I would never be a Combat Photographer. Instead, the Army trained me to be a Combat Medic. By Thanksgiving 1967, I was on my way to Vietnam. At first, my ability to disassociate served me well. Tending to a GI on Christmas Eve, it was evident that nothing I did would save his life. As he died, I cradled his bloody head in my hands. Minutes later, I tagged and gently lowered him into a rubberized body bag. The smell of his blood, its stickiness on my hands, and his shock of blond hair registered in my brain. I thought of his journey home and how his family would accept their son's death.

The following year, 1968, would become the war's bloodiest year. In retrospect, coming under enemy fire, I sometimes did not take immediate evasive action to protect myself. I found it hard to believe that someone was trying to kill ME. It wasn't long before the shock of dealing with the carnage of bloodied bodies, the distinct smell and look of bloated and charred remains, and the dazed look of survivors would jar me back to reality. And thus began my long-stewing anger about the war and war in general - what it did to those who died and those who survived. I grieved the loss of my naivete. With easy access to drugs, I self-medicated.

Returning Stateside, I struggled to overcome my drug dependency. The withdrawal was a painful process I shared with another medic who struggled as I did. We suffered together through tremors, sweats, hallucinations, and abdominal pain, but in the end, we persevered. We were both discharged on June 26, 1970, and promised to stay in touch. When we met at his home in northern New York a year later, I was well on my way to alcohol dependency; he had resumed his use of drugs. I never saw Craig again, but I sometimes wonder how he lived out his life.

In struggling to be seen as 'normal,' I used my smile to hide many things. But sometimes, not even a smile could stop my uncontrollable outbursts. My violent outbursts would make people cringe, giving me an adrenaline rush and a sense of power. The 'high' lasted briefly before sending me into a deep depression. I was wracked with guilt, shame, and pain throughout each episode. Suicidal ideation was a frequent companion. Following the murder/suicide of my 5-year-old nephew, I sold my gun.

Through the following years, I struggled to raise a family, earn a college degree, make a successful career, and hang on to a foundering first marriage. My angry, unexpected outbursts continued unabated. Despite attempting couples counseling, the marriage ended. I returned to individual counseling with Nancy D. It was 1985 when she diagnosed me with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) caused by my wartime experiences. I had never heard of PTSD. During my divorce, I was given custody of my three young children.

Two years later, believing I had conquered my demons, I remarried and stopped attending counseling sessions. Coming from a broken home, I desperately wanted the marriage to work. But wishing, wanting, and hard work will never guarantee that two families from broken homes can successfully 'blend' into one.

Wary of my past drug dependency, I found comfort in alcohol. At some point, I realized the impact that using alcohol had on my children. Not long after, I returned to counseling, and my drinking abated.

As time passed, I struggled to hold my marriage and family together, I also began caring for my ailing father. At the same time, my government career floundered under an abusive boss and in a hostile work environment. It would take a contentious lawsuit and settlement to revive it. But by then, I had started drinking heavily again. I turned my back on counseling at a time when my second marriage was rapidly falling apart.

My life had become a perfect storm of consequential failures, and suicidal ideation again took hold. Yet, whenever I was in a drunken stupor and on the verge of killing myself, thoughts of my children pulled me back from the ledge. What kind of legacy would my suicide leave for them? After my second wife left, I felt as if a leaden curtain had been lifted from my shoulders. The sun shone again.

I married for a third time. Sometime after all three of our beloved pets died, the darkness returned. One sunny Saturday afternoon, I retreated to my office, sitting for a long time before calling the Gestalt Institute. Thankfully, Natasha quickly returned my call and listened patiently. Through our work together, she would later diagnose me with childhood and wartime PTSD. That was seven years ago. Two years ago, we discovered the nexus between my father's experiences as a prisoner in a Japanese POW camp and his treatment of me as a child. I learned to forgive him long after he had died.

Today, I continue with counseling and have learned new tools to deal with life. Perhaps because of my former drug dependencies, I won't use drugs to calm my fears, anxiety, or depression. Through counseling and with a supportive wife, I have learned that a 'blue' day or

episode is just that – one day or even a few – that don't need to lead into an ever-growing spiral of despair. I've found my voice. I've learned to put my anger, grief, shame, and guilt in their proper places in my memory. At times, I still get triggered, but finding that 'voice' to vocalize my thoughts and fears helps to put things back in perspective. Sometimes it takes days to do that; sometimes not. Ultimately, sharing my voice with others benefits me the most.