

## Story of My Life: A Mixture of Misfortune and Lucky Breaks

**Comment:** Title captures themes the author has tried to express throughout the piece

I am Caucasian. The vast majority of the inhabitants of the communities I have lived in are Caucasian. Thus, I have little experience with other races and cultures and will address them as sparingly as they have occurred in my life. This is not to say I prefer it that way, but I will instead focus on an issue which has always played a large role in my life: financial hardship (I will address later how this can and does relate to race). However, I'll be a little more specific about my family history and early life experiences first.

*[Starts by discussing own background/ethnic identity]*

My Dad's side of the family is descended from some of the first French-Canadian settlers. Today, most of them either live in Vermont or Massachusetts. I'm not sure where my mom's side of the family is from but I do know that there is a tiny bit of Welsh in there somewhere. In other words, my family is as ethnically diverse as a sheet of paper is colorful.

I was born May 30<sup>th</sup>, 1991 in Fletcher Allen Hospital in Burlington, VT. Like all my siblings, my mother's pregnancy with me had been high risk due to her epilepsy, and the fact that all of us were as healthy and bright as could be was seen as a miracle by both of my parents and the doctors. My mother had been diagnosed with it when she was 12 and had to contend with throughout her life. If you don't know, epilepsy is a disorder where, on occasion, neurons start randomly firing in the brain, causing seizures which can range from mild and short-lived to a grand mall seizure, which can be so bad that the brain essentially has to shut down and reboot after a while. This means she couldn't drive or hold a permanent job. It wasn't crippling, but she was sick a fair amount of the time. This means that my dad had to bring home all the money but he didn't make a lot considering there were six of us all together.

*[Note that this author has decided to organize things chronologically]*

My earliest memories are of living in East Middlebury, Vermont when I was in elementary school. We lived in an old fixer-upper about 130 years old (which never really got fixed up) next to an old barn which was primarily used for storage. Despite this and the lack of luxuries like cable or computers, I had a pretty happy childhood. We had a large yard and my mother usually organized huge yard sales every year, which brought a lot of the community together. I never realized what I was missing at that point and I consider myself lucky in many ways for the opportunities and experiences I did have.

By the time I was finishing fifth grade my parents decided to move in with my grandmother so that she wouldn't have to live by herself. So, about two weeks before sixth grade started, we moved into a house in Buttolph Acres, a small suburban area near both downtown Middlebury and the local schools.

It was a very nice house, fully representative of suburbia and only 20 years old. However, the happiness of this living arrangement was short-lived as a few months later, on the night of December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2002, my mother died after an especially powerful grand mall seizure. This was obviously a life-shattering experience for a ten-year-old. While this was a very tough part of my life, I recovered fairly quickly as children tend to do, and got used to doing even more for myself than before. I did end up having much more perspective than most kids my age, which probably contributed to my success in school. Luckily, I had been fairly self-sufficient beforehand as my dad worked most of the day, five or six days a week, to provide for us and my mom had to rest to get over her frequent bouts of sickness. I think it is partly due to this early self-sufficiency as well as being taught the general tenets of Christianity (generosity, humility, caring for your neighbor as you would care for yourself; aka the golden rule, respect, gratitude, etc.) that really makes me who I am today. I'll tell you more about my out-of-the-ordinary religious experience to show you how I came to learn these things.

*[Tries to define personal beliefs and where they may have come from]*

For most of my life we attended one church or another regularly for short periods of time. My parents both considered themselves Christians and have tried to pass those values onto us. The one thing that probably sets us apart from the average American is that we never identified with a particular denomination. We attended church when they felt like they really wanted to, but it usually ended after a couple of months when my dad had to work on Sundays for a couple of weeks or my mom wasn't feeling well at the same time as that, or they didn't like how the preacher focused on things other than what my parents really thought were the important points of Christianity: caring for others and your personal relationship with God.

To be honest, at the moment I don't know where I stand in reference to religion.

However, I think that religion can help some people by telling them how to conduct themselves and is only really detrimental to mankind when it directs followers to attempt to convince non-followers to become believers of the religion, or makes uncompromising statements about its own correctness. Personally, it seems to me that it doesn't make a lot of difference if you subscribe to any religion or not as long as you don't hurt or harm in any way someone who doesn't believe the same thing as you do; spirituality is a personal journey and should not be forced upon anyone.

As for diversity in this category, I have some firsthand experience with people who associate with different religions. In my school there were a fair number of kids who were Jewish but not many of them were not practicing, so it wasn't terribly important to them. There were also a couple of kids who practiced Islam. In both cases they celebrated the holidays and embraced the main tenets but they didn't practice some of the more culturally-involved aspects of those religions such as wearing a hijab or yarmulke. However, I never really had a problem with them or really talked about it with them. I guess, like most things, I accepted other people's differences but never really discussed them. Having said that, I have rarely come across people whose differences are incredibly out of the ordinary, so it wasn't much of a challenge.

*[Discusses personal experiences with other religions to set up conversation about those interactions]*

On the flip-side of the coin, I did know someone who took their Christianity very seriously and was often made fun of for it. While she was very vocal about her religion and unashamed of making it widely known that she was a Christian, I didn't think she took it to the point where it became harmful, so I didn't have a problem with it. In fact, I was a friend to some extent, and I came to learn that she was vocal about to try to show people how it helped her, not because they were incredibly wrong

*[Gives specific example of personal experience]*

One of those rare areas of diversity where I have some serious firsthand experience is that of sexual orientation. One of my best friends, Richie, came out of the closet last year. I met him in fifth grade while talking about Pokemon cards and we've been best friends since. He's always been very excitable and almost eccentric but a great friend who always helped me out. When he told me he was gay I told him it didn't change who he was to me; he was still the same person I'd been friends with for seven years. I used to envy him for all of the stuff he had that I didn't, like cable TV and video games primarily, but after he came out of the closet, I learned a lot of things about his childhood that he hadn't told anyone. Since then, I've learned about a lot of issues in his life and how hard coming to terms with being gay, or how other people treat you for being gay, is. As far as coming to terms with being gay, I don't think it was that hard for him, but for some people I know it can be tough if their family is homophobic or their religion looks down upon homosexuality. Richie's parents got divorced not that long before and I only then realized how bad the relationship between him and his father was. Richie told me a while ago he hadn't told his dad that he was gay because he didn't know how he'd react. I know that must be tough to deal with, and one of the few serious advantages I had was definitely the open and loving

*[Another specific example—more in depth. Set-up for analysis and critical discussion about this interaction/experience]*

relationship I have with my dad and I really don't know what I'd do if I didn't have it. On the other hand, I don't have any living grandparents and my dad's the only parent I've got left, so it's little bit different I suppose.

One thing that stands out to me in relation to this subject is the homophobia or stereotyping of homosexuals that goes on in our society. In my high school this is especially obvious as for some reason the phrase "that's so gay" has come to reference something stupid, idiotic, or lame, and I really find it offensive. I did discuss this with Richie on several occasions but he says he doesn't have a problem with that or other various insults. I'm not entirely sure if that's true, but I suppose it's something you adjust to living with or go crazy. I'm a wimp and never really confronted anyone who used that phrase or any other similarly offensive phrase for that matter, but I wish I had. On the other hand, Richie did tell me once that he finds it really annoying when other people take offense at things for him. I haven't conclusively reconciled this with the ideal of helping those in need, but perhaps the ideal stance would be not to start a movement on someone else's behalf, but to offer support those who are trying to help themselves, or perhaps 'work to solve the problems that concern you.'

One of the major problems I have had throughout my life is lack of financial resources.

This is something that I've really only come to realize this quite recently. Throughout middle and high school I slowly came to the realization that most people had a lot more money and stuff than I did. My earlier example involved being envious of Richie's TV and video games, which amazed me whenever I visited his house. Other people had large houses, they traveled abroad, their parents gave them an allowance, they had expensive ipods and computers and enormous itunes collections, they didn't need to have jobs and they could buy whatever they wanted. I only had TV for five years while I lived in Buttolph Acres, an old computer for seven, and never had internet access at home until now. My dad let me know fairly early on that anything I wanted to buy, I was going to have to earn the money for by myself.

*[Discusses another important aspect of identity]*

Perhaps the biggest things that really brought me around to how little money we had was when my grandmother died in the spring of 2006. It was not quite as rattling as my mother's death, but still a fairly dramatic shift in my life. Along with that came the fact that she hadn't (and couldn't have) left us the house (most of her life savings was invested in the house). While I was always confident that we would find somewhere to live, I realized just how close we came to being homeless, and that really rattled me and brought me around to the reality of my own financial situation. I don't know if you've ever been that close to homelessness, but it's a scary

thing and it really messes with you. So while some people can look and say 'that's terrible' whenever they hear about people being homeless they're concerned for a bit but then they forget. I tend to consider the factors that led to their homelessness and perhaps how it could have been prevented.

*[Tries to bridge the gap to larger scale issues]*

Luckily my dad was able to find a house he could rent through the Champlain Valley Housing Trust and since the summer of 2008 we've lived in a small older house adjacent to the downtown Middlebury area. I consider being so close to downtown lucky as it precludes the expenses related with a car, but the area comes with its problems. The apartments that surround the house we live in are also owned by the Champlain Valley Housing Trust and as such, they are inhabited by similarly low-income people. For the most part the people who live around us are nice people and respectful, but there are also the people who you would expect to live in a low-income area: drug dealers, rowdy undisciplined kids, apparently negligent mothers, people with violent natures, etc. I have to hand it to the Champlain Valley Housing Trust for the job they've done on cracking down on crime and noise disturbances, but someone was shot (not

fatally) by their spouse a couple of houses away pretty recently, the cops roll through at least once a day, and there have been a few minor drug busts nearby (after they got rid of the major drug dealing that had been going on there for a while). We've had stuff of ours broken or stolen (mostly outdoor plants or plant bins) but we've never had anyone break into the house. I consider myself and my family lucky to be living in a relatively small town so ghettoization can't really occur and there can't be an 'inner-city.' But I can see how having to deal with that situation would feel and how important it is to resolve them and not to stigmatize the poor because they are poor or because they tend to be people of color, which happens too often.

*[Tries again to bridge gap to larger issues using personal experience]*

Since my dad makes so little money, he told me that anything I want to have aside from food and shelter I have to pay for myself. Thus, I have held a steady job since the summer of my eighth grade year as a cleaner with my dad. Obviously, I am still a kid so I can't chalk up the very low-end job to being poor, but it still is a low-end job. On an average workday at some of the businesses we clean, I vacuum large expanses of floor, take out people's individual garbage and recycling, clean their bathrooms and dust. I usually work about nine hours a week, primarily on Fridays and Saturdays, and it worked out well enough that I managed to save enough to go on a week-and-a-half-long-trip to Italy (through the school) my junior year, and had about \$4500 saved for college (as well as a couple of personal belongings I wanted and clothes that I needed).

*[Describes experience as part of a group and tries to illustrate that experience for those who are not part of that group]*

Holding that 'bottom rung' job really also gave me perspective on things other than money. Anyone you ask will tell you that having more money doesn't make you a better person, but despite acknowledging this, there is still a stigma about being poor and/or holding a menial/manual job that causes some people to judge that you must either deserve being poor or that you don't work hard enough to 'get out of your situation.' I must admit that this is a very sore point for me. This value judgment is usually more prominent for people of color as race is sometimes perceived as the cause behind their 'failure' when in fact, it is the racism itself which causes the economic problem (it's a self-fulfilling prophecy based on an illusion). I'll admit that I don't know the full extent of the stigmatism experienced by people of color, but either way it's unfounded and detrimental to forming true relationships and bonds where we need them most.

For the most part, the people I have met on the job have been friendly and courteous despite the fact that my father and I were cleaning up after them, but there were some situations where you could see that people just avoid talking to you if they can because 'you're just the cleaner' and thus you can't have anything of interest to say. One thing which probably lessened the stigma in my case was that I am white; I don't have to contend with race and the stigma that comes with the job at the same time. I can clearly see the problem that I would have had getting a decent education and getting into college had I lived in a big city, and consider myself very lucky every time I consider the course of my life.

These experiences also color my view of the world in a pretty noticeable way. I have to consider costs all the time, it annoys me when I see people wasting money, and I usually relate a lot of my thinking on issues to the way it affects people with low incomes. The poverty cycle is especially clear in my mind as a major problem, and one of the biggest which stands in the way of improving mankind's relationship with the planet and itself. Another example is health care. Most people see it as a simple payment for services, but take for granted how hard it can be to have to go without it. You may be able to understand why I consider it a basic human right which should be available to all despite their income, status, or race. I have only gone to the emergency room (other than check-ups) once in my life for a minor case of pneumonia, but other people, like my sister who has diabetes, have more serious health problems and don't have the


*[Discusses views again and where these views might have come from]*

means to deal with them. Luckily, my sister is covered by the Dr Dynasaur program they have in Vermont for low income children, but once she has to buy her own insurance, it's going to be prohibitively expensive. The inability of people to treat their illnesses simply because of their lack of income seems stunningly cruel and I'm not sure why it has yet to be resolved (hopefully Congress will put forth a health care plan which seriously addresses the needs of these people).

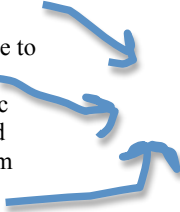
I must say that again I have fairly strong feelings on these issues, but I never have found an appropriate place to voice them, usually I just keep it to myself so I don't go on a rant. However, I know that I was very lucky for the chances I got and that being quiet about the problems I've faced means that they may not get solved and that others must deal with them in the same manner I did. For this reason, I am constantly looking to learn about how to help people in this situation and what has worked and what might work.

Concerning high school, I've done very well, despite my financial situation, and was invited to numerous leadership conferences such as the CYLC, Boys' State, VYLC, and several academic summer trips, but I was never able to attend a single one because they each would have cost a significant portion of my savings; the only money I could count on paying for college. I think that there is a certain amount of bias against the poor when the college admissions process selects for experiences that often require money. It's hard to gain new experiences when you've got to try really hard in school, hold a job, care for your family, watch out for yourself, and fight through the stigmas attached to being poor to even consider college. I knew from pretty early on the only way I was going to get out of the financial situation I was in, as well as doing something I thought worth doing as a job, was to go to college. Despite all of these setbacks, I managed to get into the Honors College at UVM and get almost a full scholarship, which I am constantly grateful for. To be honest though, I didn't so much fight for it as it fell into my lap after I went through the process. For the most part, most schools have a system in place to help low-income kids so I don't really help except to encourage the continuation of these programs.

As you might be able to tell from my presence in this course, I am making an effort to resolve environmental problems. We both know that environmental problems affect to the greatest extent those who are least able to deal with them: the poor. You should be able to tell by now that I am acutely aware of these issues and it bothers me when everybody is focusing on 'cool', superficial reductions in environmental impact (look at that hybrid SUV, it gets ten more miles to the gallon!). How can you reduce your impact when you can barely survive? Or when you have to contend with more pressing problems constantly just to approach fulfilling your basic wants and needs? I think that everyone could do a lot better with a lot less stuff and a lot less money, but those who have it already are already have it are so accustomed to it that they consider it necessary to live. **This is one thing I think I can start to be vocal about: Instead of reducing the impact of your belongings and actions, start reducing your belongings and harmful actions.** Along with that, be sure that these solutions are widely and easily applicable to people with lower incomes. **I am trying to do just that by joining the SGA committee on diversity, equity, and environmental ethics.** With fewer unnecessary items, the general public would be more able to help those in need and perhaps the stigma of having less money would fade. This is, to some extent, wishful thinking, but once I know enough about how I can, I am going to try my hardest to be as loud as I can about it. **But first I'll have to practice taking a stand on the smaller things.**



*[Addresses why he decided to pursue environmental education]*



*[Looks to possible future actions]*