

**An Education  
Saved My Life:  
Silver Wolf's Path to Promise**

**David A. Patterson Silver Wolf (Adelv unegv Waya)**

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David A. Patterson Silver Wolf (Adelv unegv Waya), PhD

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[at] wustl.edu

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Humans can, through their interference with processes that would otherwise be natural, produce an outcome which is an improvement over the aforementioned natural one.

—William James

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## Preface

The people who raised me were storytellers. Their stories weren't always true—at least not 100 percent factual—but they told their version of the truth nonetheless. I heard repeated accounts of my father's childhood traumas, inadvertently overheard stories about loss and shame, stories of my ancestors, and about my people's Native American and Irish roots. So when it comes to learning or understanding life circumstances, I learn best when teaching moments are connected in some way to the telling of a story.

To me, a story has to have some level of truth to be meaningful—and a true story also has some level of pain connected with it. Truth is inseparable from pain. So is life. A life story without pain could not be true. There is no way to “live life on life's terms” without experiencing some level of pain. Life is sometimes hard and unfair. Many times we don't have a choice in what happens to us. We have to find a way to keep going and survive. We have to find a way to change our lives—to change the world.

The stories I am about to tell are my version of the truth—the truth how I have chosen to see it—and they are, at times, painful to recall. For years, I tried to close up and lock away some of my own life's events; I'd hoped that these stories might someday go missing from all memory. Unfortunately, though most of my life's painful events were purposely ignored, they weren't lost. The memories were always there, threatening, lurking, and it was a constant effort to hold them back. When these horrid kinds of memories arrive from the mind's deep, dark cellar, regrettably, the good memories vanish.

But please allow me to state that, despite all the bad things that happened in my past life, I would not change one minute of it. All of those events have led me where I am today. To regret my past is to regret my present and future. I have no regrets.

Every life, even a very fortunate one, will suffer some kind of loss. We all have things taken from us, but one thing that cannot be taken by anyone is an education. An education saved my life. An education altered the course of my life, the lives of my kids and other people around me, for the better. My Native American and Irish relations have fought hard for the idea of sovereignty—being completely independent and having total authority over their lives. They suffered many losses, many things were taken from them and denied them: their land, their language, their history. An education is the ideal way to achieve self-determination. Having an education is having total sovereignty.

This book is about how I became educated and free. It is about how I overcame addiction and reconnected with my Native American culture. The words in this book are about sending a message to the reader that anyone can get a college degree, regardless of past educational experiences or limitations. I have received much feedback from people, mostly academic folks, on how I should tell this story. Some said it is not structured like a traditional text book. A reviewer indicated that there are not a lot of Native American writers and then recommended how I should edit my words in order to comply with a conventional, non-Native, style of writing. Academic ways of thinking have never been able to handle non-academic ways of thinking. The entire educational system rejects, discounts, and tries to alter creative, out-side-the-box efforts. That's alright. You don't have to be an educational clone to succeed. You can remain who you are and find other paths to success.

Regardless of what people might have told you about your learning abilities or despite your past experiences, you can enter any college on our planet and be very successful. You already have everything you need to obtain a college degree. Once you unleash these powers, you will be amazed by your accomplishments. You can achieve anything. You can change the nature of things.



## Introduction

In 1898, Reverend J. A. Lippincott gave the commencement speech to Carlisle Indian School graduates. Here was his message to advocate for Native Americans becoming educated:

The Indian is dead in you. . . . Let all that is Indian within you die! . . . You cannot become truly American citizens, industrious, intelligent, cultured, civilized, until the Indian within you is dead.<sup>1</sup>

Another predominate admonition from the past efforts toward forced cultural assimilation of Native American children was to “kill the Indian, save the man”—words spoken by Brigadier General Richard Henry Pratt, founder and superintendent of the Carlisle Indian School. Genocide was becoming much more difficult to justify by this time in American history, so Pratt’s ideal was to send out an army of teachers to commit cultural genocide, to kill Native Americans by way of teaching them to be like white Americans.

At the turn of the twentieth century, America was trying to figure out how to educate “savages”—not Native Americans—to benefit the United States’ expansionist goals. American schools did not aim to make Native American students independent and self-sufficient; rather, these were indoctrination and assimilation academies intent on crushing a sovereign Native American identity. Schools were built or existing buildings were converted. Native American children were forcibly removed from their parents and communities. Children had their hair cut. They were made to wear military-style uniforms; were not allowed to speak any language other than English; and were physically, mentally, spiritually, and sexually abused. These schools were not a place for Native American children to learn and be respected. In today’s terms, they were more of a torture camp, where orders were to be followed; if they disobeyed, the children were

severely punished. Boys were taught how to farm and become typical American heads of household. Girls were taught how to cook, clean, and sew. These boarding schools hoped to remove all Native American culture and identity—using any means necessary. In the end, after attending boarding school for several years, Native American children would grow into Americans, never to return to their reservations or their own cultures, beliefs, or communities.

By the 1920s, Native American boarding schools began receiving a good deal of negative attention. Rather than being regarded as schools, they were considered labor camps. These schools were forcing children to upkeep the facilities, saving the government money. Although the official policies that allowed for boarding schools ended in the 1940s with the New Deal, some schools converted into conventional teaching institutions.

Haskell Indian Nations University is one of the converts, and it has a long and complicated educational history. Haskell began educating Natives Americans in 1884, mainly as a way to train young Native Americans in how to remove the “Native” and become simply Americans. Some of the children who were forced to attend in the 1800s never had a chance to make it back to their parents, communities, or cultural ways of life. The little white headstones in the graveyard at Haskell Indian Nations University bear the names of children who passed while attending the school and were not returned to their parents. These graves represent both standard genocide and cultural genocide.

In 2013, I traveled to Haskell with the honor of giving a talk to the university’s students. My message to these Native American students was that “an education saved my life.”

Native Americans and education have a complicated relationship, and trying to deal with this issue is complex. So my talk at Haskell had to be unpretentious, humble, and, most important, helpful.

I was set to speak to three different classes: two back-to-back classes in the business department, with Dr. Jim Bliven, and one social work class after lunch. The building where Dr. Bliven's classes were held looked like the high school I'd attended in the late 1970s. The hallways were bland, with institutional, colorless walls and tile floors. Dr. Bliven came to class with drinks and baked goods his wife had made. Like me, Dr. Bliven is a mixed blood, except he is Hispanic and Native American. He has coal black hair and a goatee.

Bliven greeted his students. "Good morning, everyone, I brought breakfast," he said, gesturing toward the drinks and baked goods on the table. "Please help yourselves. This is Dr. David Patterson from Washington University. He is going to speak to you today about his life and work."

I stood in front of a large chalkboard that already had my name written across one side. I looked out on the students, seated in perfectly even rows of tables and chairs. Many of the men wore coats and ties, and the women were in dresses. It turned out to be "Dress-Up Day" on campus, but Dr. Bliven's classroom atmosphere was very laid back, like his own personality.

I wanted to send three very strong points about what it takes to be successful in college. My agenda that morning had been stewing in my mind and developing over several years.

"Getting an education has nothing to do with intelligence," I told them. Although they seemed a bit surprised at first, some shook their heads in agreement. "A person does not have to have a high IQ to succeed in college. A strong belief system is much more powerful than a strong IQ." There were more heads nodding in agreement.

I recall saying, "A strong support system is also very powerful; to be successful, students must have a group of people who will bolster their efforts at getting an education." I have never heard of a successful student who finished college without outside support. It takes help from

family members, friends, professors, and any other person who has a positive, motivating influence. The loner does not do well in college—a loner is someone who is isolated, cut off from connections to supportive others. The loner could miss a class, several classes, and no one would notice. American public universities are not designed to accommodate individuals or an individual's personal problems. A support system in place for when personal problems do come along is vital to success in higher education.

Several studies have addressed the issue of family, community, and cultural connectedness and the effect on academic achievement for Native American students.<sup>2</sup> Students who are connected socially and academically do much better in college. Living and learning communities, which many universities have on their campuses, lend themselves to interconnected, supportive environments. Along with living and experiencing college life together, members of these communities can organize or sponsor cultural events that invite students' families into their academic activities. According to Huffman,<sup>3</sup> Native American and other minority students should find ways to hold on to their own cultural identities in academic life. Maintaining cultural identity increases students' self-awareness and the chances that they will remain in and complete college.

The final thing I wanted these students to leave with was – “hope.” I told them, if I could succeed in college, anybody can. Students are doomed without some level of hopefulness or optimism about thriving in college. A strong belief system, a strong support group, and hope are the primary ingredients for success in any educational institution.

Clearly and efficiently expressing these important themes was the challenge. In the midst of attending college, I think young people are more apt to depend on their overall survival skills than to think about or strategize specific, productive actions. College is an entirely new

environment that young people are expected to navigate on their own; they have left the security and familiarity of their home base and face new responsibilities and demands, academically, socially, and financially. This reliance on survival skills is especially true for minority youth, particularly Native Americans, who face far more obstacles than the general challenges of adjusting to the college environment. From the time that Columbus arrived, throughout the great American expansion and beyond, there was an enormous, coordinated effort to rid America of these “savages.” Haskell and other former boarding schools are reminders of the American educational system’s attempts to eradicate Native American culture. The only reason Native Americans still exist today is because they fought to survive.

Survival instincts are in our Native American blood. They are a hereditary response that has been passed down from our ancestors, whether they were warriors or peacekeepers. Our strong survival methods can either be a gift or a curse. During times when our lives are stressed or challenged, like starting college, if we use these survival skills in a good way along with following a planned-out, organized strategy, we can accomplish just about any task we might face. However, if we only use our survival skills with no plan, we are more likely to retreat to a safe, familiar stance, which often results in rigidity, defiance, and overall failure. Armed with gene-level resilience and a well-designed plan, we can conquer any challenge.

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Years ago, I got into an argument with an acquaintance about some issue related to Native Americans and their bad experiences. I can’t even remember the details now, but the discussion got heated quickly and I ended up mouthing off and storming away. After I had

cooled off some, an elder pulled me aside and said, “If all you do is yell at people about what your problems are, then the people will treat you like a dog barking in the distance. The people hear the dog’s barks and understand that it has an issue in its life, but they have no reasons to help the dog solve its problem. All they hear is an annoying, barking dog and after a while, they learn to tune out the noise.”

I understood her point. Now, I don’t just bark. I try to educate people!

This is a fact that bites: high rates of college dropout among Native American students throughout the United States are well documented.<sup>4</sup> According to Brown and Robinson Kurpius,<sup>5</sup> 75 percent to 93 percent of Native American students drop out of college prior to degree completion; compare this to the fact that about 35 percent of white college students drop out. While retention rates in higher education differ for all minority student populations, the gap is paramount among Native American students.<sup>6</sup> The fact is, if Native American students do get a high school diploma and enroll in college, they have the highest rate of college dropout compared to any other student demographic. Although Native American and other minority students are academically capable, a number of reasons contribute to this population having the highest educational dropout rate in the United States. For instance, several studies have examined the educational system’s design;<sup>7</sup> instructor attitudes;<sup>8</sup> and ineffective curriculum and instruction techniques.<sup>9</sup>

Most classrooms are structured where the students’ desks are lined up in military formation and the teacher stands in front conveying that it is the teacher with all the knowledge. Most teaching that occurs in Native American settings happens in a circle—a “talking circle.” This environment sends the message that all are equal and joined together during times of learning and teaching. Many teachers teach the way they themselves like to learn. Their attitude

toward teaching is to carry on the tradition that the teacher is the *knower* and the students are the *know-nothings*. There are no considerations for various learning styles or cultural issues related to learning within a large teaching institution. For instance, in many cultures, specifically Native American cultures, it is rude and disrespectful to call someone out on his or her mistakes. Unfortunately, in many classrooms around the United States, openly confronting someone's limitations is an acceptable practice.

Furthermore, Native American children are expected to learn in a system that is designed for the privileged majority. Every day, Native American children have to enter an institution that disrespects their culture and expects them to be open to learning untruthful history. They are expected to learn in a system that has a history of promoting cultural genocide. When they drop out, that institution blames the victims. Perhaps these kinds of barriers are contributing to the fact that Native American children have some of the highest rates of suicide among minority groups.

What if the numbers were reversed? What if the statistics and obstacles bit the privileged majority? What if they were told they would fail from the time they set foot in a classroom? Things would change. These numbers wouldn't be a dog barking in the distance—people would recognize the attacking animal.

I can only bark about a problem for so long before actually doing something about it. It has always bothered me when people complain about a problem rather than actually doing something to solve it. When the elder told me about the story of the barking dog, I was doing just that, barking without thinking of a solution. Years later, during a health conference, someone broached the subject of “why Native Americans have high dropout rates” in high school and college. Although I have addressed this question many times in the past, for some reason, the question hit me wrong this time. My response was, “Why do people always ask the question in

the way that it is the Native American student's fault for dropping out?" I challenged the person who asked the question to go ask the principal of a high school or the president of a university "why those institutions chase off so many Native Americans and other minorities?" I suggested that the person should begin asking people in leadership positions in higher education why our educational systems are designed to "best serve the majority." And then I declared that our educational systems are guilty of "institutional-level bullying."

When Native Americans, in the year 2014, have to recognize and celebrate Columbus Day in their schools, that is institutional-level bullying. Forcing Native American children to pledge their allegiance to a flag that is the symbol of their own people's destruction is institutional-level bullying. Native American children being molded into a system that is designed for the privileged conquerors is institutional-level bullying. If schools are allowing children to be harmed through bullying, that damage should be taken very seriously regardless of culture, race, gender, or any kinds of differences.

But it seems from recent news stories that schools are motivated to get serious only when *certain* children are harmed. When the privileged are harmed, new policies, laws, and social movements arise to stop that harm—instantaneously. When minority folks are angered or harmed, the privileged become willfully blind—blind to the special needs of underrepresented minority students; blind to how the current institutional structures are not working for certain students; blind to the fact that, until there are changes in the way educational services are delivered to minority children, American schools are guilty of institutional-level bullying.

Most educational institutions do not look inward; instead, they try to find fault in the child who stopped attending. Native American students who don't drop out have to regularly endure the challenges of being constantly bullied by the educational institutional. Failure to stop



this bullying suggests that minorities are not worthy of anything beyond the standard, harmful educational services.

There is evidence, though, that educational systems that have adapted to cultural factors can, in fact, have beneficial results for both majority and minority learners. Having an educational system that treats all humans with respect does not threaten the great experiences of the majority.

In the late 1980s, a large university implemented a unique critical thinking course for undergraduate students. The course primarily focused on cognitive psychology and philosophy issues connected with the theory of self-regulated learning (SRL). It was a course on learning how one learns. A review of the data revealed a significant difference in retention and graduation rates, on average, between the students who took the SRL course and those who did not.<sup>10</sup> Many studies have established that SRL increases academic achievement<sup>11</sup> and boosts the idea of lifelong learning.<sup>12</sup> With this encouraging data, differences between Native American students and other student populations were evaluated.

Compared to the university's general population, Native American students who participated in the SRL course had higher retention rates, higher graduation rates, and higher overall grade point averages (GPAs). The difference between Native American students who participated and those who did not are just as impressive. Native American students who completed the SRL course had higher retention rates, graduation rates, and overall higher GPAs compared to Native American students who did not participate in the SRL course.

Considering the high overall success of Native American students participating in the SRL course, certain components within the SRL course seem to connect with this population's thinking and learning styles. There has been a debate whether Native American students have

their own cultural learning styles,<sup>13</sup> but it is well established that thinking and learning are grounded in one's own culture.<sup>14</sup> Because the goals of SRL are to help students understand how they learn, coordination between teaching and learning strategies could benefit Native American and other minority students.<sup>15</sup>

SRL in college and university programs has gained much attention over the past several years.<sup>16</sup> Although the definition of SRL has evolved over time,<sup>17</sup> three major constructs of SRL theory are connected across theoretical opinions: (1) the student's learning style; (2) the student's ability to influence and predict his or her daily academic life; and (3) peer assessment and feedback.<sup>18</sup> The common element that unites each definition is that students perceive themselves as learners, and it is critical that they use various processes to regulate their own learning to achieve academic success.<sup>19</sup> Considering the retention, graduation, and GPA benefits Native American students gained by attending the SRL course, this type of course may benefit other minorities with similar college retention and graduation rates as Native American students.

Despite the great success of the SRL course since its inception in the 1980s, the large university terminated the course offering as the result of the downturn in the U.S. economy and university resources. Unfortunately, these types of resources for high-risk students, like Native Americans, are easily eliminated when universities are faced with finding ways to save money.

The SRL course taught us, though, that students from different cultures, like Native Americans, will perform worse when forced to learn within a style that does not match the learner's style.<sup>20</sup> Large-scale studies on cultural difference and SRL are lacking in the academic literature; perhaps the absence of these types of studies indicates that college professors might provide insufficient academic guidance to underrepresented students.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, college

teachers lack specialized teaching-skill development. If they are taught how to teach at all, they are taught how to be a typical college teacher.

In the face of such obstacles, instead of barking in the distance, as the elder so gently stated, it is time to take action and do something to change this tragedy, and this book is my attempt to do so.

I am Native American. Statistically, I should have dropped out of high school. I did, in the twelfth grade. Statistically, I should have an alcohol and drug problem. Check that off the list, too. Statistically, I should have committed or at least attempted suicide. That's three out of three.

I entered college with many secrets, the parts of my story I wanted to erase. I knew that if the educational system became aware of my past, I would be doomed. My plan was to keep my head down and mouth shut. I needed to blend in. Standing out or bringing any attention to myself seemed unwise.

The first step to some kind of healing is to stop being ashamed and afraid someone will discover my past. Keeping my head down and mouth shut during my years in college was my best thinking at the time. Only a select few really knew me or knew about my past. Now that I have a PhD, the highest educational degree in our system, I am free to raise my head and -- my voice.

Yes, I'm a high school dropout. My two older brothers managed to graduate, but I dropped out my senior year. The only reason I stayed as long as I did was vocational school. In the eleventh grade, a school administrator came into one of my classes and asked if any students wanted to attend vocational school. He said there were openings in heating and air, auto mechanics, and machine shop. Vocational school students only had to go to regular school half

of the day and spent the other half at the vocational school. I didn't know anything about vocational school, and regular school had too much reading, writing, and arithmetic, so I raised my hand for machine shop. To my great surprise, I was admitted into vocational school.

I did very well there. I hardly missed a day of machine shop in the year and a half I attended. The problem was, I didn't go to regular school. After about missing seventy days of regular school, I was finally called into the principal's office. As a punishment, he kicked me out of vocational school, which meant I had a full day of regular school. The only school-related activity that kept me involved in school was machine shop. Again, while I did not miss any days of machine shop, their best educational option for me was to remove me from the only positive thing in my life—vocational school. My time attending all-day regular school didn't last too long.

One of my last report cards had five Fs and one D. My dad glanced at it, then smirked at me. "Maybe you used up all your intelligence in one class," he said.

I did not get his point that day. I did finally get it. Intellectually, I am limited. Unfortunately, he would not be the only person who made a statement like this. The very fact that I was not able to understand his demeaning remark was an example of my thinking limitations. What I know now is that this limitation is not only a reflection of me, it also reflects poorly on him. Our first teachers are our parents, and my first experiences with teachers were poor and got worse from there.

Despite these experiences, though, I did go on to achieve a higher education, and I now have a successful and prolific academic life as a professor at Washington University in St. Louis. A higher education saved my life, and it can save the lives of many struggling young Native

Americans and other minorities, even within the current flawed system. This book shows how such a thing is possible.

## Suffering from a Poor Belief System

There was a young frog that was taught by his elders that scorpions should never be trusted and that frogs should get away from all scorpions. This young frog was told many times about the dangers of being stung and killed by scorpions. One day, while the young frog was playing by a riverbank, a scorpion appeared. The scorpion was very polite to the young frog. The young frog was also taught to be respectful to everyone, so when the scorpion spoke to the youngster, the frog politely responded.

The scorpion asked the frog for help. He said, “My young cousin, I hate to bother you, but I need help and you are the only one who can help me.” The scorpion continued, “I have to get across this river and I cannot swim. I have to get home to my own family right away and the only path is across this river. You are a very strong swimmer and can greatly help me.” The young frog wanted to help the scorpion, but the stories his elders told about scorpions made him reluctant to help. The frog said, “Mr. Scorpion, I could help you across this river and get you to your family, but frogs should not trust scorpions. My grandfather told me that scorpions sting frogs and I should run off whenever I see a scorpion.” The experienced scorpion reassured the frog. “My young, wise relative, if I sting you, I will not be able to cross this river and return to my family. You are my only hope.” This reasoned statement reduced the frog’s fear. The young frog thought about these words and finally offered the scorpion to climb onto his back.

They had made it halfway across the river when the scorpion stung the young frog. In shock, the young frog asked, “Why did you sting me? I will die from your sting and you will drown—we will both die today.” Just before they slipped under the water, the scorpion replied,

“Why I sting frogs has no reason, it is in my nature to sting. Losing our lives cannot change what is my nature.”

American sociologist William Isaac Thomas theorized that what is real in the mind is real in its consequences. For instance, if you believe that your spouse is being unfaithful to you, regardless of the facts, your behavior will more likely be similar to someone who has a cheating spouse. That *belief* is more powerful than *fact*. Regardless of the number of people who try to persuade the believer with facts, what is real in the mind, is real.

A friend of mine, Joe McQ, tells the story about hanging on to an old chair. For some reason, he just couldn't live without it. This poor old chair had been painted a few times during its life. Four different colors showed in places where the paint was chipped. The covering and padding were once in pristine condition but now were torn in many places, with the springs beginning to pop through. Joe's wife believed this chair was worthless and belonged in the trash. She would carry this old chair out for the garbage men to pick up every year during spring cleaning, but Joe would always seem to get home just before the truck arrived. Every year, he would jump out of his car and lug this old chair back up to the attic and again convince himself that, some day, he would have time to restore it. Joe's wife tried to understand why this chair was so important to her husband, but Joe never seemed to have a very good explanation. He couldn't even recall where or how he had first gotten the chair. But he still believed that, one day, he would bring this damaged chair back to its original condition.

That day finally came; Joe decided to fix up his beloved chair. He brought it down from the attic, dusted it off, and began to remove the old covering and padding. Joe sanded off several layers of paint until he reached the original wood. After he removed years' worth of paint jobs,

Joe was able to view this chair as it was originally designed. He discovered that this chair was made with high-quality wood and was spectacularly constructed.

Joe loaded the chair into his car and drove to a local furniture restoration shop. The gentlemen at the shop listened to Joe's story of the chair: how he had saved it from the dump many times and explained to his wife the importance of rescuing this seemingly worthless piece of furniture. The man at the shop inspected the chair, carefully examining it from different angles, and offered Joe \$3,500, as-is. Joe was shocked! He couldn't believe that this chair had sat in his attic year after year and that no other person saw its value. The shop manager showed all the details of the chair and explained its history. The chair was designed and constructed by a well-known craftsman, who offered a *lifetime guarantee* for all his work. The craftsman's products were in high demand, and every piece constructed was a one-of-a-kind work of art.

Most of us have allowed a lifetime of troubles to collect on us; we try to cover up all of the resentments, fears, humiliations, and regrets in our lives. After several years of trying to cover up with all these layers, we and others are unable to see our worth, our value, blocking us off from our original purpose. If we think we are worthless, that we have no value, our actions follow from that thought.

As an illustration of this fact, I can look back to the time when I used to conduct lectures in a men's prison. I began the talk with a question: How many of you are in here because of alcohol or drugs? Although I already knew that about 85 percent of folks incarcerated have an alcohol and drug problem, having the majority of the room raise their hands set the stage for our discussion regarding that specific problem. Most nights, everyone raised his hand. One night, though, I recall a man in the back row who did not raise his hand. I spotted him and asked why



he was in prison. The man responded that he had raped a woman and did not have a problem with alcohol or drugs.

I was shocked and surprised that he admitted to the crime of rape and relieved that he was caged up, at least for that moment. But after hearing him talk for a while, I realized, *there is something worse than the act of rape*. And that something is his *thought process* prior to that act; the man who had admitted to rape had a belief system that allowed for the violation of another person. If that man left prison with the same frame of mind that led him to rape a woman, I feared more violent acts would someday follow. You can't be a different person when you're thinking the same things.

The other side of this is that you can't remain the same while thinking differently. Changing behavior begins with changing thoughts.

Having spent a few years in college, both as a student and as a professor, I will expose a little secret about America's institutions of higher learning. First, obtaining a college degree has nothing to do with intelligence. You can be a high school dropout, an alcohol and drug addict, have a documented learning disability, or many other performance limitations, and still be successful in a university program. So, if you don't think you can make it in college, change your thinking—because you can.

The second and most important secret about college is, if you believe you are college material, you can get a PhD in any university in the world. What is believable is achievable. If you read this book, you might think, "If this guy can get a college degree, then anybody can." And that is the goal. Thinking and believing are strongly related. Some people believed I had limitations—I believed differently.

I recently conducted a study where I asked one question: What was the main reason you graduated from college? I only asked this question and wanted answers from underrepresented minorities: African Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanic/Latinos. There is lots of research indicating that if any of these folks enroll in college, they are likely to drop out before graduating. There are many reasons why they drop out, according to research, like poor college preparation, low GPA, lack of money, lack of support, and so on. Unfortunately, not a lot of research addresses why they succeed. Instead of avoiding factors that result in failure, why not follow a path of success?

All of the Native Americans, African Americans, and Hispanic/Latinos I have met who graduated from college got an e-mail from me asking that question. I then asked them to forward that same question on to other minority friends who graduated. After a few months, I received fifty-four e-mails from across the United States. The sample of e-mails I received comprised twenty-two (41 percent) Native Americans, nineteen (35 percent) African Americans, and thirteen (24 percent) Hispanics/Latinos.

Data analysis revealed that each of the three minority groups identified a variety of factors that they considered to be the main reasons for them completing an undergraduate education. The majority of participants listed more than one main factor. The top three themes cutting across every group were 1. Parental promotion of education and expectations that their children would go to college (37 percent); 2. Determination (33 percent) and; 3. Emotional and logistical support of parents (31 percent). Respondents who identified the influence of their parents (e.g., promoted and expected an education and provided emotional and logistical support) as the main reason for succeeding in college represented 69 percent of the sample.

With regard to African Americans, being the first in the family to attend college and wanting to break new educational ground for the family (47 percent) was listed at the main factor. An African American participant stated, “The main factor for me staying in college and continuing to pursue my studies is because as a first-generation college student, I feel a greater sense of passion and determination to live my life to my fullest potential.”

The breaking new ground sentiment was further expanded on by another participant, who indicated, “I think the main factor that allowed me to finish is the protective factors that I had in my life. My father, who attended college but did not finish, and mother always told me that I would go to college. I never thought about not going even though a lot of people in my family didn’t go.”

There was also more of a direct influence other than stories of past failures, for instance, one respondent stated, “I recall once calling my mother to advise I might not stay and I believe she dismissed my angst and told me she’d see me at graduation in a few months.” Another African American respondent went further by reporting, “Even if I wanted to drop out and leave I couldn’t because my parents had strict control over my education. . . . Dropping out and failure was not an option for them, which meant it wasn’t an option for me either.”

The second most reported theme was determination. One participant indicated, “Honestly, the main thing that kept me in college as an undergraduate student was my self-motivation, which is strongly driven by my faith.” Another graduate expressed determination this way: “The days when I wake up and it feels like I have the entire world on my shoulders because of my circumstance, the thing that keeps me motivated is that ‘end goal.’ I’m constantly thinking, my faith won’t let me give up.”

There were statements that centered on making one's mind up and moving forward. Their determination was expressed, for example, as, "So basically, I personally wanted a college degree, that was my goal, and I made the choice to complete this goal." Certain circumstances triggered determination. For instance, a respondent indicated, "Although it is clear to me that I had less support in general once I got to college than most, I think the fact that I didn't see another option made it impossible for me to quit." Whether they saw the choice as external or internal, their determination moved them forward toward achieving their goal of graduating.

For American Indian/Alaska Native participants, the majority of respondents named determination (27 percent) and emotional support of parents (27 percent) as the two top factors.

For instance, one American Indian/Alaskan Native participant stated, "It was at that time I had embedded a message within myself that I would not give up my personal goal of higher education because I had a child. I had witnessed friends and family members give up their personal dreams and goals because they had children at a young age. I had seen people quit going to school after they had children and I knew deep down, that isn't what I wanted to do."

This participant used her child to increase her determination. Many American Indian/Alaskan Native participants also indicated that the support of their parents enhanced their own personal determination to succeed in college and have a better foundation for the future.

One participant simply wrote, "I didn't want to let my family down. They always believed in me and were there for me." Later the same participant elaborated on this sentiment by writing, "If I had to pick a main reason [for graduating college] it would be my parental support. I appreciated my parents but I never knew how much they did for me or how much I would miss them until they dropped me off at college. They wanted me to graduate and I did, they were proud." Another participant described the same determined feelings by writing, "My

determination on finishing college was stemmed from my family; to be independent & self-sufficient.” Similar to African Americans, Native Americans used their determination and the motivating support from their families to propel them forward.

For Hispanics/Latinos, having parents who stressed the importance of a college education and expected their children to attend (62 percent) was most often the main factor for choosing to finish college. For instance, participants stated, “There was no way in hell I was going to let my parents down,” or “The main factor that I had for staying in college was to make my family proud,” and “I believe the main reason for me to stay in college was my mom’s support. She taught me since I was young that education was the way to be successful in life and supported me through my school years so when time to college came it was no question if I was going to go or not.” It is clear family plays a very strong role in college success for Hispanic/Latinos who responded to this question. Not letting a parent down and making them proud led their way forward.

As with the other two groups, the remaining highest reported statements among Hispanics/Latinos were centered on determination and having emotional and logistical support from parents. A respondent stated, “I also had incredible support and encouragement from my parents, which helped me get to college and make it through college.” Determination was expressed in this group by a member stating, “I did not want to be another ‘dropout statistic’ and was determined to be successful.” The supportive family played a large part in Hispanic/Latino students’ lives during college, along with having some internal drive.

It seems if you ask a typical college administrator why minorities drop out of college, the response, most likely, will be that the student was not prepared to be a college student. That is code for saying that the student was *not smart enough*. Colleges and universities place very high

value on intelligence. Enrollment is driven by SAT and GRE scores, GPAs, and scores from other tests that purport to measure intelligence. So when it is necessary to explain dropout, many college administrators search for individual-level flaws.

I hope that what this study indicates is that success for minorities has little to do with how smart they are. There were no responses like “The reason I succeeded in college was because I am very smart and a great test taker.” No! College success for minorities is all about family support and/or determination. Now, please take note of the “and/or” in that last sentence. If you never received or do not have any family support, you can still succeed if you are determined. Having family support is great and helps very much, but you are not doomed without it. Determination—or, said another way, a strong belief system—can move you along nicely toward achieving your goals. If you are not sure if this is true, ask a minority college graduate about the main factor contributing to his or her success.

## **A Dysfunctional Family**

There was an unspoken rule in my family that graduating high school was all that was expected from my brothers and me. You could drink alcohol, take a few drugs, without much said, as long as there was a plan to graduate. Once graduated, you try to find a good, stable job and not get yourself fired. The only reason to graduate high school was to increase the likelihood of getting a job. Having a job equaled being an adult. On both sides of my family, the attitude was that once you get a job, you are no longer a kid—regardless of your age. My oldest brother started working when he was in the ninth or tenth grade. He was allowed to start making adult decisions like staying out all night and driving a car without a license. Although he was about fifteen years old, the adults in my family left him alone. He had a job!

I could not get away with the things he was doing, although we were only two years apart. I wanted to get a job as soon as possible so I could be treated like an adult. Once you are an adult male in my family, the tradition is to work hard, drink hard, and die young. The adult males in my life at this time died in their fifties. They all followed our family tradition. I was happy to follow it as well.

My mom's people are Native American, Cherokee descendants. She is the third child of five. The first four were girls, Mary, Margie, Betty (my mom), and Rosie, and the youngest was the only boy, Bill. My grandfather, Earl Allen (Pap Pap to me and my brothers and cousins) was a very quiet man. He raised his family in rural Kentucky and was a farmer for most of his life. When something on the farm broke, he fixed it. If his family ate, they ate crops he had planted or animals he had raised. Sunday was his only day off.

When my grandfather was too sick to continue farming, the home and everything else were auctioned off. My mom remembered walking from her bedroom into the living room the night after the auction was over and all was sold and saw her father lying in her mother's lap, sobbing.

My grandparents moved to Louisville, Kentucky, to be closer to the hospital and my grandfather's doctor in the city. He was sick, but he still worked; he got a job as a night watchman at the local high school. My mom brought my brothers and me to visit our grandparents every Sunday. We would eat, the kids would play, and the adults would sit and talk. I remember sitting on my Pap Pap's lap in his rocking chair. He didn't say a word, only looked at me. When he looked my way, I felt he was saying, "I see you and you are OK now." I felt safe with him because I knew he was a good man. I was also scared, because he had a hole in his throat from a tracheotomy and had coughing fits. But everyone respected him and, as a child, I picked up on that.

My Pap Pap crossed over soon after the move to Louisville. The day of his funeral, my aunts stayed in the room where my Pap Pap lay, and most of my uncles and my dad stood outside smoking and sneaking alcoholic drinks. After Pap Pap was put into the ground, his side of the family changed. Although I was young and did not understand all of the dynamics of family systems, there was a feeling of the family being leaderless.

My mom's family respected a humble life. We were expected to treat people kindly and remain committed to family. They were basically a traditional Native American family.

My dad, Coleman Patterson, AKA Buz or Buzzy, was born with clubfeet. He was a sickly child, in and out of hospitals, in leg casts and braces and on crutches, until he reached his teens. As kids, my brothers and I were told that our father suffered many operations, many times



without painkillers. The doctors gave my father something to bite on while they operated. When I was older, I overheard his mother, my grandmother, Momma Mae, say that she felt guilty for leaving him in the hospital for months without visiting.

Momma Mae divorced my dad's father, Kenneth Perry Patterson, and married Lloyd Jones after his return from World War II. Kenneth Perry Patterson died an alley drunk in his mid-fifties. Lloyd Jones and Momma Mae lived hard, worked hard, and drank harder. This was the belief system in which my father, the only child, was raised.

Secrecy was another part of that belief system. I once overheard my Momma Mae say that she'd had "several abortions" before finally giving birth to my father. I learned many more secrets about this side of my family as I was growing up.

Every summer, just before the start of school, my mom used to take my brothers and me to Kmart for new clothes. When I started high school, you had to own a pair of Chuck Converse. I could have attended school with torn pants, ratty old shirts, and no money, but arriving at school without a pair of Chucks was just terrible for one's year-long reputation. My mother, raising three kids with little help from her alcoholic spouse, could never afford them, but I couldn't resist just trying them on.

"Here, David, try these," my mom said, pushing a pair of Kmart's Chucks knock-off, Buddies. "These look just like those other ones you tried on."

I shook my head. Mom didn't understand the politics of showing up on the first day of school with some fresh Buds on. I would better show up barefoot. From a distance, they looked just like Chucks, but take a closer look and you can tell that they are fakes, imitations, phonies. I wouldn't get ten feet inside the door without someone noticing—without being exposed as a fake.

Buddies and I had something in common before I changed my ways. The further away I was from a person's intrusive eyes, the more real I appeared. Up close, my phoniness was visible. The life I wanted to portray to the outer world was best hidden by distance. My mounting list of bad decisions and bad behaviors resulted in more secrets to hide, which led to more distance from folks—and from sanity. There is this idea among my Native American community—*we are all related, connected with each other*. It was hard to remain connected with people when I did not let them get close to me. I thought if people really knew me, they would run away as fast as possible. If they knew what I was thinking, they surely would have me locked away. I never had a “real” conversation about me until I was in my late twenties and trying to change my life. If someone asked me what was wrong, my usual response was, “Uh . . . I don't know.” Although my mind raced with all of the things wrong with me and my life, I could not release them; I could not be honest with anyone about my problems. I did not know how to start, where to start, or whom I could really trust not to judge me if I did start revealing all of my problems.

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At some level, I have always dealt with dreams and visions. When I was a kid and finally got up the courage to say something to an adult about feeling like I had experienced a current event in the past, I was told it was *déjà vu*, a French term meaning “already seen.” I can't explain all of the mysteries behind having already seen something. As a matter of fact, I don't think solving this mystery is so important.

I could be sitting in a car looking out the window, and in my mind I would know exactly what was coming next. I knew about every tree, hill, or valley to come. I had seen this place before, clearly, like I had spent a long time there. It was not like I saw myself sitting in a car. My eyes had seen this area before. There were also times when I would have a flash or vision, particularly between dreams. I would wake up and very briefly think about what I just dreamed about and go back to sleep. I would not recall this dream, sometimes several years later, until it happened in my real—awake—life. I would think back to when I had the original dream-vision and would understand then why it had seemed so strange to me. For instance, when I was a kid, maybe eight or nine years old, I dreamed about being in a lot of snow outside cutting wood with all of these strangers. In the dream, we were talking about weird things like our kids and working.

About forty years later, I was in Buffalo, New York, in the snow cutting wood with some friends and some others who wanted to help. One of the helpers, whom I had never met before, started talking about his kids. My ears and eyes locked on to him and his conversation. I knew exactly what words were coming next, and his face took me back to my small bedroom in Kentucky. As an adult in Buffalo, I had had many of these visions, and I knew what to do and think. But when they first started coming to me as a kid, they greatly confused me, and I was not sure what was happening, or why.

I was too afraid to tell anyone I was having the visions. I'm not sure I even knew how to explain them. I mostly thought my mind was damaged, so I tried to ignore them and convince myself they were not happening. When I started drinking and using drugs, they ended for the most part. One or two visions came over the course of several years, when I was high and not living the right way. Once I got clean and sober, they started coming back. By this time, I had

wise elders around me who could help me understand why they were coming and what I should do about them. These trusted Native friends explained how these were gifts to be cherished. They were a way of letting me know I was on a good path. They told me that the visions provided vital information about what is to come and how I should live my life accordingly. The elders let me know I should not ignore my visions, that they are important messages from my guide. As long as I am following a good path, treating others with respect and always doing what's right, this gift would remain with me. I would be directed and supported as long as my mind was ready for these messages.

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When I was a kid, I jumped a fence while taking a shortcut home. Out of nowhere, a big brown dog charged me. I stood there for a second, terror-stricken, my feet cemented to the ground as the dog hurled himself toward me, baring his teeth. Adrenaline kicked in and I leapt safely back over the fence before the dog could reach me.

In my home, there was no safe place to jump.

Whenever I heard my father's car pull into our driveway, I felt panic-stricken, like when that big dog was charging me, ready to tear me to pieces. My father was a six foot four drunken Irishman with an inner rage that could be triggered without much warning. I could be beaten with a belt or his hand until I pissed my pants. If I did, that was apparently an act of disrespect, and I would have to stand in the corner afterward. Standing facing the corner after a trouncing with piss-soaked pants is extremely embarrassing, and confusing. The mind races, trying to understand how this all came about.

There is no other high that matches this racing mind, this pulsating panic. I got that high when I was beaten. I got it when I had to watch my mom get beaten, screaming and pleading for my father to stop. Similarly, when an older kid convinced me to pull my pants down and exposed me to sexual sensations—that was also a very confusing experience. My mind raced; I felt extremes of pleasure and repulsion, bounced back and forth between the two, desire and loathing. And then it was over and my mind settled on repulsiveness and deterioration. Being beaten and sexually stimulated as a kid both created certain thought processes that I found difficult to overcome.

And so I've never felt right with the world. My mind has always raced from one thought to the other. I always wondered why I was different from others. I never felt connected to anything or anyone.

Alcohol and drugs were the only things that dulled these constant, secret thoughts. Alcohol also deactivated the overwhelming, negative self-talk. Drinking released me from the feeling of phoniness. It was the only thing that made me feel “real.” It was a great tool for living, and I learned this valuable lesson at a young age.

When I drank, I did not shake in stressful situations. I did not feel out of place or out of control. Drinking alcohol made my life normal. My mind stopped racing, my hands stopped shaking, and I joined in with the rest of the world. Throughout my young life, I compared my insides, my thoughts and feelings, to people's outsides. From the outside, most people seemed like they had their lives together. They seemed healthy. Comparing those healthy-looking exteriors to my inner turmoil only resulted in more negative self-talk. The only thing that would calm my mind was alcohol. Alcohol did for me what I was not able to do for myself.

Prior to discovering alcohol, I was insecure, full of self-doubt, and lacking in confidence—and what's real in the mind is real in its consequences. And when it came to the opposite sex, I really felt out of place and became so overwhelmed with nervousness that I avoided interactions with girls—until I was in seventh grade, when I found one girl who so mesmerized me that I had to do something about it. Shelly was beautiful to me and I was in love. She had long, thick, wavy brown hair, like beautiful brown steel wool. She had lovely brown eyes and thick eyebrows that almost met her hairline. Come to think of it now, she was pretty hairy with hairy little knuckles. But when you're in love, these things can be overlooked. She smelled good too. I had never been this close to someone I loved before. She was perfect for me.

The problem was that I didn't know the first thing about how to talk with her or show my feelings to her. I did have a secret weapon, though, in my friend Sid; he seemed smooth with the ladies, at least the ones in our seventh-grade class. Sid became my mentor and taught me the most important thing I needed to know to get my new love, Shelly, to become my girlfriend—how to French kiss.

Sid verbally instructed me and acted it out for me, arms waving, head leaning, and tongue slinging. I paid close attention and was a great student. I practiced. I practiced with my pillow, the air, a dog, a tree, whatever was readily available.

The day came when I would try my new technique on Shelly. Sid had a clubhouse in his backyard that was shaped like a rocket ship. It had three floors, and the top could fit four kids our age. This was a perfect place. Sid had set up a meeting between him, me, Shelly, and one of her friends for Sid. We all sat on the top floor of the clubhouse and smoked a cigarette. We were all new smokers, so the cigarette still gave us a buzz. Sid's plan was that, after we were done smoking, I was going to kiss Shelly, indicating our relationship as boyfriend-girlfriend.

The pressure was on, which triggered all of my insecurities and self-doubts. Everything was in place but me. I was a wreck: mind racing, hands shivering, and armpits sweating.

After we'd finished the cigarette, Sid gave me the look. We all knew why we were there. We all knew this was the moment—especially me. I thought I would count to ten and do it. Ten seconds came and went. I thought I would count another ten; the first time didn't seem right. Another ten seconds, counted—and gone. The pressure became so overwhelming, with Sid staring me down, Shelly moving closer to me, and my mind spinning.

I pounced onto Shelly.

I was going through all of my practiced moves. Arms moving, head leaning, and tongue slinging. As it finally hit me that I was French kissing my love, I realized that Sid never told me how long I should continue. So, just as I leapt on, I awkwardly disengaged our faces. Everything was quiet and still. Shelly looked at me, Sid looked at Shelly, Shelly's friend looked at me, and I realized everyone looked disappointed. Shelly and her friend jumped down out of the clubhouse without saying a word, and Sid followed close behind. I was left there alone, confused, stunned, and a bit moist.

There was no need to count to ten when I was around girls after I started drinking alcohol. If I had drunk alcohol before Shelly arrived at the clubhouse, that day would have been very different. And for the better—at least that's what I thought once I began drinking. Although I knew alcohol changed my family members for the worse, it was a medicine for me. It cured all of my problems, physical and mental.

Alcohol became a constant companion. There was no life situation that could not be cured by a few drinks. Unfortunately, the cure became the curse. The more I drank, the more I wanted. Once I started drinking, there was no plan on stopping. I craved more after the fifth

drink than after the first, and I could not satisfy this craving, no matter how much I kept drinking. I would stop only because I had run out of money, passed out, or others had made me stop. But left on my own, I would drink until drunk, and then some. Once I started drinking or using drugs, I could not predict the outcome. I could not trust myself to do the right, smart thing. If you can't trust yourself, whom can you trust?

Drinking alcohol is problematic, and the consequences can be severe for both individual and society. A study of non-traffic-related deaths that involved alcohol use indicated that the presence of alcohol intoxication can be a significant contributing factor in many fatalities.<sup>22</sup> Studies on unintentional injury-related deaths by drowning, hypothermia, falling, fire, or poisoning showed that between 26 and 90 percent of people were drinking alcohol at time of death. Vehicle-related injuries have been considered a social problem for several decades. Among drivers between the ages of twenty and forty who were fatally injured in traffic accidents, 50 percent were found to be intoxicated at time of death.<sup>23</sup>

Alcohol use can also increase the risk of becoming a victim of violence.<sup>24</sup> Between 30 and 57 percent of homicide victims tested positive for alcohol at time of death. Among victims of violence, including intimate partner violence and child abuse, more than one-third reported that their perpetrators were under the influence of alcohol at the time of the incident. Specifically, among incidents of intimate partner violence, studies have shown that as many as two-thirds of all incidents are associated with alcohol.<sup>25</sup>

Alcohol use is also associated with high-risk sexual behaviors such as unprotected sex, multiple sex partners, and increased risk of sexual assault, unintended pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infection.<sup>26</sup> Alcohol is a significant cause of miscarriage and stillbirth among childbearing women as well as a significant precursor to birth defects.<sup>27</sup>



Long-term health consequences from alcohol misuse can be devastating. Chronic diseases associated with continued alcohol misuse include cardiovascular problems;<sup>28</sup> cancer of the liver, colon, breast, and throat;<sup>29</sup> cirrhosis of the liver and hepatitis C;<sup>30</sup> pancreatitis;<sup>31</sup> and other gastrointestinal issues.<sup>32</sup> Neurological and psychiatric issues associated with alcohol misuse include dementia, stroke,<sup>33</sup> depression, anxiety, and suicide.<sup>34</sup> People who misuse alcohol are also at higher risk of on-the-job problems, resulting in higher unemployment and decreased productivity.<sup>35</sup>

According to the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion,<sup>36</sup> in the United States, roughly 16 percent of adults aged eighteen years or older practice behaviors that would categorize them as binge drinkers. Binge drinking is characterized in men as having five or more drinks on one occasion, and in women as having four or more drinks on one occasion. Heavy drinking is characterized among women as averaging more than one drink per day, and among men as more than two drinks per day. In the United States, 4 percent of women and over 6 percent of men are considered to be heavy drinkers.<sup>37</sup> The National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions<sup>38</sup> places the prevalence of alcohol abuse in the United States at about 5 percent overall, with people between 18–29 and 30–44 years old having rates of alcohol abuse slightly higher than the overall total, at about 7 percent and 6 percent, respectively. These figures translate into about ten million people total in the United States meeting the criteria for high-risk drinking.

Alcohol use and the resulting problems within Native American communities are well known and well documented. Native Americans have the highest prevalence of substance abuse of any racial and ethnic group throughout the United States.<sup>39</sup> Studies have speculated on different factors as the cause for levels of drinking patterns within the Native American

population, such as modeling the drinking patterns of European colonists,<sup>40</sup> different levels of acceptable behaviors,<sup>41</sup> and socioeconomic conditions of reservations.<sup>42</sup>

Regardless of all the reasons for high rates of drinking in Native American populations, research indicates that they begin drinking at a young age and experience the resulting effects of overall poor health and high mortality rates. According to the Office of Applied Studies,<sup>43</sup> in 2005, Native American youths aged twelve or older were more likely than any other racial group to have an alcohol problem in the past year. It is an unfortunate and consistent finding that Native Americans have high rates of alcohol use and all of the problems that come with drinking too much alcohol.

It is not just alcohol and drugs that can cause problems for Native Americans and keep them from seeking a higher education. It is also hard to change. Trying to do something different is risky, especially if people around you are not willing to change. I never talked about going to college while I was in high school and around my friends. They would have laughed at me and made fun. Lots of times in Native American communities, there is pressure to conform and not get a college education. Going to college could turn you white! For instance, there is a saying that Native Americans who go away to college and return to their communities are apples—red on the outside, white on the inside. Being accused of selling out is a hard reputation to restore. In my neighborhood, a sellout cannot be trusted.

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I learned early not to trust people, especially those who were the closest to me. Our father had a form of discipline that often crossed the line into extreme physical abuse. I am the

youngest of three boys. Whenever we got into trouble, as boys do, our father doled out various levels of “discipline,” depending on how sober he was. If our father had downed way too many drinks of brown whiskey, there were no limits to the amount of punishment exhibited. The only things that could stop the physical harm were him becoming too tired to carry on, my mom begging him to stop, or one of the boys pissing his pants from the extreme pain and trauma.

If our father was somewhat sober, the violence was still extreme but would not reach the same level as when he was drunk. So my brothers and I learned to monitor our father’s “moods” and tried to act accordingly. Unfortunately, everyday occurrences could dramatically alter his moods. We were poor. With the combination of day-to-day hardship, lack of available resources, my father’s own history of childhood trauma, and way too much alcohol, we boys were in constant, grave emotional and physical danger when our dad was around.

My oldest brother was a big-boned kid, and the most experienced of us; he knew how to avoid some of the violence. He knew to stay away from the home whenever our dad was around. My middle brother was very skinny and suffered from rheumatic fever when he was in grade school. He stayed in his bed for about a year during the illness. His sickness had some lingering effects, which might have resulted in different labels using today’s terms. But back then, he was simply “sickly.”

If our father came home and something in the house had been broken, he would line us up. “Nothing’s gonna happen if the guilty one confesses,” he’d tell us. This tactic well worked the first time, but after we saw what happened to the guilty boy after the confession, quick confessions were few and rare.

One evening, our father came home in a semi-sober, bad-day mood. Something in the house had been broken—an old lamp. We were taken into the dimly lit, cobweb-infested basement. Our father lined us up.

“I’m going to close my eyes. The one who broke the lamp, just step forward and touch my hand. All I want is for one of you boys to confess and everything will be ok,” he said. As he closed his eyes, he added, “If no one touches my hand, you are all going to get it.”

We silently looked into each other’s horrified eyes. None of us knew who the guilty party was. My oldest brother would not dare touch, and my other brother and I knew it. Having just experienced a very troubling episode the night before, I was too terrified to touch. I could not take another hard beating. Because the guilt would be too much if all three were beaten, I began to move slowly toward my father’s outstretched hand. Just before I made contact, my middle brother, free of any guilt and probably in his bed at the time of the offense, reached out and slapped our father’s hand.

Before I could process what had just happened, our father grabbed his sickly middle child by the arm and began beating him. The only sounds were the high-pitched smacks that came from a very large hand flogging the body of a small, weak boy. No screams, no begging or pleading to stop, no crying. That skinny, sickly boy did not make one sound, drop one tear, or let loose one drop of piss. My brother let out nothing, not a whimper.

Although we had gotten used to seeing each other’s bruises during bath times, the wounds on my brother’s body shocked me the next day. But we went about our day as we always did and never spoke about that night. We never spoke of any of the many traumatic events we endured. It was around this time that I determined never to trust anyone and never to allow anyone to treat me this way. I committed never to allow anyone else to harm me.

The Native American side of my family was not violent at all—I felt safe around them. They were encouraging and respectful, quiet and gentle, like my Aunt Mary, my mom’s oldest sister. She made most everything, like food and clothes, from scratch. I never heard her raise her voice to anyone. She taught me how to do things, like cooking and making dough and knitting. I loved being around her. She treated me well every time we were together, and when I entered her home, I could tell she was happy to see me. She did not demand that I learn—I wanted to learn from her. I believed that she loved me and wanted to help me. I believed she was doing something *for* me. In school, where I was forced to learn, I hated it and I believed they were doing something *to* me.

I hated school, especially high school. All I wanted to do was wake up and have some fun. Being in school was not my idea of having fun. I failed the ninth grade. Everyone I hung out with went on into the tenth grade, and I was left back with the losers. Failing did not help with my bad attitude toward being in school. My brothers made fun of me, and I could tell my parents looked at me differently. I was too young and immature to fully express my problems. I couldn’t retain what I read and I couldn’t understand algebra. Instead of sitting down with someone and expressing my limitations, the only thing I would express was that “school sucks.”

As I discussed earlier, I dropped out of high school in the twelfth grade. I was going to fail because of all the days I’d missed. This was one of the lowest points in my life. Although I very much wanted out of school, I knew that once I did formally drop out, my entire family would know. Right before my last day, the principal called me into his office. I had been in the vice principal’s office when I was caught cutting school or was in general trouble, but this was my first time seeing the principal himself.

He started off talking about all of the reasons I should graduate, like it would be harder to get a job and I would limit my choices later in life. I already knew this information. I had heard it from my family. Thinking back, he never offered anything beyond what I needed to do. He never asked about my home life. He never asked specific reasons why I would fail most classes but pass others.

Teachers who stand in front of the class, disconnected from their students, resulted in me disconnecting from them. If there was any sign that a teacher disliked me or disrespected me, I made sure to disconnect from that teacher fully. An English teacher, though, who was young and African American, took an interest in me. She spoke to me in a caring, genuine way. She encouraged me. I could tell she had some level of hope in me. I loved her class and did well in it.

The principal's office was set up where he sat behind a large desk looking down at me. His disappointed, shaming face while speaking at me only fueled my hatred for the whole system of learning. His warning about dropping out went right past my ears. The appalling look on his face matched my internal feelings. I already felt ashamed. I knew this was a mistake.

I transferred the principal's looks and behavior to all other adults, even those in my family. Although no one in my larger family went to college, most had graduated high school. My Native aunts and uncles, those who have always treated me with respect and kindness, I thought would finally treat me like I was a failure. Although that didn't happen, in my mind I thought they would. So I avoided them as much as possible. I did not go to family functions. I was embarrassed. I thought I would have to sit through another lecture. I wanted to get this decision to quit high school out of my life and out of my mind.

Unfortunately, the pattern of escaping things through alcohol and drugs continued on after I'd dropped out. I had a hard time finding a job, and I had a hard time following anyone's

good advice. My days were spent searching for ways to drink and use drugs. My life was turning out just like people had predicted it would. I hated them for it and hated myself for them being right. I felt like a failure, which required more drinking to get those thoughts out of my head. I was lost and basically alone, on my way to nowhere.

## **Building a Support System**

I finally got a pretty good job at a garbage collecting company in my early twenties. They needed workers badly. New hires started at the bottom and worked their way up to become garbagemen. I started my first morning on the job smoking weed on the way to the workplace. Didn't make much sense to get their hopes up about me. I stumbled my way up the ladder, then back down, sideways, and every which way. I was in my early twenties and making about fifty thousand dollars a year. Another benefit to being a garbageman was that sometimes a call would go out on the CB radio that a fresh load of "Mothers Cookies" was heading to the dump. Mothers Cookies used our services to get rid of its trash. There were a lot of loads that had perfectly good cookies still sealed in their packages, and if you could get to the landfill at the same time as the truck, you could pick up some snacks.

I ended up driving the largest type of garbage truck in the waste management system, the kind with forks in front that pick up dumpsters and empty them in an opening on top of the truck. It was easy enough work. The only problem for me was that it started at four in the morning. During those times when I would stay out until two in the morning drinking, I was faced with a choice of leaving the bar to sleep for a few hours or continuing from the bar straight to work. Sometimes I made the wrong choice and tried to sleep, which resulted in being written up for showing up late. There was some kind of system, three strikes in a year and you're out. The day came when I had three strikes. My union steward and I met with the CEO and general manager. After everyone spoke with me trying to keep up with things, the CEO finally said I was terminated. This was a new word to me. I had been in similar meetings and so I just sat there,



and afterward the union man explained what to do. This time, we all signed documents; then the union man and I left the CEO's office. As we were walking out, I asked what had happened and the steward said I had been terminated. I didn't understand what that word meant. When I asked, he said, "You just got your ass fired for good."

Had I known what "terminated" meant, I'm sure I would have had a different look on my face when the CEO said it. I'm sure everyone thought I had an "I don't give a shit" attitude. That was not the case at all. I did give a shit! I had worked at this place for more than five years. It was nine in the morning, and now I had nowhere to go.

Luckily, I was taught a skill: truck driving. A fuel-hauling business was down a man when I showed up. After speaking with me for a while, the owner asked if I'd ever driven an eighteen-wheeler. I had not, but I told him I had. He pointed to one sitting on the lot and said to go check the oil and brake fluid, and to bring it around out front. After about fifteen minutes of figuring out how to open the hood of the truck, I was able to get to it. However, after I got a look at everything, there was no possible way I would be able to accomplish any of the tasks he had requested. I shut everything back up, and once I'd figured out how to start the monster, I pulled it around. I assured the owner everything checked out on his rig.

Hauling fuel is very dangerous. That big rig is a six-thousand-gallon gas tank on wheels. The owner showed me how to get the fuel inside the truck and deliver it to gas stations and other services needing fuel. Workers were not allowed to wear certain clothes in those fuel-filling factories because one spark would blow the place to pieces. And when unloading fuel at a gas station, there is absolutely no smoking anywhere close to the truck.

After a few months, I had found a good routine sitting in the truck smoking and waiting for the truck to unload its full load of fuel. One day I got a call to deliver a full load of unleaded

gasoline to the Louisville Gas and Electric Company, just off Broadway Street in downtown Louisville. I remember the details for a reason. While in my usual routine, sitting in the truck smoking and waiting for the truck to unload, I glanced in the mirror to see unleaded gas shooting out of LG&E's tank. I jumped out of the cab, flicked my cigarette away from the fumes, and shut the system down. If I had to guess, I would say forty or fifty gallons of fuel had volcanoed out of the ground and spread over the pavement and city street.

I was trained to use some water to wash away any spilled fuel. No one ever mentioned anything about fifty plus gallons' worth of spillage. I quickly gathered the hoses and put them away and left. Before I had gotten far, the owner called me on the radio. He insisted I return to LG&E. When I got back, it looked like the scene of an emergency. The police were there on site directing traffic, and several fire trucks were surrounding the spilled fuel. It seems that when gasoline drains into a sewer system, bad things happen—like a spark blowing up an entire city block.

When I got back to the office and the owner used the word “terminated,” I knew exactly what he meant.

It wasn't long until I ran into an old garbageman buddy. He told me that the company had just bought out other garbage businesses and needed workers. For some reason, they hired me back. I was put on six months' probation. Any write-ups would result in immediate termination. When the heat is on me, I am a very good employee. And for six months or so, I was great. When the heat decreased, the problems increased. I began drinking regularly and using any drug available. I have driven large trucks and operated large equipment under the influences of alcohol, pot, cocaine, Quaaludes and various other downers, LSD, and crank, just to name a few.

My life was a wreck. I tried to convince myself and everyone around me that my life was fine and that my drinking and drug use were under control, but these were untruths. I hated the fact that my life centered on drinking and drugging. All of my friends were just like me—on a path to nowhere. The number of secrets increased. The guilt, shame, and remorse that had been there since childhood only intensified with my lifestyle. Having overheard one of my uncles when I was young saying something like it, the thought that *there is no right way to do wrong* constantly swirled in my mind. I was doing wrong. I would get off work and head straight for the bar, telling myself I was just going to have a couple of beers. It was a lie I told myself over and over again. Those couple of beers turned into many nights of being in a blackout, too drunk to get myself home. While drunk or high on drugs, I would do things I would have never done sober. I lied to cover my tracks and then lied about telling lies. I would cheat people out of anything to benefit myself. I would take things that did not belong to me and then lie about it. One lie turned into hundreds, and trying to keep up with all of my lies was a full-time effort. My work behavior made a turn for the worse, and anyone who knew my past work experiences could plainly see a pattern of destruction. The general manager, who gave me all kinds of chances and opportunities, knew what I was about, even if I didn't.

One thing that never seemed to change in all of my life was my human conscience—what I had done and what I was doing were wrong. Drinking and drugging only suppressed this knowledge. During times when I was sober, my internal conversation was unbearable. The thought that “there has to be something better than this” constantly pounded me. Drinking to the point of passing out was the only way I could quiet my racing mind.

Then, one day out of nowhere, the general manager mentioned that the company had just hired a local employee assistance program that could help with any issues a worker might have. At the time, I wondered why he would specifically say something like that to me.

I met Ron McKiernan, from the employee assistance program, in the basement of his home. I thought I was headed to an official, professional business. The address led me to a residential neighborhood and a typical house. I circled the block a couple times, making sure I was at the right place. I went to the door and knocked, and no one answered.

I sat in my car and waited for someone to show up. After about a half-hour, an old, broken-down car pulled into the driveway. An older man wearing a white, short-sleeved shirt and a tie stepped out. His shirt was wet under the arms with sweat from the midsummer heat of Louisville. Although I saw him, he did not notice me sitting in my car. About five minutes after he went into the house, I knocked on the door. He was late, but asked why I was. I told him I had been sitting in my car waiting.

He invited me in and we walked down into his finished basement. Ron McKiernan was in his mid-fifties, with bleach blond hair in the style of Bart Simpson. I sat on a sectional couch facing a large-screen TV that was not on. Ron pulled a wooden rocking chair close to me. His son Pat joined shortly after; he was also part of this EAP business. Pat was about my age, tall and slim, and looked like a young man with few worries. He had brown hair and eyes and was wearing nice clothes. Pat glided as he walked past me to sit down. He looked like he had his life together. Unlike me, he could look at people without being ashamed of who he was. He introduced himself, held out his hand to mine, and welcomed me. As soon as we all sat, Ron started.

“How much do you drink on a regular basis?” First question he asked me. Not did I drink—he cut straight to the point and asked how much. I thought I was there to talk about my problems at work, why I was passed over for the better, easier jobs even though I had seniority. I thought talking to Ron would get me better working conditions.

“A couple beers. After work,” I muttered. Ron leaned forward, crossing into that invisible, off-limits space that only a select few can enter, and only with permission. I got a good look at his face. His eyes followed mine, like a ping-pong match, darting across my face.

“Look, David,” Ron said, staring me straight in the eyes. “You’re not gonna be able to bullshit the Bullshitter.” He paused, and I tried again to avoid his gaze. The Xanax pills I had taken earlier were not helping, and Ron could tell I was nervous and uncomfortable.

“I’ve been in prison eight times, total of eighteen years. I’ve committed practically every crime on the law books. I’ve spent most of my life drunk and on drugs. I have a very criminal mind, David. Any attempts to bullshit me are futile.”

He started firing questions at me, fast as his ping-pong ball pupils scanned my face. “How many pills are you taking right now? Have you ever been arrested? How many times have the police talked to you? Do you drink every day?”

“Biggest trouble in my life? Really, it’s this damn garbage company. They have it out for me,” I said. Ron lurched forward, on the edge of his chair now, and stared at me intensely, his eyes darting faster than ever, his brow knit under his Bart Simpson hair.

“You know who’s more fucked up than you are, David? That stupid son-of-a-bitch that hired you!”

That was the most honest statement I had heard in a long time.

The barrage continued, questions flung across the short space between Ron and me. I told him everything. Ron was the point man and Pat asked clarifying questions. Ron was so close to me, firing one question after the other. I was dazed.

“David, how many friends do you have—I mean close friends who you can talk with and know everything about you?” Pat asked.

I had never been asked this kind of question; I never even thought about how many close friends I had. Someone who knows everything about me? I didn’t talk to anyone about my life. I kept people at a safe distance. Ron was in my face, his eyes locked on me, and his questions kept coming.

“If you were tested for drugs right now, what would show up?”

I told him.

“Got any on you now?”

I handed over my bottle of pills.

“Have you ever thought about suicide?”

I told him.

I was about seventeen when I carried the .22 caliber rifle into my room. It was in the downstairs closet near my and my brother’s bedrooms. I knew where it was, but didn’t know whose it was or where it came from, but I found it, loaded a single bullet, placed the butt of the gun on my bedroom floor and the other end against my temple. I pressed my thumb on the trigger—a little more pressure, and that would be it.

My mind was racing, my thoughts stumbling over one another, catching each other on their heels.

I was an error in the system. My Creator had forgotten me and overlooked this mistaken life. The lesson I learned about the Creator, or God, as some of my Christian relatives referred to him, was that he was always watching. God was everywhere and all knowing. And if that was true, then why was he allowing me to suffer? If he is watching, then why didn't he do something about my life? The Christians within my family taught me that if I was bad, God would punish me. If the things they taught me were true, then I hated their God. What the hell has he ever done for me except bring misery into my life—and then watch it happen? If he controls everything and is all knowing, then I knew who to blame—him. It wasn't until I returned to my Native American beliefs that I better understood the Creator. My Creator does not punish and does not judge me. But on the day when I held the gun to my head, my mind was in a different place and my beliefs were out of balance.

Sitting on the side of the bed holding that weapon, my thinking continued to be on who would be the first to come home to see my body on the floor. My mom could find me. Or my brother, he could find me. My brother would probably come home first and see my body here.

I applied a little more pressure on the trigger. My legs quaked and my whole body shivered. More pressure. I struggled to keep my head flat against the rifle, but it bobbed around. My feet bounced off the floor like I was dancing, though I remained seated. I must have looked like I was having a seizure. I was trying with all my might to keep myself steady.

There was a bang at the back door. I didn't move to answer it. My body was exhausted from my convulsive attempts to hold the gun.

A second bang. My mind came back. I hid the rifle under my bed and ran to the door. It was my Uncle Bill.

We had lived in that house, my mom, my brothers, and me, for five years. But that was the first time my uncle had ever visited us. If he had been a few minutes later that day, he would have discovered my body.

Uncle Bill is the youngest of my mom's siblings. When I was a young, I knew he was special; with four older sisters, this only son was treated like a prince, and I looked up to him. He rode a motorcycle, always had pretty girls around him, and was very handsome, with long, dark hair, dark eyes, and an athletic build. I was always happy when I was with my Uncle Bill.

All I cared at that time was that he had weed. He always had pot, but now he felt like I was old enough to smoke with him. So that's what I did. I forgot about what I had just almost done, smoked pot with my uncle, and went on with my day. I put the thoughts away, like I had always done. More secrets to lock away. More reasons to be overwhelmed with self-doubt and self-hatred.

I told Ron. The suicide attempt; the physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; my alcoholic, violent father; poverty, sickness. I told twenty years of secrets, out loud, for the first time in my life.

I had always tried to keep from crying, because I was afraid that if I ever started, I might not stop. Ron and Pat sat there with me in that basement office and allowed me to cry. The questions stopped. No more attacks. They sat quietly and I cried. My hands were smashed against my face trying to hide and hold back my emotions. My mind slowed and I was at peace for a minute.

When I was ready, they told me they thought it would be best to take me to the local psychiatric hospital. I needed to be detoxed from all the chemicals I had consumed and placed under the care of medical professionals.



I was taken to Our Lady of Peace, and because I was suicidal, I was admitted to a unit where the doors have no knobs on the patient's side. This institution sat up on a hill overlooking a beautiful park across the street. It was once run by a bunch of Catholic nuns, who still had living quarters around the back of the building. It looked like a typical hospital from the outside, but once I got behind the front doors, I realized it was not a typical medical hospital. Once they collected all of my information, a young man led me through the gray concrete hallways, like a mouse in a maze. He did not talk much as we walked, and neither did I. I was trying to figure out where he was leading me and what I was getting myself into.

Every door was locked and the young man must have had a hundred keys on a ring, fishing for each one as we passed through. He would unlock a door, allow me through, and then slam it shut behind us. The people we passed, who mostly seemed like they worked there, never spoke or even made eye contact. The place was cold, and occasionally voices could be heard from behind different doors. Each area we walked through had a different smell—sometimes odors from cleaning supplies or the smell of something cooking.

I arrived to my area late in the evening. There was a large, open space to hang out in with chairs, tables, and a TV mounted in the corner. No one really paid much attention to me. When I made eye contact, most quickly looked away. Being in a strange place, I needed to evaluate who might be able to harm me. I was scared, really scared. I was out of my comfort zone. I'd just met a stranger and told him my darkest secrets, and now I'm locked in an insane asylum.

The nurses and other staff were located behind a wall with a window opening if someone needed to speak with them. Everything was gray; no windows looked outside, and there was no way I would ever be able to find my way back outside without help.

The unit seemed to be winding down for the night, and lights-out would be soon, but the unit never really slept. Every half hour, staff checked on us with a flashlight. Everything was cold metal—the beds, dresser, door, seats. I hardly slept that first night.

I wasn't sure what to expect as far as seeing a doctor or sitting in a group. I had seen the movie *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, but the people were nothing like the characters in that movie. I was moved to a two-bedroom with a very small and frail gentleman. He showed me around and explained the activities and some of the rules—where and when we could smoke, the times we lined up for meals and meds, basic information about what to expect during my stay, advice on how to get on in the unit.

“Stay away from all females,” he said. “Not only is it against the rules, but it would be a very bad idea to get mixed up with these institutionalized women.” I had yet to see any woman other than the nurses, but my roommate nodded decisively, and with that bit of crucial advice, he said no more.

Although we were in the same room, he didn't talk much after that. Most everyone stayed to himself. It was obvious which ones were on strong medication—their glassy eyes stared fixedly at nothing.

My second or third day, as I was playing cards with the other patients, an attendant walked by and said to me, “Hey, you are fitting right in around here.” Although it was a locked psychiatric hospital, I felt safe. Other than the staff, I was the youngest man in that facility. I knew that if someone went crazy, the staff would step in. At that point, I was also confident no one could physically harm me. In an area where everyone was similarly flawed and no one could hurt me, it was easy for me to fit in.

After about three days, I was called into a small meeting room with four other men. Everyone was in a coat and tie except me in my hospital-issued clothing. Ron showed up too. I was happy to see a familiar face, and he seemed happy to see me as well. Ron explained that my job would be held until I'd completed the hospital's alcohol and drug treatment program. If I did not complete the program, I would be terminated. The first step would be to stay thirty more days in the hospital, then complete three years of EAP oversight. Ron would be my overseer. I would be required to attend an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting every day for three years. I had to call Ron every day to check in and report if I was sober or not. I had to meet with the hospital's psychiatrist each month for three years or until he released me. I had to work every day and be on time. I had to meet with Ron weekly, face-to-face. I had to do anything else that these people in coats and ties might deem necessary.

Everything Ron just explained was written out in a contract, which I signed. Ron later told me that if it is not documented, it didn't happen. I would learn a lot from Ron. He had been fifteen years clean and sober by the time he took me on as a client. Ron had experienced a difficult time getting and staying sober. He had a long criminal record connected with his addiction, but he began attending AA meetings; he met some men there who helped him. In one of his final court appearances, he could have gotten twenty years to life. Just before ruling on Ron's sentence, the judge said, "I'm not sure why I am doing this, but I am releasing you to continue attending AA meetings and to be placed in the care of Jim," who was an ex-drunk and current city detective. I heard Ron wonder many times why that judge did not send him to prison.

People either loved Ron McKiernan or hated him. Ron did not care either way. He was not going to do anything he didn't want to do, personally or professionally. Ron built a business where he could walk into just about any court in Louisville and leave with the judge's support

for the defendant. If Ron worked with someone, he had that person sign a contract, and if the person did not comply with the terms of that contract, to the exact word, he would return the individual to the court. Sure, some issues might call for clinical intervention, like missing a phone call or an AA meeting. But if any of Ron's clients were not on the road to recovery, the road Ron paved, then he would make sure they would go to prison or back to the halfway house, or whatever their circumstances might require. Ron believed prison saved his own life, and if clients were not working on getting sober, prison would save theirs.

I knew Ron would have treated me the same way. He assured me that if I did not make progress or did not comply with the contract I had signed, he would recommend that I lose my job, because I would be putting the company at risk as an employee.

At the inpatient alcohol and drug treatment program, we had regular, daily group therapy sessions. The group consisted of ten or twelve patients, both men and women. During "chalk talks," when a counselor stood in front of a chalkboard and taught a class about alcohol and drugs, we sat in a classroom formation. I would always find a seat next to an older gentleman who worked as a groundskeeper at a local golf club. One of the women in the group was rather long-winded, and every time she began to speak, this gentleman would act like he was pulling a pistol out of his pocket.

His imaginary pistol in his hand, thumb up and index finger pointed out, he would look at it and then look over at her. As she continued to speak, he would slowly, with his other hand, dig into his pocket and pull out a make-believe bullet. He would load each imaginary bullet into the gun. The middle-aged groundskeeper would continue to look at both her and his fictional weapon as he loaded it. Just as he would raise the make-believe gun and point it toward the

annoying, long-winded lady, she would wrap up her comment. As the counselor or anyone else would talk, he would begin to slowly unload the pistol and place it back into his pocket.

Everyone knew his game of waiting for the lady to raise her hand to speak and watched him systematically go through the process of loading his invisible gun. At the time it was funny to watch, and it was a needed distraction from being locked up in an institution.

Along with regular chalk talks, we also had group counseling sessions. We sat in a circle and discussed different topics each session. I had been in this group for a couple weeks when the therapist looked straight at me in the middle of the session and said, “David, you have been here two weeks and have not said a word.”

In a panic, I replied, “Well, I get more out of these groups just listening.”

That was not the truth. While I did learn a lot listening to other folks talk about their alcohol and drug problems and how that related to other problems in their lives, I kept quiet because these folks were talking about themselves—and it seemed like an honest conversation. I did not know how to talk this way. It seemed they could speak freely and honestly. They would openly talk about their own lives and how they had made poor decisions. One of the wisest people in my group was a guy called J.D. I was not sure what the J and the D stood for. I didn’t ask and he didn’t bring it up. J.D. had been there about three weeks, and he was the most senior and, seemingly, the wisest. He was from Hazard, Kentucky. I had never been to Hazard, but I had heard about this part of Kentucky and knew that the folks who lived there were rough and hard. J.D.’s black mullet-style hair matched the black tattoos sprinkled around his arms, back, and shoulders. His missing front tooth was the perfect match to his Hazard persona. J.D. spoke like he had “seen the light.” The way he talked, I thought he would never drink again.

I got to the program midweek, and on Fridays, the group went to a Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meeting by bus. At dinner, J.D. was filling me in on what to expect and let me know that we would be going to a NA meeting. When I asked what that was, he said, “It’s a meeting where we get to hug women.” He was my chaperon that night and made sure he introduced me to all of his female friends in NA. Introductions were made with a hug. And after each introductory hug, J.D. would be sure to look at me as if to say, “I love this place!” I met a lot of women that night. He did not introduce me to one man.

The therapy groups we attended and those folks who were there when I arrived seemed very wise. Their words flowed freely about experiences I had faced myself. Again, when I was asked why I had been so silent, I said it was about learning through listening. But I was mostly afraid to say something because it might make me appear stupid. I had never spoken this way, nor had I ever heard anyone around me speak in those ways. If I had spoken, I might have said something that would make me look bad. I did not want to look stupid in front of my new friends, especially J.D. There I was, sitting in an insane asylum, worrying about what insane people thought of me.

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All programs that are designed to help folks, whether it is a hospital, mental health facility, or religious or spiritual service, have a basic ideology about what constitutes health and wellness. This is important because with this idea, they can measure where someone currently is (e.g., not healthy) and a plan a way forward (e.g., being healthy).

It is hard to get somewhere, not knowing where you currently are! An old friend of mine worked at Mammoth Caves in Kentucky for a few years. Now, you may not believe this, but people travel from all over the world to visit and walk through the caves that make up the Mammoth complex. The main entrance, and where all tours begin, is located off the main roads in the backwoods of Kentucky. Her full-time job was to answer the phone and assist people who were lost—speaking from experience, the wrong place to become lost is deep inside Kentucky. You might just find yourself driving down a road that dead ends somewhere in the eighteenth century.

So when a lost person called the offices of Mammoth Caves, my friend was there to save the day. The conversations would go something like this: “Hello, I am trying to find the main entrance into Mammoth Caves and I am lost.” My friend would ask the same question every time: “Where are you now?” Most times the reply would be, “I don’t know where I am!” This would leave my friend without the information she needed to bring the lost person to the park. Again, it is hard to get somewhere not knowing where you currently are.

If you are to arrive at health and wellness, someone has to know where you are. What is your current state of health?

Whether you call them American Indians, indigenous people, First Nations, and/or Native Americans, these original people of the United States are more likely to suffer from poor health-related issues than any other peoples living in the United States. Lower life expectancy and the disproportionate disease burden exist because of such things as inadequate educational systems, unbalanced rates of poverty, and discrimination in the delivery of health services. There are broad quality-of-life issues rooted in economic adversity and poor social conditions. I will not burden you with all of the supporting data indicating the disproportionate rates of poor health

associated with Native Americans. These data are easily found. We know the current state of health for Native Americans and other minority communities.

What's missing from a lot of research is how to best *treat* minorities, especially Native Americans. What are the best approaches to helping Native Americans, whether they have mental health problems, alcohol and drug problems, or any other kind of behavioral health problems?

Most empirically supported treatments have been designed, tested, and validated with minimal input from minority clients. Furthermore, in the few studies that have included minorities, the numbers are too small for any reliable comparisons or suggestions for clinical practice. With minorities being overrepresented in many of our mental health facilities, it is unacceptable that we don't know more than we do.

If African Americans and Latinos have low enrollment in randomized-controlled trials, Native Americans can be characterized as nonexistent in our literature. If a Native American, a minority within the minority, were to walk into any mental health clinic in America, workers would have minimal empirical guidance. The general practices, such as cognitive behavioral therapy or motivational enhancement therapies, have been widely tested and shown to be effective. Unfortunately, minorities are not the main focus of these studies. When a minority enters some kind of health and wellness program, the workers usually do whatever works with nonminorities. Looking back, this was true during my time in treatment. Everyone was treated the same regardless of cultural differences.

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After about thirty days, I completed the treatment program, returned home, and got back to work. Whereas before I was a proud, well-paid garbageman, I had to return to our newly formed port-o-potty division.

I hated that job—I was angry and frustrated but didn't have alcohol and drugs as a release valve. As a garbageman, I was driving a one hundred thousand dollar truck and acquired some respect from the other workers and management. Now that I had admitted to an alcohol and drug problem and lived in an institution for a month, I returned to cleaning someone else's temporary outhouse. All respect from others and myself was gone.

I have used many port-o-potties during outdoor social events without ever thinking about how they arrived there or what happens after the events are over. I have also seen them at construction sites without giving much thought to how they get cleaned. With my new lower-level job, I became an expert on all subjects port-o-potty. I was trained how to pick them up and deliver them to a site. I was trained how to place them where a truck could reach them in case of rain, mud, or any other obstacles. And lastly, I was trained how to properly clean them.

The truck was the most important part of this job. The truck had both delivery and cleaning capabilities; if it did not have a very good cleaning system, the job was overly difficult and potentially very nasty.

The truck had a big tank with water on one side and empty space on the other. The water was used to spray out the unit's floor, urinal, and seat. There was a long-handled brush used to scrub down the unit and rinse it with the water, via an outside water hose.

The empty space in the tank was for holding the sludge: toilet paper, piss, shit, or whatever else people threw in the port-o-potty's tank. The truck had a vacuum system with a long hose with a hard plastic tube and an on/off handle at the end. I would turn on the vacuum

system and allow it to build up sucking pressure. During the training session, I was told to inspect the tank and gauge the thickness of the sludge. It should be the consistency of a “good, hearty beef stew.”

If the sludge were too thick, the vacuum wouldn't be able to suck it through the hoses. So sometimes water had to be added and stirred around to achieve the desired beef stew consistency. If there was a lot of vacuum pressure built up, the beef stew sludge would be sucked up into the truck's tank without any issues. With the port-o-potty's sludge tank empty, the unit scrubbed down and rinsed out, all I had to do was replace empty paper rolls and move to the next unit.

Sometimes there are problems in the cleaning system. People throw unauthorized materials into the potty's tank, which can clog the vacuum hoses. Baby diapers are one of the worst culprits. A baby diaper can increase in size by ten times when wet. Also, people might throw a piece of their clothing in the tank. I'm not sure why someone would throw clothing into a port-o-potty, but regardless, once these materials find their way into the potty's tank, they all become part of the beef stew.

If you can see these unauthorized materials, you can try to avoid sucking them up. If not, these things can get sucked into the vacuum hose and become lodged. There might be twenty feet of hose to reach some of the units. So if something gets stuck at the ten foot mark and you lose your sucking power, the whole system shuts down. Although these occurrences are somewhat common and annoying, there is a solution for clogged vacuum hoses.

The truck's vacuum system has a reverse lever. So, when there is a clog, you reverse the system so it builds up pressure to blow out. Once the blowing pressure builds up, you find an area to point the hard plastic nozzle and turn the handle on, and whatever unauthorized material is lodged gets shot out of the hose, like a beef-stew-soaked cannon ball. While these events can

be aggravating, they can also be very entertaining. I hit many objects while unclogging my system of projectiles: stop signs, fence posts, small animals, young children. Well, not so much the last two, but I thought about it. This unclogging method is all good with one major and very important must: you have to remember to change the system back to vacuum (sucking pressure) before arriving at your next unit.

I was clean and sober for about six months, attended self-help meetings on a daily basis, kept my appointments with my psychiatrist, had not missed a day of work, and met with Ron weekly, every Tuesday. This was my routine now: get up at six, work until about four, go home, take a shower, meet with Ron or the psychiatrist about six in the evening, go to a self-help meeting until about half past nine, then go home to bed. Wake up and do it all over again. No more pool games. No more hanging out with my old friends. And no more drinking or getting high. I had signed a three-year contract, and this routine was my new life for the next two and a half years.

At the end of my route one Tuesday, I had a few more units to clean when I received a call on the radio to go way across town and clean a unit that another worker had missed last week. I tried to get out of doing it, but no luck. I was miserable about having to clean an extra unit out of my way after a long, bad day of working a job I hated. I was mad that I was not a distinguished garbageman, and I wanted back in my truck driving job picking up people's trash—not sucking up people's sludge.

When I arrived at my second to last unit, I found that someone had thrown an unauthorized product into the unit's sludge tank, a sweatshirt, and it got stuck in my hose and stopped the sucking power. I reversed the system and blew it out. This extra effort only added to my worsening attitude. The negative thoughts swirled around in my head, and I continued feeling

sorry for myself as I arrived at my last unit. The tank was the right consistency of beef stewness and should have been an easy unit to clean. So I stuck the nozzle in and turned it on, thinking it would suck this stuff up easily. Unfortunately, I forgot to reverse the system from blowing to sucking.

Chunks of sludge and toilet paper, a mixture of the most filthy and foul-smelling material imaginable, sprayed the entire inside of the unit, and the entire outside of me. The only solution that came to mind was to stop, drop, and roll, screaming the whole time. I got up, still screaming, shedding my outer layer of clothes like they were on fire. The drive back to the shop and home was filled with openly hostile yelling and a plan to finally get off the port-a-potty job.

I practiced my speech to Ron all the way to his home for our regular meeting. If getting my face and body sprayed by shit did not convince him that I needed to get back on the garbage route, I wasn't sure what could convince him. When I arrived at his home, I was prepared. We sat and he asked his usual first question: "Have you drank or used any mind- or mood-altering drugs since our last meeting?"

He always thought that was the most important issue. This day, however, that was the last thing on my mind.

"I have not," I responded, "but if you don't tell them I am ready to get back on my garbage route, I probably will start drinking again." I went on to explain how I got sprayed by beef stew sludge and how this job was beneath my intelligence and skill level. Ron lifted himself from his seat, move into my personal off-limits space, and stared at me with his ping-pong eyes. After listening to my story for about a minute, with a good ten minutes to go, he stopped me and said, "David, you need to be grateful to have a goddamn job. I don't know any other employer in town who would even consider hiring you. You are too goddamn ignorant to even have a job."

“I’m not as dumb as you think I am!” I replied.

He snapped back, “You couldn’t be!” It took a few weeks before I got the intent of his reply.

“David, you need to go to your meeting tonight and be the first person to raise your hand and talk about how grateful you are to even have a damn job. You need to talk about how unemployable you are and that having the opportunity to have shit sprayed on you is a blessing.”

I did exactly that, hoping to convince the other attendees how crazy Ron’s thinking was. However, as I was speaking, people were nodding their heads, replying that they too were once unemployable and that by staying clean and sober, they were now great employees, fathers, mothers, friends, and overall good human beings. When I told them about the beef stew spraying, they all laughed rather than feeling sorry for me.

It wasn’t until I told my mom the story that I finally found a sympathetic person. However, my mom would stick up for me no matter what I did. She might not have liked what I did, but she always believed in me. As I discussed earlier about having family support and how that is very important to succeeding in college, my mom was the one person who always supported me. I’m not sure if the rest of my family knew about all my problems, but I sensed that most did not pass judgment on me. They knew what kind of home I had grown up in and most of the things my mom, brothers, and I suffered through. So I guess many in my family understood and expected I would be troubled. Any kid who witnesses violence, as well as experiences it, would have problems.

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I attended my dad's funeral in March 1993; I was thirty years old. We had not spoken for a few years. My mom called me out of the blue and said, "David, I have been waiting a few weeks trying to figure out how to tell you this. Your father is in the hospital and he's been told he has two weeks to live." She thought I should know this in case I wanted to see him before he passed. I did not. After a week or so, I finally decided to visit him.

His life had proceeded since we last saw each other, and I was on a completely different path. While my brothers had updated me on some of our dad's activities, I had lost all contact with him and interest in his life. He was still in the hospital when I decided to see him. I thought about how our meeting might go, with him on his death bed and us not speaking or seeing each other for several years. What would we talk about, the weather? I was angry with him. Dying would not change this. The more I thought about all of these things, the less likely it was that I would go to his hospital room.

To me, he was a horrible person and father. The things he did to me and to my family were unforgivable. At some point in my young life, I promised myself that when I got big enough, old enough, or whatever it took, I would never allow anyone ever to harm me. If I did go to see him, it would be brief and on my own terms.

Walking out of the hospital's elevator, it took all of my power to head toward his room. He was trying to die and I was trying for a rebirth. Why would I want to mess up this natural process? We were both men who had made our life choices. He had had his chance, and to me, he wasted his life. His belief system carried him to this hospital. The thought process that drinking and smoking for fifty years will have no consequences does in fact have consequences. But if it is real in the mind, then it is real. I was determined to change my thinking. What was

real in my mind was that if I did not change my life, my thinking, I would soon be dying in a hospital bed or, worse, end up shooting myself.

My steps toward his death room were steps back in time. The sick feeling in my stomach and the overwhelming fear that was washing over me were the same feelings I had known every time his car pulled into our driveway. I relived the fear of not knowing what condition he would be in lying in his hospital bed just like I did as a kid as he stepped out of his car.

I let it be known to my mom what day and time I would see him so that news would get to him. Neither of us needed any more surprises. When I finally entered his room, he looked at me and said, “Hey . . . it’s David. Come on in, son.” He was in a typical hospital bed with the back tilted up. It seemed the only thing he was connected to was a heart monitor. He had aged in the two plus years since I had seen him last. His hair was mostly gray, and his face looked like a layer of skin over bone. His cheeks were sunken and his eyes were wide open. White sheets covered his large belly, but his exposed shoulders and arms were noticeably thin. His little finger on his left hand was totally black, and his ring finger was black from the tip to the second knuckle.

The only other person in the room was an older lady. He introduced her, but I did not catch her name. We were still and hushed as our eyes tried to take in two absent years. The window in the back of the room had a few cards sitting in the seal. There were a couple of vases with flowers sitting on the nightstand next to his bed. Finally, his girlfriend said, “Well . . . I am going to leave you two alone for a while.” This sent a pulse of panic through me. There were no buffers between my dad and me now. I just nodded as she walked past and out the door.

As I looked back at my dad, he raised his cancerous black hand and said, “They say I have cancer.” We both looked at his rotting hand. “This cancer is not from drinking and

smoking,” he said. “Some people just get cancer.” I knew this statement’s purpose. It was a self-lie. It was a lie to protect the mind from the brutal, cruel truth of a life spent addictively smoking and drinking. I was not there to expose the truth to him but to myself. I saw the truth.

He asked me to sit down in the lounge chair next to his bed. I felt better standing just inside the doorway but slowly made my way to sit down.

“I hear many things about what you are doing and I am proud of you,” he said. He paused, then continued, “I have wanted to tell you and your brothers how sorry I am for the way I have treated you all. There have been thousands of times I wanted to say sorry, but I never could. When people drink alcohol they do things they don’t mean to do and say things they don’t mean to say.”

As much as I wanted not to cry, I could not hold back. I tried to hold it back by rubbing my face with my hands. I was close enough where he could touch me with his black hand. He was patting me on the shoulder, saying, “Don’t cry, son, please don’t cry. You’re going to be OK, you’re doing good.”

I quickly composed myself, stood, and let him know I needed to leave. I leaned down, we hugged, and I walked back to the elevator and back outside. The sun was out, but it was raining lightly. It was March, springtime in Louisville. The trees and flowers were out. There was new life all around me. My life was new. My dad died March 3, 1993, a couple days after our visit. I did not see him again until he was in his casket at the funeral home. His suit covered his boney chest and arms. His black fingers were pink again.

At the funeral home, my oldest brother told me that Dad said he was going to leave me a hundred dollars but didn’t because I did not return to visit him again. In my mind, I wanted to say, “Fuck him and his hundred dollars,” but I didn’t. I moved on. Everyone who cared about me



said I should be respectful, stay close to the casket, and support folks who came up to see him. I followed those directions. I was somewhat shocked when I overheard some of the conversations between the people who gathered around his casket. Some of the folks who had considered my dad an alcoholic and didn't have too many good things to say while he was alive now had a different attitude. I heard them say things like, "Poor Buzzy, it is sad cancer took him. He was a good man. He never met a stranger. Cancer is a terrible thing." When he was alive and an alcoholic, he was a bad person. Cancer and death cured his badness. People did not feel sorry for him when he was suffering from alcoholism. They saw him as a terrible human being, just like I did. The disease of alcoholism causes no one to feel sorry. It causes harm and leaves a path of destruction. Trying to clean up this mess in the last two weeks of life was pointless. I was not going to follow this path. I did not want to be a bad person trying, at the end of my life, with two weeks remaining, to become good again.

I admitted I was sick. I have an illness and it is called alcoholism. I did not want to be in a hospital bed with a black hand and heart, explaining to one of my kids that my behaviors were in no way connected to my health. Behavior and health are inseparable. Honesty is also connected with health. Untreated alcoholism (e.g., harmful behaviors, lying) is worse than cancer. Cancer allows for some level of sympathy.

## Overcoming Low IQ with the Power of Belief

About six months or so into early sobriety, I watched a video of a lecture about the steps to staying sober. I was zoned out and not paying attention, until I heard the man on the film state, “You are not limited by your abilities, but by what you believe.” He gave examples of folks who seemingly had little ability but made huge changes to our society. He explained how the Wright Brothers, the first people to fly, were high school dropouts. They sold and repaired bicycles. Though the two brothers had little ability to design and build the first flying machine, what they did have was the belief that they could. Their simple belief system changed our world.

That story stuck with me, and I quickly began to understand the impact of belief systems. It was around this time that a friend and I went to a David Copperfield magic show. He did some amazing things that night. At one point, Mr. Copperfield lifted off the stage and flew over the audience, way up to the ceiling and back down, and around the entire auditorium. On one of his passes over the crowd, he swooped down and grabbed a young lady from her seat and flew around the arena with her in his arms. The young lady’s hair was blowing wildly and the crowd was yelping in amazement. He placed her back into her seat, landed on stage, took a long bow, and walked off, disappearing into the darkness as the arena went black.

How could he pull it off? It was magic. I thought of the impact of belief systems, and wondered how Mr. Copperfield’s act would have gone off in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692. During the now infamous Salem witch trials, accused witches were questioned in court, but no matter what they said to defend themselves, the magistrates had a ready interpretation: if a suspected witch claimed her innocence, then she was speaking as the devil and trying to deceive

the court; if she said she had been in her home the evening another had accused her of making him ill, then she must have sent her spirit out of her body. In 1692, the people of Salem were already convinced that evil was among them, no matter what an accused person might say in her own defense. It was kind of funny to think about David Copperfield's show during such a time. I would imagine he would have had a sold-out show. Unfortunately, his first show would have also been his last. The belief system of the people of Salem would have limited them to seeing Mr. Copperfield as a witch. He would have been evil, an agent of the devil—and they would have missed the sense of awe and wonder in seeing the impossible.

Similar to the people of Salem, I grew up in a community with a strong belief system. I was the product of my community—my family's beliefs. As far as an education, I was expected to finish high school, find a labor job, drink hard, work hard, and hope for the best. No one in my family made it beyond high school. Most barely completed high school.

Survival, paying rent, eating, keeping a job, were the biggest concerns in my family. Going to college was never discussed in my home. Going to college was the furthest thing from my mind for years following. When Greg, a manager at the garbage company, suggested I go to college, I recall laughing at him. I was several months clean and sober and beginning to be a good, reliable employee. I thought he was just being nice, but practically every time we passed each other, he would ask, "Why aren't you in college?" After a few months, I quit laughing and started thinking: why aren't I in college? It would sure beat picking up people's trash.

After I told some folks about Greg's persistent question, they too encouraged me. From these conversations, I found out there was a service, Vocational Rehabilitation that helped people like me get into college and helped pay for some of the costs. The process consisted of speaking with a Voc Rehab counselor. I learned there was a counselor located inside an alcohol and drug

treatment center that I had visited before. I finally got up enough nerve to schedule a meeting and attend it. The counselor was a young lady in her mid-twenties, not much older than I was at the time. I was extremely nervous, and all of my belief systems came crashing down on me.

It did not help that she hardly looked at me during our brief meeting and was somewhat rude. I was instructed that, to be considered for Voc Rehab help, I would have to qualify. I would need to set up an appointment with an evaluator and be tested. I was given information and instructions.

The day I arrived at the evaluator's office, I was very nervous and questioned my whole plan. I could not believe I was talked into following through with this. My thoughts and beliefs crushed me again. I was overcome with self-doubt. I realized I was sitting in a doctor's office. Not a medical doctor—a mind doctor. I was going to be there two full days.

I wasn't sure what this meeting was all about, so I did not wear my best clothes. The doctor, however, wore a tie and nice shirt and dress shoes. He looked every bit a doctor; he was in his late forties, with a thick salt-and-pepper mustache and hair. Needless to say, I was intimidated. Our first meeting consisted of him talking about the testing process and what I should expect. I was so overcome with my own negative self-talk and taking in his magnificently professional office that I don't recall much of what was being said. He asked a series of questions, peering at me through his round glasses. It seemed like every word I said was written down on his pad. Over the two-day period, I completed surveys. I did hand and eye tests. I looked at cards with different pictures on them and explained what they meant to me. I looked at cards that seemed to have been shot with a paint gun and the doctor asked me to state what I saw in them. I had to read out loud to him and sound out several words that I did not know how to

pronounce or define. I think there were also some math questions, which has always been a problem for me.

He asked me if I knew who Martin Luther King was. I had heard of that name before and knew he was killed because he was black. My answer was just that: "He was a black dude who was killed." I didn't know what else to say. He kept waiting for a better answer, but I could not think of anything else. He also asked about other important, historical people, but again, I knew very little. During a break early on the second day, I asked him personal questions. I didn't know that those kinds of questions should not be asked, not of a doctor. But I really wanted to know about the person who was studying me.

He told me he used to work in a paint factory and that he went back to college and became a doctor. That surprised me. I had no clue that people could be something before being a doctor. I had always thought they spent their whole lives in school until they were doctors. At the end of two days of what I considered very hard questions and tests, he sent me away. Within a few weeks, the Voc Rehab counselor contacted me; the results were in and we needed to meet. I was curious about the outcome but thought for sure she was going to help me get into college. She had to understand that being a garbageman is no easy life. I had to find something else to do with my life besides collecting trash.

I showed up in her small office again and she pulled out a thick file. She flipped through a few pages and then looked up at me. She looked straight at me and said, "I think it is best to send these results over to your psychiatrist so he can explain the outcomes." She concluded with, "Voc Rehab can't help you. You are not college material. Stick with the garbage company, they have a good retirement." She set a meeting with Dr. Pellegrini, my psychiatrist.

Once I met with him, he started everything off with, “Well, David, this is not all bad but . . .” After he said this, he finished with, “Voc Rehab is unable to help you with college.” Again he started with, “Well, David, this is not all bad but . . . it says here that you are dyslexic, have ADHD, and have mild mental retardation.” Now, I was not sure what dyslexic was or exactly what ADHD meant, but I did know the definition of retardation.

Not really focusing on the other outcomes, I couldn’t believe this doctor verified what my brothers had been saying about me for a long time. I tried to recall all of the tests I took and how they would have concluded my condition. There was a long survey and about every other question had the word “sex” in it. There were also scenarios about criminal and ethical decision making. When I was taking the test, I thought maybe I’m an abnormal, overly sexual, criminally deviant maniac. Being told that I was mildly mentally retarded was totally unexpected. I always thought that issue was determined much earlier in life and assumed that I had escaped that limitation, just like I avoided inheriting my father’s clubfoot.

How could this condition hide itself for so long? Maybe I had had two bad days of test taking at the doctor’s office. All kinds of theories rolled around in my head: now that my brain is defective and I am incapable of learning, what tool do I use to overcome this? The very tool I needed, a brain in good working condition, was just determined inoperative. So what tools did that leave me? I thought, “Maybe a life as a garbageman is best for me. I make a good salary. I have good health benefits. Heck, the landfill always has some treats to pick up.”

A few days turned into weeks of depression, but then my feelings and thoughts began to change. I became very angry. Angry at this doctor who evaluated me. Angry at the Voc Rehab lady who seemed disrespectful toward me. Angry that I had signed a three-year contract that said I would not drink or use drugs, go to meetings regularly, not miss work, meet with Ron and a

psychiatrist, and on and on. I was angry with my current, past, and future life. I was sober, I was a good employee, my life was different, but to me all of my feelings, thoughts, and options seemed unchanged. I was not stuck in an alcohol- and drug-infested life, close to killing myself any longer. But I was a garbageman, uneducated, with limited opportunity.

The more I stewed on my life, the angrier I became. Alcohol and drugs did not have a chance to distract me from the truth. When I was high, I could believe in lies. Substances removed the truth. Now the truth had no barriers. Truth flooded my mind. The truth about how I was treated as a child. The truth that I took over the abuse of myself as soon as others stopped. I was now the main cause of my life failures. The truth was extremely painful and rained over me uninterrupted. Falsehoods were replaced with anger.

Raw anger moved me forward. Not hope for a brighter future, alcohol and drug free. No. Anger led me. When I thought about the lady saying I was not college material, I no longer searched to confirm that statement. I thought, “Oh, yeah? Fuck you!”

I would no longer live a lie. I knew what I needed to do. I had to drastically change my life in every way. Anything that seemed like it would hold me back from what I needed to do, I ignored it or just walked right over it. I used my anger rather than my lies and depression to fuel my path forward. I began to change my thinking—my belief system. I saw this as an opportunity to change my life. In my mind, I began to believe I could succeed in college. I was not going to focus on my failures but rather on what was possible. Going to college and succeeding was possible, and I believed differently than these people who said I could not succeed. My change in thought led to my change in actions.

And then I was made an offer that could possibly change the whole course of my life and allow me to enroll in college. Ron and Pat, out of the blue, asked if I would be interested in

moving into a treatment program. I had been clean and sober for a while, and they talked with me differently than before. There were no demands from Ron or anything like before. This was an opportunity to change my career path. There was a program, Third Step, in the Volunteers of America (VOA), that needed a resident manager. This was a volunteer opportunity that offered a room and food. I would live with other men who were trying to recover from alcohol and drugs. For my one-man room and food, I would have to report any issues during the evening time and weekends, and I would hand out and oversee that chores were completed. Because Third Step was a 24/7, residential program and there was not enough money to pay for 24/7 care, this position was made for someone who had at least a year clean and sober and agreed to follow the rules of the program.

I could continue being a garbageman, live in my small home, and try attending college on a part-time basis. Getting a degree would take several years. I still had to comply with my contract, attend meetings every day, meet with Ron and the psychiatrist. Getting up at the break of day, working all day, going to a meeting at night—by the time I got home, I would collapse from exhaustion.

Moving into the VOA would require me to sell my home and quit my job. The VOA offer would give me a place to stay and eat, but no income. However, I could attend college. Most people told me I would be a fool to quit the garbage company and move into what is basically a homeless program. After several weeks, I decided the foolish option was the best. I sold my home and got rid of most of my belongings. Residents in the Third Step program could only bring what could fit into a typical plastic garbage can. I quit my job and walked into the VOA to begin my new life's journey.



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There has been some recent research about personality traits such as grit. Grit can be described as the tendency not to abandon tasks regardless of all of the obstacles standing in the way. Angela Duckworth, a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania's Department of Psychology, in the Positive Psychology Center, has been studying how grit is related to achievement (A).<sup>44</sup> She and her research team, using a grit scale, can predict who will stay in school and other types of challenging situations. Those who are gritty, do not give up, do not get discouraged by setbacks, and finish what they begin can achieve great things. It is the ideal of the idea that what is believable is achievable. A person is not limited by ability but rather by what the person believes. If the Wright brothers were around for Dr. Duckworth to measure, I bet she would discover that those brothers were full of grit.

Some folks might say that the Wright brothers had talent or high intelligence and that that was the most important factor in their great success. Professor Duckworth indicates that grit and talent are most times unrelated. Having talent and grit would be outstanding. But according to Duckworth, having those two traits is rare. So it would seem that most talented people are without grit. Given the choice between the two, grit is best. Anyone with grit, regardless of having talent or intelligence, can overcome most obstacles.

If you are concerned that you are not smart enough to make it in college, please do not worry. If you have grit, a strong belief system, or what my mom often said I had—a hard head—you can succeed in college or in anything you put your mind to doing. You are not what you think you are, but what you think, you are. You are not limited by your abilities but by what you believe. What is believable is achievable!

## Living and Learning

I was determined to be a student. I was learning how to stay clean and sober. Living at the VOA placed me with others who were trying to learn that same skill. Now I needed to learn how to be a college student. Ron said living at the VOA was a great opportunity to live and learn with others. I had experienced this during my time at Our Lady of Peace, at least for thirty days. Living with other learners seemed like a great opportunity.

The idea of connecting and integrating student learning with student living began to take shape in the 1920s under philosopher, university administrator, and free speech advocate Alexander Meiklejohn. He emigrated from England to New Jersey at the age of eight and received his doctorate from Cornell. He later became a dean of Brown University and Amherst College president. Dr. Meiklejohn developed an Experimental College with the main goal of creating a community to aid teacher–student interaction in a living and learning environment.<sup>45</sup> In our current college systems, the living and learning community has several different varieties, but the theory behind these models has remained the same: students will persist and excel in college if they are given the opportunity to integrate their social and academic lives.<sup>46</sup> When students join together around commonly shared academic and/or social interests, their college experience is much more likely to be positive.<sup>47</sup>

Connecting social and academic life can involve many different categories, thus creating a number of different living and learning community models. Some models may group students according to the same course work, common characteristics or interests, a dedicated dorm participating in similar activities, intensive faculty collaborations, or all of the preceding.<sup>48</sup>

Students who became involved with living and learning community programs, even those who are measured as having the least amount of structure and intensity, have increased GPAs,<sup>49</sup> higher retention rates,<sup>50</sup> and positive experiences in the program.<sup>51</sup> Some colleges around the country offer living and learning opportunities for Native Americans. A lot of them are centered on staying connected to the students' culture, so these programs sponsor powwows and other traditional events. Many tribal colleges that have student housing could be considered living and learning programs. If the Native students who live in the same dorm do things together, help each other study or lead cultural activities, then they are living and learning together.

The main goal of a living and learning community is to provide groups of students with specialized academic and social services activities. Entering the VOA was the equivalent of a living and learning community for me. Although the community I was entering was not for college students, it was all about learning. We all had a shared, unique interest—learning how to get and remain sober. This would take many hours of education, sacrifice, and support—and some hope.

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The VOA program I moved into was called the Third Step Program. It got its name from the third step of AA's Twelve Steps. The third step states, "Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understand him." I was basically turning my life over to the care of the VOA's Third Step program—or more importantly, its manager, Pat McKiernan.

Because I was still involved with his dad, Ron, Pat also influenced me a lot. Although we were about the same age, he was an experienced counselor and manager of alcohol and drug

treatment programs. The Third Step program was located on Shelby Street in Louisville, which is better known locally as German Town. It is a low-income community comprising mostly shotgun houses. The building was originally the first African American hospital in Louisville. It has five floors with a red brick exterior. The VOA had different programs on each floor. The Third Step program was on the top floor. This floor used to be the nursery of the hospital; it was now a place to be reborn.

The program only served adult men. Other floors served different people: women with children, men with dual issues, and criminal justice folks. The one thing that connected everyone was that these programs treated alcohol and drug issues. For everyone living there, regardless of what else might be going on in their lives, the primary issue was addiction. The Third Step was for men who needed much more treatment time than the typical thirty-day residential treatment. This program was a minimum of six months and a maximum of a year.

The program held about twenty men. The new men started off in a room that slept six. As they successfully proceeded through the program, they moved into a four-man room, two-man, and then toward the very end of treatment, a one-man room. The treatment program and daily schedule were extremely structured and closely monitored. It was a totally alcohol- and drug-free facility. This meant that if someone used a mind- or mood-altering substance, he would be immediately removed. Many behaviors could be dealt with clinically. Using alcohol or drugs resulted in termination from the program.

I had visited this program many times prior to moving in. Ron had other clients living there. To be honest, it was a dreary, bleak place. It was an old hospital, an institution, and it felt like one. The floor was tile, the walls were concrete and light gray. There were pictures on the walls with inspirational quotes and statements such as “One day at a time” and “Live and let

live.” Only certain rooms had air-conditioning: the manager’s office, the group room, and the dining room. The rest of the floor only had fans and open windows. My first summer there was hard to take, and not just because of Louisville’s hot summers.

The first few nights in my new room reminded me of my time at Our Lady of Peace. I was back in an institution—and in a place that housed some troubled human beings. The room had a twin bed, a five-drawer dresser, a nightstand, and a curtain rod to hang the few remaining clothes I had. The room was six or seven feet wide and ten, maybe twelve, feet long. It did have its own bathroom with a standup shower. The one window looked out over the parking lot.

The program had a curfew. Fortunately, I did not have to be in bed at a certain time, but I did have to be in the building. There was only one TV room. I was not used to sleeping in a room without a TV. The silence was overwhelming. My mind was incapable of settling down; silence fueled its racing. I was living in a strange, new place, I had quit a good job, and I planned to enroll in a community college soon. Self-doubt and negative self-talk overtook me during these quiet times. The only thing that could change these racing negative thoughts was to think about all of the things I needed to do to accomplish my goals.

I also wondered if I should lock my door. My new housemates were some rough, notorious individuals. Many men were either on their way to prison or just leaving. This program was a last chance of sorts for reform and freedom. Their ability to remain alcohol- and drug-free and to comply with all of the program rules would determine if these men would see prison. There were a lot of rules and a lot of things to remember, and so my job was simple: live and hang out there, oversee the chores, report rules being broken after hours, and be a role model.

I settled into a regular routine fairly quickly. The program had three phases, each lasting about three months. The daily schedule began at half past seven in the morning and ended at

eight at night, when everyone in the program attended an AA meeting. The first phase was for new clients. The men in the first phase were not allowed to work. They would get up and go to a morning meditation group where they would do certain readings, followed by a discussion of their plans for the entire day. Those plans usually consisted of doing their chores, studying until a morning AA meeting, returning for lunch, doing more recovery-related paperwork, having dinner at five, doing afternoon chores, attending a therapeutic group at six, making the eight o'clock AA group, and being back for curfew by ten and lights out at eleven. This happened every day, like clockwork, Monday through Friday. No clients were allowed to work on the weekends or work any shift but first. On the weekends, clients would have morning groups, lunch, and serve out any consequence time they obtained through the week, and attend an eight o'clock AA meeting. Curfew was extended an hour on Saturday.

Consequence time was a period of fifteen-minute infraction for various rule breaking. For instance, to keep costs down, if you were the last person to leave a room without turning off the light, you would be confronted and receive fifteen minutes' consequence time. The building also had a roach problem. If you left a cup or glass in a room unattended, fifteen minutes. If you left crumbs or any food residue, fifteen minutes. If your chore was not done or done correctly, if you were one second late for any scheduled meeting, fifteen minutes. If your bed was not made, your clothes not properly put away, you left the bath a mess, left a couch's cushions in disarray, fifteen minutes.

Everyone's consequence time was calculated on Saturday morning. All of the fifteen-minute infractions were added up. Instead of having free time on Saturday, clients were required to work their time off cleaning the walls, windows, or stairwells or making the building a better place to stay. Saturday nights were for AA meetings. Sundays were for on-site family visits,

church attendance, home visits for more stable men, or catching up on paperwork. All of these activities had to have preapproval by management. Sunday night was another AA meeting, and then back at regular ten o'clock curfew.

## Off to College

### Confronting My Disabilities

The VOA position relieved me of a full-time job and most of my bills (my truck had several more payments, but that was it), and I was able to focus on getting into Jefferson Community College. Although my middle brother enrolled at JCC, he dropped out before the semester ended. No one on either side of my family graduated with a college degree. I had never heard a conversation about college in my family. I had no idea what to expect.

I was scared—very scared on my first day. I did not know exactly where all my classes were and did not want to be late for anything. Basically, I wanted to be unnoticed. I wanted to slip in and out without having to speak, especially in a large group—like a classroom. I didn't have much money for fresh clothes and didn't know what students were wearing. I hadn't worn a pair of Chucks in a long time and wasn't sure what was in style. My mind was racing and I was not sure if I would fit in.

My first class was a college prep course. I thought it was for students like me, special needs. To my surprise, the class was full and they did not look anything like me. I was in my late twenties, still wearing clothes that could be considered hand-me-downs. Many of the students in the class looked fresh out of high school and well put together. Our first assignment that we would be tested on was correctly filling out a bank check. There was a white paper that looked like an oversized blank check. We had to put the correct date, write out the name of the person we were making the check payable to, write out the amount, indicate the memo of what the



check was for, and, finally, sign it. Points were taken off for the wrong date, misspelled words, or putting information in the wrong place.

By the end of the semester, we advanced to simple math, writing a short story, and strategies for reading and retaining information. I was stressed the entire time. I worried about being late, failing an assignment, forgetting to complete an assignment, or being called on to say anything or answer a question. But I did learn things about myself. I had multiple flashbacks to my high school experiences. My mind could drift off for large amounts of time, and I would miss important information. Students fidgeting in their chairs, twirling their hair, or flipping a pencil around had my total attention. Windows distracted me. What was happening outside and all of the possibilities that might be happening could result in a lot of missed lecture time or important information.

Sitting in the front row was mandatory. It forced my attention always forward. Having someone, especially a female, sit in front of me was disastrous for my learning. There were too many opportunities for distraction. I would get lost in smells, clothes, how their clothes fit, shoes, why they fidgeted with their hair, how many chews on their gum before swallowing the juice . . . any movement caused my eyes to solely focus on that movement and evaluate why it was happening. I missed an important history lecture one day because the person sitting in front of me had a big black mole on the back of her neck. I would run through different scenarios where I touch it—sometimes in disgust, others where I screamed with horror, and a few where I knocked it off.

Unfortunately these things continue in my life. Other things related to the doctor's diagnosis continue too. I learned more about ADHD and dyslexia as I progressed through college. I began to understand how these issues played a huge part in my life and learning. I

could not pay attention to what I was reading, and those times I did read something with my full attention, I could not retain the information.

For some reason, during a math course, I could not pass a test. The first test resulted in scoring a 44. I was depressed. I needed a tutor. A man who was living at the VOA with me had two college degrees. One was in chemistry and the other was in some kind of math program. He obtained them both from Germany, where he was from. He was living at the VOA because of his out-of-control drinking. He would get a job in a chemistry lab, and within a few months, he would make alcohol in the lab, get drunk, and get fired. When he was sober, he was a very nice and smart man.

His name was Eric. I asked Eric if he would help me with my math course. He looked at my math textbook, reviewed my notes, and was happy to help me. Because it was an algebra course, there were both numbers and letters to deal with. I was extremely frustrated. I would be able to understand the rules and how to complete the task, but when I took prep quizzes or tests, I failed. After Eric worked with me, I felt more confident. He took time with me, explaining exactly how to approach each problem and steps to solve it. The next test after Eric worked with me, I was astounded that I had scored another 44.

Back at the VOA, I let Eric know what had happened. He sat next to me, with the scored test between us, and he went through each missed problem. He asked me to work through each missed problem. As I was working through a problem, following each step and explaining it to Eric, he would stop me and ask, "Where do you see this number six you just said?" When I went to point and show him where it was, there was no six in that problem. We moved on to the next. Again, as I worked through the problem, he would stop me, asking me to show him the number eight I identified as being in that problem. When I searched, using my finger, again, it was

nowhere to be found. The best solution at the time was to drop the course. My first attempt at algebra was a failure.

After completing my course work at JCC, I enrolled at Spalding University, a small, private university in Louisville, to complete a bachelor's degree course in social work. Spalding was founded by the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in 1814. When I was there in the early 1990s, there were nuns who still taught there, and many wore their habits. It was a very rigorous school. If a nun was the teacher of a course, learning was assured. Difficulty was also assured. Usually there was a prayer before each class if a nun was in charge, and I needed it.

A couple of semesters into my time at Spalding, I reenrolled in an algebra course. I only had a couple of semesters left, and I needed to pass both an algebra and a stats course to graduate. My eyes and my mind were playing tricks on me. How could I ever pass this course with these sorts of problems? The algebra course at Spalding was taught by a new PhD who had just arrived in the United States from Korea. He was trying to learn and understand the English language, and I was trying to learn and understand, or more honestly, just pass a math course.

Now, in his class, not only did I have to overcome my own brain and eye problem, I had an additional challenge. I could not understand half of his lectures. When a student would ask a clarifying question, he would look very frustrated. It seemed like he did not like to be asked any questions. Sometimes he would listen to a student's question and then continue on with his lecture.

Although very difficult and frustrating, this class was entertaining. The students would coordinate a revolt before class. My classmates, all female and all younger than me, would talk about the course as we waited for the teacher to arrive (he was never on time). In he would walk,

ignoring the outrage that was building against him. It turned out that so many students complained, I think everyone in the class got a passing grade. That was fine by me.

The next semester's stats class was taught by an American with many years of experience teaching at Spalding. There would be no student uprising, nor a need for one. The professor was an elder female who was working her way through chemotherapy treatments. She wore a wig (and it looked like a wig) and she was very gaunt looking. I felt very sorry for her. Because I always sat in the front row, I had an unobstructed view of her look and movements. I could tell she was a strong woman who would not allow a disease to alter her work. She did not miss a day, and neither did I. I tried to keep a smile on my face, nod my head often, and bring an encouraging attitude to class. I'm not sure why I felt the need to take care of her, when I needed help.

I failed every test in that class. After each test, she suggested coming to her office to retake the test. I sat outside of her office at a desk, and she handed me the test again, saying, "David, I know you know this material, please try again." She did not return the retests to me. As she would say, "I know you know this," I would say to myself, "I'm glad you are confident, because I do not have a clue how to even approach answering these questions." For instance, a typical stats question might be, "Three people are each holding 15 balls. They each have 6 yellow balls, 2 red balls, 4 green balls, and 3 blue balls. They all throw their balls in the air at the same time and height. What is the probability that a green ball will hit the ground first?"

I did not have a clue how to answer this question, and still don't today! My mind would not and could not hold all of the possible, unreasonable options in such a situation. I become easily distracted when confused. I focus on why three people would ever want to do this or why this information is even applicable in the real world. I did not ask her for my retest results,

because I already knew the results, and she never indicated any potential problems. I thought if I fail this class, which I was sure to do, I would just try again. I was at the end of my degree. I could take this one course and totally focus on it. But more focus was not the problem—the problem was trying to keep all of these numbers in my head and make sense of them.

Looking back, one of the biggest mistake I made was refusing to tell anyone about my problem—my disability. I could not even say that word. I rejected the idea that I had any learning problems. The supportive people around me explained that a college education is just a different kind of education. They tried to convince me that I was extremely smart and could do many things that professors could never accomplish. They wanted me to understand the difference between school and learning.

Mark Twain said, *don't let schooling interfere with your education*. The idea behind this quote seems simple. There is a difference between institutionalized schooling and becoming educated. Or maybe more specifically, there are two kinds of learning.

My grandpa said the same thing, but differently. *People cannot be fully educated until they can make something with their own hands*. My grandpa was a farmer. He was not a college graduate. But he could repair any mechanical system like a tractor or car. He could also repair living systems too, like his animals. Or even a child's broken heart.

He was both schooled and educated. I currently have school-aged children. I worried about their education. School is good at schooling. Educating, conversely, is lacking in some schools. To be successful in school requires successful time management: be somewhere at a certain time, complete a task by a certain deadline, and so on. There is a premium on timeliness in schools. I guess time management is important, but is it related to becoming educated?

My family spent a few days in the Ozarks on the lake. The rental house sat right on the water, and there was a dock just out the back door for fishing and hanging out. It was a bit too cold for swimming. My oldest son, who is thirteen, spent a lot of his time on that dock fishing. It was his first time specifically fishing for catfish. Fishing for catfish requires a particular strategy.

He was taught about different hooks, baits, and how to set up and watch his pole. Also, there is much learning about what to do after getting a bite, bringing the catfish in, and handling it, so he or the fish is not harmed. He caught several catfish and a couple turtles during our time on that lake. I feel comfortable to say that he was well educated during those days on that dock. And the educational processes were exciting to him. He wanted to learn. He was up early and out the door each morning, learning and becoming educated on how to catch an old, wise catfish.

This was not school—this was education. Had this been designed and carried out by his school with a project wrapped around it, I suspect it would have, well, sucked! School might have killed the creative process of learning how to fish. There was really no reading required to learn how to fish. It is basically learn as you go—and go with someone who knows how to successfully catch fish.

## Belongingness

Many moons ago, the Porcupine's land suffered from the coldest winter ever. As the bitter cold continued, many of the animals perished. The porcupines, realizing the dire situation, decided to gather and huddle together. This way, they protected themselves. Even though they gave off heat to each other, one of the consequences of coming together was that their quills wounded their closest companions.

After a while, they decided they did not belong close together and distanced themselves. They soon began to die, alone and frozen. So they had to make a choice: either accept the quills of their companions or disappear from the earth.

Wisely, they decided to come back together. This way they learned to live with the little wounds that were caused by the close relationships with their companions. But the most important part was the life-saving heat. This way, they were able to survive.

The best relationship is not the one that brings together perfect people; it is when each individual learns to live with the imperfections of others and can admire other people's good qualities.

Despite my academic successes after much hard work, I am not sure I ever felt the sense of belonging in any school. I was not sure where I belonged in the world. The early experiences of school were very negative. To attend any social event or anywhere folks gathered, I had to force myself (or have someone else force me) to attend. The feelings I suffered when trying to French kiss Shelly never went away. Every day I walked onto campus was a day like sitting next

to Shelly. I felt out of place then and now. I seldom experienced the sense that I belonged somewhere, anywhere.

Social belonging is defined as a perception of having positive relationships with other people within one's community.<sup>52</sup> A sense of social belonging is essential during young adulthood and times of transition into new and unfamiliar communities, such as a college campus. Many investigations have suggested that social separation, seclusion, and low social status damage well-being<sup>53</sup> and intellectual attainment<sup>54</sup> as well as overall mental and physical health.<sup>55</sup> Some of these studies have indicated that a single instance of exclusion can destabilize overall well-being, lower intelligence test performance, and decrease self-control.<sup>56</sup> Socially stigmatized groups like Native American and African American students might be more uncertain about their social belonging in mainstream institutions like a college campus, compared to nonminority groups.<sup>57</sup> Because of their frequent marginalization, these groups may be skeptical of whether they will fully integrate positive social relationships in certain settings.<sup>58</sup>

Every kid at JCC and Spalding seemed like he or she fit right in. Again, I compared everyone's outside appearance to my insides. Internally, whenever on campus, I was a total, anxiety-ridden wreck. If a professor ever asked me a question during class, I would stumble over my words and embarrass myself. Even the threat of the possibility of speaking openly in class, or in public, caused an internal freak-out.

According to Walton and Cohen's study,<sup>59</sup> a student's sense of belonging to the college community correlates with college persistence. I never felt like I belonged in college. Attending college and living at the VOA created a feeling of living a double life. I had a secret, and the internal self-talk reinforced the feelings of not belonging on campus. In a randomized controlled trial, forty-nine African American and forty-three nonminority first-year students in the treatment



group received a social belonging message framed in a way that conveyed that college adversity was shared by all students and was short-lived.<sup>60</sup> The researchers were surprised by the magnitude of improvement over the three-year period of the study. The goal of the study was to test a new intervention for minority students, who have the highest dropout rates in American colleges. The social belonging intervention improved GPA, health status, and retention and also reduced the number of doctor's visits during students' time in college. Although this intervention has not been tested with Native American students, it has the potential to significantly improve those students throughout the United States who have the highest dropout rates—Native American students.

What I have learned over the years is that every student has these issues. It is not a matter of if they have it or not, it is how much. Every student feels out of place when he or she first enters college. Students feel like they don't belong. Unfortunately, these feelings are hard to detect. To the eye, it looks like the student actions on campus are normal. Seeing a group of students chatting, laughing, and appearing to have fun caused me to think about how I didn't have that connection on campus. I was not sure how to even engage in that process. How do friendships and close connections start? This is something I had not thought of much. In high school, there seemed to be matches made over years. Stepping onto a college campus, there were few existing connections. That process had to start over from the beginning. For a person who is not good at being open and outgoing, the feeling of not fitting in or belonging is exaggerated.

Getting a couple bad grades or having a couple bad experiences on campus reinforces thoughts about not belonging in college. For me, early on, these thoughts and feelings were overwhelming. Few students looked like me, acted like me, and I know for sure no one thought like me. If someone could look into my thoughts, he or she would run the other way. There were

times at the beginning when I had strong urges just to stop this madness. College life was not for me, so I thought. I did not fit in. I did not belong or enjoy any part of college. It did not help that I would leave a college campus and go home to the VOA. This was a secret I could not expose. If someone found out I lived in basically what could be called a homeless program, I would be doomed. I was also not going to tell anyone that a doctor labeled me as retarded or learning disabled.

In Walton and Cohen's randomized controlled study, the message conveyed to students encouraged them to assign adversity to something other than fixed deficits unique to themselves or their ethnic group, that is, to the typical and temporary conditions of any student's college-adjustment period. Not only did the intervention improve the treatment group's overall GPAs and success rates, it also improved their general health and wellness.<sup>61</sup> Minority students, specifically Native Americans, who are the minority within the minority, are most uncertain about their sense of belonging on college campuses, so an intervention that specifically targets social belonging will impact them more significantly than nonminorities.<sup>62</sup> When Native American students understand that all students feel out of place and question their academic abilities, their feelings become normalized.

Having the strategy of sitting in the front row, I overheard many conversations between students and professors about why work was not completed or turned in. Some of these stories were unbelievable, and from the looks on professors' faces, I could tell they were not buying it. For any poor grade I received, I would never try to explain my learning problem or history to improve my score. This was not an option for me. Also, having heard student services folks come into class encouraging students to disclose learning problems, I told myself I would never do this.

There were points when I knew I could get my garbageman job back, leave the VOA, and go back to something familiar. I went from taking one course to going full-time. I was flooded with college expectations and the feelings of not belonging. In the first week of a new semester, going to new classes, I was down. I was losing hope.

On the first day of a required biology course, I sat next to an older, rough little guy with tattoos and the smell of a recent cigarette break. We did the usual acknowledging head nod and waited for the professor to start. She was an older lady who was built more like a man, wearing blue jeans and a button-up shirt with sleeves rolled to her elbows. Her voice was deep and raspy, like someone who smoked and drank too much. What was also hard to ignore was the large hump on her back. As she took a little break from strolling around the room talking about the class, this dude leaned over to me and asked, “Is it man or beast?”

John Hockman was what I needed at that time in college. He had spent about a year in jail as the result of drinking and using drugs and had left the VOA’s Third Step program, my current home, several months ago, after he was confronted about an inappropriate relationship with a woman in another treatment program. He was a good ol’ country boy; he was funny and said what he considered the truth, no matter how hurtful or wrong it might be. We became fast friends. He said openly what I was feeling inside. He would make fun of anyone and everyone. And it made me laugh. It made me feel like I finally belonged on campus. I made a connection. I had one friend whom I looked forward to seeing and talking with. The other thing about John, he was smart and a very good student. He did not have the learning issues I did. He was also on the same career path as me. Like me, he was fulfilling the required courses at JCC and transferring to Spalding to get a bachelor’s degree in social work, and we would go on together getting our master’s degrees.

From that biology class on, we would sit down and coordinate our schedules. Though we were not in every class together, we were together in most. We were together in the stats course where I failed every test. He called me every name in the book. In the end, he also got a C, but was not offered any of the extras, like taking a retest, I had received. He let it be known that I charmed my way through that class. This was mostly true. He said I took advantage of an older, sick lady, telling people that every time he looked over at me during that class, I was smiling and shaking my head at the teacher. Again, all true. A smile was mightier than my brain.

John's honest remarks and reactions were also comedic opportunities. One of our social work teachers, Helen, looked almost like granny in the Tweety Bird cartoon. She had white hair, her upper body was well rounded, and she always wore a dress that went to her knees. Her skinny little legs and toothpick ankles seemed structurally unable to hold up the rest of her body. She was always a target for John's smart-ass remarks when she tried to be cute or flirtatious.

One day, between classes, John and I were hanging out in Spalding's "spa" and exercise room. This room was about the size of a small bedroom with a treadmill and couple of other outdated workout machines. We were just killing time sitting on these dusty old machines. Helen walks in and says, "Hi, guys, how's it going, are you two working out?" We both responded quickly that we were not and were just hanging out. In her always upbeat, happy way of speaking, she said, "Yes . . . well I work out almost every day." With this John rocked back, face pointing to the ceiling, and let out a genuine belly laugh. He thought she was joking. He saw her as an overweight, out-of-shape older lady who was hanging on to a teaching job until retirement. When his eyes returned to see her standing there, frozen and straight-faced, he quickly composed himself. She mumbled something like "have a nice day," turned, and left the small room.

The shocked look on John's face only made the situation funnier. The more I laughed, the more concerned he became. Was he worried that he had just offended a nice old lady? No! What mostly bothered him was how this interaction might impact his grade in her class. I could not wait until our next class together with her. I made sure I told that story to every student we knew in our small social work program. She never brought it up, and neither did John. However, I tried to bring up her workout schedule every time we three were together.

John and I finished Spalding and went on to the University of Louisville's social work program to obtain master's degrees. Whenever we are together, he tells the story of me smiling my way through a stats class, and I tell about how he offended poor ol' granny.

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I never much paid attention to how I made friends. My friends in high school just kind of happened. Anyone who was my friend during high school had to be doing what I was interested in doing. My brother's high school friends were interested in going to school and studying. They were weird. To me, when I saw them around our high school, they looked happy to be there. Any kid in high school who looked happy to be there I was sure to avoid. I felt better around kids who thought school sucked and who were interested in smoking weed and drinking.

There were times when I had classes with none of my friends. I felt so out of place in those classes. I had no one to talk with. Everyone looked good and appeared happy. I did not fit in with these kids. I did not *want* to fit in with them. And they did not want to fit in with me. Having only a few friends in high school, I felt out of place there. I felt like I did not belong.

Walking onto a college campus was very stressful. I did not know one person. Again, I compared my own internal feelings with everyone's external appearances. Internally I was a wreck. My mind raced, my hands shook, and I felt so out of place.

What I know now is that every kid felt the way I did. Everyone was nervous and felt out of place. Most every student on a college campus arrives without friends. All of their high school friends are gone—they are not on this campus. Every first-year college student starts new. Every first-year college student is stressed out. Not only do they have to learn new, harder material, they have to develop new friends. Some people are good at making friends. They are good at “small talk.” I was not and still am not. I hate situations where I am around new people and have to talk. It causes me to have a lot of anxiety. It is hard for me to connect with people, especially when no one looks like me or acts like me.

Minorities on college campuses sometimes have a hard time connecting with others because they are in the minority. When there are a lot of people like me around, I feel like I belong—I fit in. When there is no one like me, my mind begins to point that out and I talk myself into exclusion. There are very few African American and Hispanic/Latino groups on college campuses. There are practically no Native American groups on campuses. Finding another person like me in college would be hard to do. In my mind, I was very different from all the other students.

I had to get out of my comfort zone and start to talk to people who appeared different from me. Being forced into groups helped during classroom projects. When the professor would make us work in groups, I would be so nervous. But once I spoke up, it became easier. I felt more connected and began to know some students. When we would pass each other on campus,

it allowed for the opportunity to say hi or something. The more I spoke, the more friends I made. The more friends I made, the more I felt like I belonged in college.

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I first saw Nicole, “Nikki,” during an Economics and Political Powers course at Spalding University. I was sitting in my safe zone, middle front row, when Nikki came in and went to her seat in the back somewhere. She was young and had a bounce in her step. From the quick walk-by, I sized her up as being unblemished by life. Her eyes were wide open and bright, beautiful blue. When our eyes briefly connected, it was like being electrocuted. She smiled and gestured with a head nod. I’m not sure what I did in return—I think I just stared as she walked past. I was obsessed with her and her overall appearance. I had only been at Spalding for a few months. I did not know how to deal with college girls. Had she walked past me in a bar, drunk, with a bad reputation—I’m familiar with that. Young, gorgeous, pure-looking college girls, I got nothing. The old thoughts about the process of getting close to someone flooded me. Nikki would never be interested in someone like me, especially if she ever knew the real me, beyond the Kmart Buddies, at-a-distance version.

There is a specific and special protocol and balancing act when first meeting someone. It seems that at the beginning of a new encounter, it is best to introduce a person to my “representative” of me—the ideal me, not the damaged me. But if I really like someone, which happened at the first sight of Nikki, things become very complicated. Like, how quick of an introduction is made to the real me? Do I slip detrimental information in over the course of

several years? If I blurt it all out at the beginning and just get everything out, she would surely flee toward safer ground.

With past relationships, most times, the girls were just as messed up as me. With damaged girls, we always had an unwritten agreement that past issues would not be discussed. Same with any real, current issues. If “issues” became an issue, then it was time to end the relationship, or whatever our time together might be called. Violating this unwritten and unspoken agreement, regardless if the agreement was never discussed or agreed to, was a deal breaker. And there is really no reason to stick around and explain all this. Doing so would be just as uncomfortable as having to bother with speaking about the rules in the first place. If these girls don’t understand the rules of never talking about anything serious, then our time together might get too close to real. I didn’t need any realness in my relationships, just some dating and sexual relief.

With all these thoughts and personal issues swirling around my head, I thought the best course of action to capture Nikki’s attention would be to learn her schedule and strategically place myself in her path. After a few weeks, I had her time and walking path down. She had a class inside the library, so I sat just outside appearing to be reading something. When anyone would walk by, I would look up. When Nikki finally passed by, I would look up, like I had been caught off-guard, and nod my head and wave hi. Forty-five minutes of waiting resulted in ten seconds of interaction. I noticed she occasionally walked past a big tree in the courtyard. I staked myself out around the courtyard. These brief interactions happened over the course of several weeks.

My friend John already had a girlfriend. He was well aware of my interest in Nikki and my plan to connect with her. He was brutal. He would say things like, “Just go talk to her, you



big dumbass.” This type of motivational speech was not effective for me. It only made things worse because of the pressure. It reminded me of sitting next to Shelly in Sid’s clubhouse trying to French kiss her. Nikki was much more sophisticated and required a more delicate interaction. One day, John and I were in the cafeteria, in line for lunch. John tapped me on the shoulder and directed my attention to Nikki approaching. I panicked. It didn’t help that John was laughing at me and talking out loud, where she and everyone else could hear him say, “Just go talk to her.”

The cafeteria had two lines for getting food that came together in the middle, where a cashier took money. Nikki and I came together at that cashier. I panicked. My heart and mind were racing. John was behind me and bumping into me. She said hi, and I did the same. As cool as possible, I asked, “What’s your name?” She said, “Nicole.” I took my change, turned without another word, and walked out to the big tree in the courtyard. I couldn’t think of anything else to say or ask. As I was sitting there trying to eat, beating myself up internally, I saw her come around the corner, headed my way. I had not prepared myself for this unplanned interaction. Palms sweating, heart beating, head spinning, she walked up and said, “I told you my name and you walked off without telling me yours.”

“This poor, innocent beauty does not have a clue what she is walking into,” I thought. I was convinced she would never associate herself with someone with my background, once she found out the details. I am a documented retard living in a homeless shelter. My only friend is John, who is a chain-smoking redneck who talks loud with a country twang. I was sure she could do better than me.

Nikki and I have been married since 1997. Our relationship and trust built up over time. I released my long-held secrets slowly and acceptance of my situation grew for both of us. I accepted the fact that my life was not perfect, and she accepted me as I was. We were married in

a church down the street from where we first met, and our reception was held in Spalding University's auditorium. Although there were bumps along the road in the beginning, we are together and happy to be together.

Having John as a friend (and he was my only friend through both college degrees) helped me stay in college and finish. Having Nikki accept me also helped me feel a sense of belongingness on campus. While there were other supports and other factors that helped me succeed, being socially connected and having a feeling that I belonged in college was a major element in my success. I'm not sure what would have happened had I not met John or Nikki. The good news is that I did, and we are all still friends today.

## **A Solid Belief System**

### **Vision and Path**

I think we all have this internal director, this voice that tries to guide our course of action, a director that steers us between right and wrong. I know the difference between right and wrong, always have. Whenever I was caught doing something wrong and someone would lecture me about that wrongness, that time spent was worthless. I could have given that lecture. No one needed to explain how wrong I was. The voice inside me took care of that lecture all the time. But knowing right from wrong means more than just knowing not to hurt others, not to steal, and not to lie. It means going beyond; it means doing the right thing and taking action even when no action is required. It's not just restraining yourself from doing harm; it's burdening yourself with doing good.

My brothers, cousins, and I were forced to attend church when we were young. Some of my people were strong Christians and always attended church. Others, like my uncle, never went to church. I hated every second of church, except when everyone sang a song I liked. Other than those short occasions, church was not for me. I would always try to escape or at least be free to roam around the building and outside. When I made successful breakaways, there was a lot to look at and explore. It was exciting and scary to walk around some of the dark old rooms and hallways. There was a kitchen and dining area in the church basement and a large room full of tables and chairs for gatherings. Off to the side was an old, red Coke machine. On the left side was a long, skinny glass door out of which different colas could be pulled, and a bottle opener next to the door allowed you to pop the metal cap off the bottle. You could only see the bottle's

neck and cap sticking out. A metal brace held the sodas back until you pushed the right amount of change into the machine's coin slot. Then the metal brace would release your choice.

The soda bottles were small and very cold. I loved this Coke machine. I was fascinated by how it knew, when you fed it enough money, to release its pleasurable, sweet drink. It could not be tricked or fooled into releasing its drinks before receiving a certain amount of money. How could this old, beautiful machine outsmart my efforts at manipulating its rules?

One Sunday morning, after making a somewhat clean getaway from Mom's pesky eyes, I made my way to that machine. On this day, there was a handwritten sign on it that read, "Machine broke, please put money in box." There was a cigar box sitting on top of the machine. I opened the slender glass door that exposed the line of ice cold drinks. Usually, when I pulled on my best selection, Big Red, the metal brace would not let it go. Not being able to ignore my childish sense of curiosity (*is it possible that the machine will really give me a drink for free?*), I pulled, and this time, this mechanical wonder surrendered its marvelous red fruit. I popped off the cap with the bottle opener and could hear it hit somewhere inside, landing in a pile of other caps.

As I enjoyed the drink, I wondered if anyone really put money in that box on top. "Who would be foolish enough to do this?" I thought. I carefully sat my drink down, pulled a chair over, and climbed up. To my surprise, the box was heavy with coins. I sat it on the chair and lifted the lid to see a treasure chest full of loot. For just a moment, I considered that no one would miss this money, but immediately my inner voice kicked in, and I thought, "Taking these coins would be wrong." But then I realized, even more poignantly, that doing right was not just leaving the money in the box but putting money in the box, even with the soda already in hand.

Regrettably, my problem was that I did not often listen to this inner voice; there were so many other voices that this director's voice was overpowered. For instance, when I would cut high school and get caught, when I was standing in front of the principal preparing to get paddled with an oar, that voice would be loud and clear! The voice would say, "I told you so . . . I told you this was a bad idea . . . Now look at you . . . You dumbass!"

Once I removed those other manipulative voices and that positive, moral director came forth, my decisions and actions changed for the better. When I have a gut feeling about something, I follow it. I rely on this voice as it has been right more times than wrong in my life. My thinking and believing are clear and powerful. What is believable is achievable.

Being clear of thought allows us to listen to that inner director, to understand the right courses of action to take and when to go beyond the expected. Recently I was watching an HBO documentary about the famous boxer Sugar Ray Robinson. Sugar Ray was born in the 1920s and was one of few African American boxers during that time. His amateur record was eighty-five wins—with no losses! Sixty-nine of those wins came by knockout, and forty of those knockouts were in the first round. At the age of nineteen, he became a professional fighter, and when he finally retired some twenty-five years later, he had fought in about two hundred fights.

In 1947, he was preparing to fight a guy named Jimmy Doyle. At this time in his professional career, Sugar Ray had won seventy-five fights with only one loss. As he was training to fight Jimmy, Sugar Ray had a dream about the upcoming fight. Sugar Ray dreamed that he accidentally killed Jimmy in the boxing ring. After some thought, Sugar Ray decided he was not going to fight Jimmy. After word got out that the fight was going to be cancelled, two ministers met with Sugar Ray to discuss his dream. No one reported what was said during the meeting, but these two holy men convinced Sugar Ray to fight Jimmy Doyle.

These two boxers entered the ring on June 26, 1947, in Cleveland, Ohio. Sugar Ray dominated most of the fight, except in the sixth round, when Jimmy landed several punches and staggered Sugar Ray. During the eighth round, Sugar Ray hit Jimmy with a hard left hook.

Jimmy crashed onto the canvas. He remained motionless as the referee counted ten. Sugar Ray added one more win to his record. Jimmy lost consciousness while still in the ring. He was quickly rushed to the local hospital in Cleveland. Jimmy never regained consciousness, and within a couple hours of being knocked out by that hard left hook, he died. Sugar Ray's dream came to life. It was said that Sugar Ray was never the same person after that night in Cleveland.

It turned out that Jimmy was fighting against doctor's orders. There were concerns that after suffering a recent beating, Jimmy was in no physical condition to fight. However, Jimmy was fighting for the money so he could buy his mother a decent house. When Sugar Ray was informed of Jimmy's plan, he used the money from his next few fights to buy Jimmy's mom a home. It seems Sugar Ray ignored his own dream—but acted on Jimmy's.

Tatanka-Iyotanka was a leader and warrior. His first fight was at the age of fourteen, and he was involved in many more during his life. When he was about forty years old, Tatanka-Iyotanka participated in a Sundance ceremony. During the ceremony, he sliced his arms about a hundred times as a sign of sacrifice.

He had a vision during that ceremony. He saw American soldiers falling on the ground like "grasshoppers falling from the sky." When others became aware of Tatanka-Iyotanka's vision, they followed him to the land of Little Big Horn. Soon after, General George Armstrong Custer's Seventh Cavalry showed up to fight, which fulfilled Tatanka-Iyotanka's vision.

Sugar Ray Robinson and Tatanka-Iyotanka, aka Sitting Bull, had many things in common. They were both young warriors who were very skilled and successful. They were both

focused and had special gifts. They both listened to their inner directors. The one major difference between the two was that Sugar Ray's director came to him in a dream; Sitting Bull's came in a vision. There is a huge difference between these two perspectives.

As a kid, the message about dreams and visions was to brush them aside. When I became an adult, got clean and sober, and came back to my people's ways, I brought this subject up again. I asked an elder to help explain a dream I had. Before I could tell of my experience, he stopped me and stated, "Indians don't dream, we have visions." That was stunning and profound. Since that day, I have taken these already seen events much more seriously.

When I lived in Kentucky, we had weekly Inipis (sweat lodges), regardless if we needed them or not. At that time, I was very close to completing my PhD and was on the job market. I interviewed at three different universities in three different cities. This was back in 2006, when universities had multiple job openings. All three made an offer within a few days of each other. My wife and I were excited, and stressed, about picking the best place to work and live. We had a few weeks to decide.

I arrived at our usual lodge night with all these scenarios swirling around in my head. I was asked to carry in the Grandfathers that night. This was a nice, additional thing to distract me from all the stressors. During the first round, after the door was closed, a stranger came into the lodge and sat next to me. I thought nothing of it. There were typically seven or so Native and non-Native men crowded into a small, hot lodge. The only thing I saw was the reflection of his profile coming off the glow of the searing rocks. I thought nothing of it. During each round, after the door closed, he still sat next to me. He didn't say anything. He was nonthreatening. He just sat next to me. For some reason, I ignored this and went on about the business of participating in an Inipi.

A few months after living in Buffalo, I was talking to a new friend I'd met at Seven Clan. This is a place on the Tuscarora Reservation that hosts many Native health and wellness-related activities. He was showing me around the area, and we had been together for a couple of hours. As the sun went down, we stood next to our vehicles. I glanced up to catch his profile against the darkening sky and backdrop of trees. The sight of this buckled my knees. This was the same profile sitting next to me in that lodge six months earlier in Kentucky. These events converged in my mind and came crashing in on me. The present and past entangled themselves.

Since then, I have struggled with finding the correct words and sentence structure that would best define what happened. There is no way to clearly explain something like this to someone who has never experienced something similar. And for those who have, there's no need to clearly explain.

I have had these mind benders many times in my past and still do. Some are more significant than others. Some of these "seen before" experiences happen when I'm awake, and others happen during times when I'm asleep. There are some that last twenty seconds or so and others that are more like drive-by bursts. Regardless, I have regularly taken the advice of the elder who explained the difference between dreams and visions. To ignore these visions would be unwise on my part. There are many folks who have these experiences, and they direct their courses of action.

It has been explained to me that we are all on a path, regardless if we believe it or not. We decide which path to take on a regular basis during our lives. When my wife and I were deciding which job offer to take, resulting in relocating to a new city with our two boys, we were at a fork in our path. We were worried, excited, nervous, and stressed about making the right decision for our family. After we moved to Buffalo, it took several months before we began



meeting people and developing relationships with them. The stress was not released once we decided on Buffalo and moved there. We still regularly questioned whether our decision was the correct one, even after we already began living there.

When I was talking with my new friend on the Tuscarora Reservation at Seven Clan and his profile and essence came forth, linking my vision in the lodge, I knew I was on the right path. To me, if anything connects these experiences, “seen before,” visions, or whatever label one decides to use, they offer a chance to evaluate the path I am on.

Sugar Ray was given a chance to see his path placement before arriving there. It was a chance to alter his and Jimmy’s future. Instead, he ignored his inner director. I’m sure he regretted his past and questioned his future. Sitting Bull took advantage of his vision and altered the lives of many.

My oldest son, who is twelve years old, came home from school a few months ago, and I asked him how his day went. He said he had had a math test and did great on it. When I asked how he knew he did so well, he said, “When I opened the test, the questions and answers were in my dream. For some reason, I saw the questions in my dream and already knew the answers.”

Being a typical twelve-year-old boy, school, and especially math, are near the bottom of his priority list. Over the school year, we worked together studying math problems and developing strategies for test taking. When he told me of his dream, I briefly explained some of my past and how these events help us along our path. I wanted him to know that when we do things that improve our lives, we get extra help. When we try to do the right things and care for others throughout our lives, sometimes we are helped and given a gift of being able to see things before they happen.

I believe this for myself, my son, and everyone. When we are traveling a good path, we get helped along our way. We can see around corners. We can see things on our paths before arriving at that spot. It is a wonderful gift, and having people around who support and encourage traveling a good path is essential to taking advantage of these gifts.

Like most parents, I want to teach my children things early in their lives so they don't have to learn them later, like I had. The final statement I made to my son as he was rushing outside to play was, "Native Americans don't dream, we have visions!"

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After about six years in Buffalo, I came to another fork in my path. I had been offered a job interview at Washington University in St. Louis. I was as nervous and stressed as I had ever been. I'd tried not to think about it during my flight from Buffalo to St. Louis the previous day. Nor did I remain focused on the high expectations of my day as I lay in my hotel room bed all night. I thought, *Now there is no more avoiding the issue—it's on.*

Some of the folks who would be judging me were arriving for breakfast any minute. We were meeting in the hotel's restaurant. The Moonrise Hotel has an outer space theme with photos of the owner posing with different astronauts. It is close to the Washington University in St. Louis campus. I'd already checked out the dining room where we were set to meet. It had a 1950s space age look, with pictures of moons and other planets around the walls, and hits from the 1950s and 1960s playing in the background.

I planned to be the last to order breakfast so I could get a sense of what others would be eating, keeping in mind the options I had picked out as best for me. My shaking hands were my

biggest concern. If I tried to pick up a full cup of coffee, had to balance something on my fork, or do anything that might cause people to focus on my hand movements, I was doomed. My hands shake and I can't help it. I have a hereditary tremor. When I get stressed or nervous, the shaking increases. So yogurt and a muffin were best for me that morning.

I was interviewing for a faculty position at Washington University. When I first applied for the open position, I didn't think I had much of a chance to be contacted, never mind being flown to St. Louis for the two-day interviewing process. Interviewing for a faculty position at Washington University in St. Louis's Brown School is a huge honor in itself. The George Warren Brown School of Social Work is the number one social work school in the United States. Which also means it is the number one school in the world. The more I thought about this, the more overwhelmed with fear I became, which led to more tremors.

I wasn't sure I'd be able to hide the shaking, self-doubt, and tremendous excitement overtaking me. My mind was racing and my internal self-talk began to flip through all of the reasons why I was not worthy of this notable position. I feared that they would see past the front I put up and glare right into the real me. I was afraid all of my secrets would be exposed before I had a chance. The good news is that I'm an expert at keeping secrets. I had been thoroughly trained beginning at a young age.

Despite my trepidations, I made it through breakfast, and I was driven to the Washington University campus. I walked onto the grounds of a university that, for most of my life, had been well beyond my reach. The campus was well kept. The grass was bright green, freshly cut and trimmed. The buildings were Gothic style, their gargoyles watching as I strolled along the walkways. My chaperone led me to the George Warren Brown School's building. It was like

walking into a sacred cathedral. The bright tile floors reflected the light and the wood trim. The ceilings were tall and our voices echoed as we small-talked our way to my next meeting.

The protocol for interviewing for faculty jobs is to spend a couple days on campus, meeting as many of the faculty, staff, and students as possible. The on-campus interview is really the last step before being offered a position—or not. It is a dance between both the candidate and the faculty. The candidate gets the opportunity to visit with folks to get a sense of whether he or she can successfully work in the system. The faculty has the chance to meet and talk with the candidate to get a sense of whether he or she will fit within the system. So all of these different meetings allow for a dual evaluation, during which time the candidate and the faculty are on their best behavior. At the end of the visit, the faculty meet to discuss the candidate and vote whether to continue pursuing him or her. A lot rides on the interactions during the visit.

The activity that seems to carry a lot of weight is the candidate's colloquium. This is usually an hourlong presentation that the candidate gives to discuss his or her research. The faculty has the chance to watch the candidate perform and the opportunity to understand the candidate's research and teaching talents.

I had prepared for all of these activities during my visit. The advice that all of my support systems offered was to "be myself." After many years of working through issues and overcoming struggles, I know what "being myself" means. I don't have to be a fake or fraud or worry about keeping people at a distance.

About twenty years ago, while I was still living at the VOA and attending JCC, I overheard a conversation that has stayed with me ever since. I was waiting in line at a local coffee shop on my way to work. It was a chilly fall morning, and the small shop was packed; the line stretched back to the door. Two men were chatting in front of me, one about my age at the

time, mid- to late twenties, the other about my age now, mid-forties. I didn't catch the beginning of their conversation, nor was I around to get the ending. However, I did pick up the older gentleman saying, "When you find your purpose in life—it gives all other things purpose."

Until then and even after, I have not heard that concept from anyone else. When I first overheard that conversation, I wondered what must have led to such a strange statement. That man's decree swirled around in my head for several hours, then for days, and then weeks. I thought, "If that old man is correct, then living in this homeless program could not be my purpose. And if it is not my purpose, what purpose would finally give purpose to all this? If that old man was right, that finding your purpose in life gives all other things purpose—what the heck kind of purpose awaits me after living in this place?" This is why that man's statement so altered me. I could not come up with a scenario that would provide a later life purpose for living in a homeless program.

I couldn't imagine that someday I would look back on that time and think, *Oh! So that's why my life was this way and I lived in this program!*

Finding a purpose in life renders all past experiences indispensable in having arrived at the present day. For an individual with purpose, any thoughts of altering the past are quickly retracted; finding this purpose depended on all those past experiences, good and bad. The discovery of purpose puts these experiences into perspective; they happened for a reason and they led to the moment of discovery.

Each step on the path toward purpose is needed to reach your destination. If you think you will never find a purpose, relax: you are right where you are supposed to be. Regardless of where you are on your path, when you find that purpose in life, it will give all other things purpose.

What is purpose? It's truth—and the truth is your own truth. Whatever is real in your own mind is your reality.

Like many people who believe that they are not college material, the last place I thought I would end up was in college, much less working in a top-ranked university. I'm faculty at Washington University in St. Louis now. To think that I would end up here, a professor at a stellar university, is totally beyond comprehension. I am doing the things I love: teaching, researching in the community, and working with Native American students. The system that said I was not intelligent enough and not capable of success now employees me. When I was made an offer, I did not accept the job so I could have a certain position. I was accepting a purpose; I have a purpose to fulfill.

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I met Ron for dinner one night after I had obtained a bachelor's degree and was working on a master's degree. I asked how I would ever pay him back, how I could thank others who had helped me along the way. While I lived at the VOA, which turned out to be a twenty-six-month-long period, he regularly picked me up, fed me, took me to his family's gatherings, and willingly provided the knowledge he had gained over his lifetime. There is no way to measure his personal investment in me. His response to my question of repayment was as quick and direct as ever.

“David, you don't owe me or others anything. When you are in a position to help someone else, it will be your turn and your opportunity to pay your debt back. You have a responsibility now to help others.”

His statement continues to provoke me. What a great gift I have been given. The opportunity to help someone! The opportunity to give someone else hope in the way that all of the people I greatly respect gave me belief, support, and hope.

Belief, support, and hope: the main things needed to succeed in higher education. Just like when I decided that nothing would keep me from changing my life, there is nothing now that can keep me from sending this message and possibly helping others.

After I spoke with the first group of students at Haskell Indian University, we had some time to kill between lunch and the next group. Professor Bliven wanted to show me and a few other attendees around the campus. On our tour, Professor Bliven pointed to different buildings as we walked and explained the history of each. He identified an old stone building and explained that during the early boarding school days, Native American kids would be locked in it for speaking their language. He showed us part of the land that had a Medicine Wheel, and the graveyard where children were laid to rest. As we walked toward the Medicine Wheel, we approached a baseball field. We crossed over blacktop pavement before walking on an old gravel road. On top of the backstop fence, about twenty feet in the air, sat a red-tailed hawk. It was majestic looking, with beautiful, vibrant red feathers. This sacred bird sat and watched us as we made our way closer to the Medicine Wheel.

We stopped, and Professor Bliven directed our attention toward a field. “In this area are the unmarked graves of families who traveled to Haskell,” he explained. Native American children were removed from their families and sent to Haskell for an American education. One day the children were with their families, and then the next they were gathered up and sent to the Haskell Indian Boarding School. Children would be required to live there for many years during

the educational process. These children's family members, many of whom were elderly, knew they would never see the children again.

Those elderly relatives who decided to travel to Lawrence did so on horseback and wagons. The land where Professor Bliven showed us was a space where the families could set up and stay in the hope of catching a glimpse of their child playing outside or walking past. Families were not allowed to contact their children. After traveling many days, hoping to see their children one last time, many older family members did not survive. According to Dr. Bliven, those family members are buried in the space in unmarked graves. That land is sacred. The red-tailed hawk watched as we quietly passed by.

The Medicine Wheel area was about a fifty-yard circle. The grass in the outside circle was cut close to the ground. The cross mown in the middle was also cut close to the ground. The cross went North to South and East to West. A small stone fire pit circle was in the middle. Small offerings were located at each direction and in the middle of the wheel. There was tobacco, pendants, written letters, coins, and so on. Some of the trees around the wheel had different colored flags hanging in them. Each offering and flag represented a prayer. This Medicine Wheel was a place for reflection and support for students. They offered small gifts as a way of giving thanks.

After we walked around and took in what this area offered, Dr. Bliven said we would visit a final place before lunch. We would walk back the way we came and over to the graveyard. Throughout history, many Native American children died while being forced to attend a boarding school. Some died from strange diseases, some passed from broken hearts, and some were murdered. At Haskell, there had been an area set aside for children to be buried. Visions of children being ripped from their parents, of children being beaten and punished for speaking



their own language, thoughts of Native American kids who needed special attention purposely ignored, all swirled around in my head.

It is one thing to read about a horrible story. It is a very different feeling to stand on the grounds where some of these stories happened.

When we passed the baseball field where the hawk had been sitting, she was gone. As we approached the blacktop again, walking and talking, we looked up to see that the red-tailed hawk was sitting on top of a light pole, facing the direction of the graveyard. When we got close to the pole, she took off and flew to the next pole on our path. The same thing happened on three different poles. She welcomed us to the Medicine Wheel and now she was leading us to the children. Seeing the white headstones standing inside of a black fence, as soon as we arrived, she flew off over the trees and beyond.

Native Americans would believe this was a message. Being led by a large bird, an eagle or a hawk, is significant. The important thing to remember is that this is considered a sign, a message that should not be ignored. Some folks would label such an event as happenstance, coincidence, or a fluke. My people would label this as a message, a signal, a sign. They would say I should pay close attention to this message. They might say it is my Spirit Guide.

This event indicated to me that I am on a good path. How could I not be—my Spirit Guide is on the same path! We have joined together. Although I was in a town for the first time in my life, our paths have crossed. It is not happenstance that I grew up in Kentucky and was raised by a flawed father. It is not a fluke that I met Ron and lived at the VOA. It is not a mystery that red-tailed hawk led us to those graves.

After several years clean and sober, Ron and I were running one day preparing for a thirteen-mile mini-marathon Kentucky holds before the Kentucky Derby. I began running after

my lungs collapsed. I was smoking about three packs of cigarettes a day. My last cigarette was on my way to the hospital. After I got out and returned to work, Ron suggested I run a mile each day after work. He said, "Measure a mile in your neighborhood, run it, and when you do your daily sobriety check-in call, add in that you ran a mile today." Most of my daily calls were to his recorder. He had a strict protocol to check-ins. They would go something like, "Hi, Ron, this is David Patterson, it is March 13, 1990, 3:00 P.M. I am calling to let you know I have not had a drink or a drug today, I worked all day, I plan to go to an 8:00 P.M. AA meeting tonight, I did not smoke a cigarette today, and I ran a mile today. Thanks, bye."

One mile turned into two, and two turned into ten, and then into fifteen. Ron did this same system in prison years earlier after he quit smoking. We were running one beautiful morning getting ready for the mini-marathon. We planned to run about fifteen miles, knowing if we did this a few days before the mini, we could finish easily and enjoy the race day. The last four miles of that practice run were mostly uphill. After running about twelve miles, with the last three uphill, I began to struggle. I could not take it anymore; I was sore all over. I could not get my breath. Every step forward was more painful than the last. My body, and more importantly, my mind, were defeated. "I'm done," I thought. Ron knew I was hurting but did not say anything. He was about thirty years my senior, and looking over at him only made my pain worse.

I finally said, "Ron, I am done . . . I can't take anymore. How much farther do we have to go?" He replied, "Son, don't think about how much farther you have to go, think about how far you've come." He was not talking about how far I had run that day, and I knew exactly what he meant.

From my Uncle Bill banging on my back door while holding a gun to sitting in Ron's basement to seeing that red-tailed hawk at Haskell, these events were ensuring and leading my path forward. We are all on a path forward. When we are open to being helped and to being led forward on a good path, we will be. We can be successful at anything regardless of what others might think or say. Anyone can be successful in college—anyone! If I can make it, anyone can. We are all given messages. We all have support systems that can be used. We all feel like we don't belong in certain places, like college campuses, at certain times. And regardless where we start or how flawed we think we are, the path to a college education is wide open and clear. How do I know this for sure? An education saved my life. Try it for yourself—it can save yours, too.

## Selected Reading and Resources

[http://wdcrobcolp01.ed.gov/Programs/EROD/org\\_list.cfm?category\\_cd=SVR](http://wdcrobcolp01.ed.gov/Programs/EROD/org_list.cfm?category_cd=SVR)

This is the U.S. Department of Education directory of Vocational Rehabilitation services in each state. Vocational Rehabilitation helps people with certain disabilities to get an education or employment.

<http://www.aa.org/>

This site can help anyone who is looking for support dealing with an alcohol problem.

Gladwell, Malcolm. *Outliers: The Story of Success*. New York: Little, Brown, 2008.

Gladwell, Malcolm. *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*. New York: Little, Brown, 2013.

Both are excellent books about how the underdog can be successful. Gladwell is a great writer and provides firsthand stories about how seeming failures can be great achievers.

Shaywitz, Sally. *Overcoming Dyslexia: A New and Complete Science-Based Program for Reading Problems at Any Level*. New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2005.

This book provides very nice information about dyslexia and ways to overcome it.

## Notes

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