

The Long Journey Home

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I once read that who we are as adults is pretty much fully formed during that awkward time in our lives known as early adolescence. That may be why I love the music from the 80s so much. In my early to mid-teens, I was gung-ho about being an Air Cadet and I loved to read books about war and combat. I was obsessed with wearing military combat uniforms. At 14, my parents were concerned enough about my behavior to have me see a psychiatrist. The doctor had me come into the hospital for a couple of weeks, which caused an even further rift between me and my peers in junior high.

Going into the hospital at 14, I knew something needed to change, I understood I had symptoms like depression and anxiety, even compulsive behavior. I was also aware that I did not fit in with my schoolmates, wasn't liked, did not belong in most of the groups in school. I did have five or six close friends, but it seemed most people thought I was strange enough for them to avoid me. Perhaps because of backlash from the recent Vietnam War and the peace movement that grew out of it, people who cut their hair or dressed like they were in the military were shunned. Deep inside, I had a secret concept of a world where people like me were loved and respected by all, where soldiers were seen as protectors and heroes, not misfits.

Two years later when I was 17 in 1989, I had a job I enjoyed at a gas station, I had managed to make quite a few friends who saw me more for who I was. By that time, I had left behind my whole military appearance and attitude. I was pretty lucky as far as most young people go, living with my parents in a comfortable townhouse, driving a sports car and a motorbike. When my schizoaffective disorder with anxiety blindsided me in 1990 while I was just starting to enjoy life as a young person, I ended up spending two months in a psychiatric hospital. Because of my illness and a strained situation at home, I had to sell my precious 1978 Ford Cobra, my motorbike, and move out on my own.

At that time, most of my close friends were gone on to other things, other cities, or post-secondary education. The hardest part of it was to lose my sense of community, of being part of a school or a neighborhood or work. Even if I managed to finish high school somehow and get into the University of Alberta, I wouldn't be going to school with friends from my hometown or even people my age. The hope of going to university right out of high school was everything to me. I was trying hard to find something that would force me to get my act together, some way to bring back the gung-ho attitude I had when I was 14 and 15. In between my adolescence and when I left the hospital as an adult, there was a point I can't quite

define where I just seemed to stop believing or having faith in anything. This was 1990 just as the first Persian Gulf war was brewing. I made a decision to apply for the Canadian military. Deep down all I wanted was my feeling of belonging and my faith in the human race back.

Starting life in Edmonton all on my own, I quickly found out how my dad must have felt, coming 8,000 miles from Denmark and making a new beginning in a new country at 23. I also felt that I desperately needed to go somewhere where no one knew about my history of instability. I packed a bag and one night just walked out on the highway, headed for the west coast and a new beginning.

At first, it was extremely hard to leave my parents' house. I had known no other home in all my days other than that place. But later, as I crossed the Provincial border into BC, I saw something that changed how I looked at life. I was alone, I was out on the highway waiting for a ride to come that would get me to the coast and I witnessed something so beautiful. A moose, likely a mother, fully grown, was running in a grassy field with a calf. The cool air felt so clean and fresh, the mountains were so indescribably beautiful, and massive, stunning cumulonimbus clouds hung over the mountains. It was a moment of pure clarity and perfection that told me I had made the right decision to leave. There was a world to be discovered.

After living in Vancouver for around a year, I found out I could get a student loan to attend flight college. I had been flying since age 12 when I would go up in gliders and small planes as an Air Cadet, and I knew flying was something I loved. I put in my funding application and spent most of that summer reading books about pilots. It seemed to take forever, but my loan was approved. All I had to do after that was to take lessons and build up time at the controls and study my flight manuals. What I didn't want to tell the people at my flying school was that with my mental health history I never should have been flying.

While I was in college, living in downtown Vancouver, I met a guy I made almost instant best friends with. His name was Rick. He had a heavy California accent and always called people "bra" or "dude." He seemed pretty cool. We hung out for a few days and he told me he was in the Marine Corps and flew helicopters, and also that he was a veteran. Rick was a blast to hang out with. He was funny and fearless and attracted girls like a magnet. On a whim, we took a trip to Seattle together. I was so amazed at how well people treated Rick after he told them he had fought in the Gulf War. America in 1991 was that imaginary world I wished for as an adolescent. People in uniform or even just those who looked like they were in the military got so much respect. So many businesses gave them discounts, so many people would help them with rides or food or buy them things from coffee to beers. I felt like I had truly come home, and that I wanted more than anything to be an American and live out the adventures I had read and heard about growing up.

In Seattle, I admitted to Rick that I wanted to pay back my student loan in Vancouver, quit flying school, and join the Marines. From then on it was like we were brothers. I knew the Marines wouldn't pay a lot, but they offered the promise of money for school and a chance at citizenship, along with a heavy dose of what I felt I needed most of all: discipline.

At one point in our journey south to California from Washington state, we stopped at a US Army Recruiting Centre and they had me write an aptitude test. While I was taking it, one of the recruiting sergeants burst out in a beautiful rendition of Oh, Canada. I have to admit that I started to tear up and must have turned green trying to hide it. When we walked out of there I knew I could never give up on Canada, for so many reasons, not the least of which being that I was living with an untreated illness and had no health insurance that would cover my needs in the US. It was more than that though. Being a Canadian was something I was very proud of. I loved my vast, unspoiled Canada and the people that populated it.

Soon, after getting to know him better, before we made it all the way south, I started to worry Rick was a pathological liar. As he tried to trick people into thinking he was something he was not to get things out of them, I feared I was just one more person taken in by his lies. It was so important at the time for me to get through life with honesty and hard work like my dad had taught me to.

Despite my misgivings about Rick, deep inside, I still liked the idea of living in America. Not just because soldiers were treated so well, there were many reasons. There were jobs galore for anyone who wanted to work and opportunities everywhere. I had seen so many movies about people who immigrated to the US and made their biggest dreams come true. I thought that somehow I could get my citizenship and education and become somebody, maybe a pilot, maybe even a lawyer or a stockbroker. I would never fall into the trap my dad did, losing his business during a recession and turning to alcohol. But recession or not, there was something I was hiding that I prayed could stay hidden. My illness was deathly serious, and what I needed wasn't just to return to Vancouver, but to Edmonton to where psychiatrists I had dealt with for many years could help me.

We made it down the west coast to Hemet, the town Rick lived in, getting rides from truckers and going without food, sleep or breaks. Not long after we arrived, the worst imaginable thing happened. Rick took off leaving me with nothing, thousands of miles from home. I had no food or money, I was technically an illegal immigrant, and I didn't know anyone. I was royally screwed. I ended up hitch-hiking until I arrived at a truck stop and then tried to get my parents to send me enough money for a ticket home on the bus.

Everything in the States was new to me. I loved being in a place where geography and culture allowed me to re-evaluate how I saw the world. Even being

broke and homeless didn't stop me from making friends and enjoying myself. A lot of the people I met trying to get rides from the truck stop were minorities and they were the salt of the Earth. I will never forget the kindness many people in the US showed me. There was the African-American guy in the truck stop who gave me the last of his change so I could call a friend. There were also some Spanish Americans who gave me half a pack of cigarettes knowing I had none, even though they likely didn't have enough for themselves. A lot of people that heard my story went out of their way to give me rides, and many of them gave me money here and there. Two different people I had just met took me right into their homes.

I didn't want to get deported, though my dad told me I should just let them deport me and get a free ride home. I had high hopes of coming back to California one day and starting life over properly. I was in love with the place, from the stunning mountains to the truck stops that had free movie theatres and arcades. But still, the reality was that I couldn't change the facts about my illness. There was no telling how bad things could get, but I was in denial. In the back of my mind, as I went longer and longer without food or sleep in between rides, I wondered if there was any way to get my old life back, to return to Vancouver to finish my flight lessons. It bothered me that something I once had such high hopes for was just going to be another missed opportunity.

Eventually, my sister was able to send me money for a bus ticket. When I got off the bus in Canada, I didn't care who could see me or what they thought, I went right down on my hands and knees and kissed the pavement. It meant so much to be back home, back around familiar places, where I knew the rules, where things like gun violence were much more under control. It was still at the back of my mind that I might need medical help if my psychosis returned. I had made it to all the bases, back to home plate. In Canada, there were places I could work and make money for a place to stay and food. The US was beautiful in so many ways. The people, the kindness I was shown, the mountains, the deserts, the forests. Not to mention the pride people had in who they were as a nation. Then of course there were the freedoms and opportunities.

I knew going back to the US would be so much better if I waited until I was older and had saved up a fair bit of money. Eventually, close to 25 years later, I went to Hawaii and found that the US still was a pretty amazing place. Not to mention that Hawaii had just as many wonderful people and beautiful places as California did. I still have it on my bucket list to return to the US one day and drive to all of the lower 48 states, much like John Steinbeck did in "Travels With Charley," the book that won him the Nobel prize.

When I got back to Vancouver it wasn't long before I started backsliding into psychosis again. I am now grateful that it didn't happen while I was flying because I could have easily gotten myself killed. When I finally returned to

Edmonton, after weeks in a homeless shelter waiting to be admitted to an overcrowded hospital, I spent a long time in a psychiatric ward. I needed to grow up in a hurry. I had seen the harsh side of life, of being penniless and starving with nowhere to go in California. I hate to think of all the people who go there as I did back in 1991 trying to find their dreams. I didn't give up on all my dreams. Not long after I left the hospital, I signed up to finish school and did manage to get the requirements for a high school diploma, and eventually got into University. Although flying and a lot of careers were out of the question, a few years after I returned to Edmonton, it became a wonderful place. I had friends, places to go to, jobs. Without the help of my psychiatrists, the many nurses who helped me, and my family, I surely would have never made it to the state of recovery I am in now.

Above all else, although I lived through homelessness and mental breakdowns, I deserved to get an education, deserved to have a home where I felt safe and content. One day I realized that my dad left war-torn Europe so I could live without the privations and horrors he went through. I also learned that each person has a path they have to take and all they can do is their very best. Despite our troubled past together, my dad gave me the opportunity that led me to become a writer, a teacher, and a student all at once. I even beat the odds by having the long and happy life that many people, professionals included, did not think would be possible for me.