

STORIES

4 All The Way Home

Derek Book

A large question has framed my experiences as I moved through different stages of my life: how is it that I have managed to find so much success considering my background as a homeless person? Currently, I am a professional case planner and outreach worker with a non-profit service provider. I have assisted in getting hundreds of homeless people into addictions or mental health treatment, and hundreds more into affordable housing arrangements. I have connected with so many clients on such a deep level that many see me as a lifesaver. I have coordinated emergency shelter programs and assisted in developing homeless counts. I have two beautiful children and a happy life in what I consider to be one of the finest cities in the world. I am involved in my community, university-educated, physically active and healthy. To look at my life, most would never suspect that I travelled a much bleaker road at one point. That road begins in 1969, when I was born into a multi-generationally broken Métis family in Ontario.

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My mother had some pretty major mental health issues. I believe she self-medicated with alcohol to survive the pressure of being a single mother of two children on income assistance. We moved around like crazy. I don't remember ever finishing a whole year at one elementary school; as such, I was perpetually the new kid.

Attending school was not always a given in my family. At times, my mother became very unstable and we often found ourselves sleeping in transition houses, abandoned houses and even abandoned vehicles. Sometimes, my mother informed us that we were “camping,” when both my sister and I knew there was no home to return to after the said “camping trip.” My mother was at times delusional, believing that a complex network of landlords, bikers, social workers and mafia was stalking our little trio. She often left our housing in fear, relocating to another city to avoid children's services or the “Whispering Fools.”

You see, the “Whispering Fools” were chasing our little family. They were bent on tormenting us and converting us to Satanism, or worse. They would come around at night and hang outside our windows, taking small birds and squeezing them until they squeaked to elicit terror in our hearts. They would follow my sister and I home from school – my sister would carefully count how many times a car had circled the block just to make sure the driver was “in on it,” and faithfully report the information to mom when we got home. Being younger, I wasn't as interested in this tracking and would spin around in circles pretending I was flying—kick pebbles or cola cans and fill my head with imaginary places to escape. I knew something serious was going on with my mother and sister because they would spend hours each night going over evidence of stalking, but I reasoned that they would take care of it somehow.

Our family thrived on and lived for this drama. Other families may have played Clue or watched Alfred Hitchcock in the evenings, but our family was fully engaged in a drama more exciting than anything on TV. The story of how a single mother on welfare could elude and outsmart the Whispering Fools was all so exciting.

We had to move constantly to keep one step ahead of this “evil network.” While this led to very precarious financial situations and much loss in personal belongings, it made us feel empowered and free of their evil grasp.

We might have slept in an abandoned shack (or occasionally a car) in the middle of the woods, but they were never going to get us, never! Food was scarce, but it was better to raid garbage cans or gardens and cook up what we found than to submit to the authorities for assistance, because we knew that the authorities were part of the “evil network.”

It was impossible to avoid the system, however, maybe because my mother required a cheque each month to get by, or perhaps because my sister and I had the occasional “nosy” teacher who would trigger an investigation. My sister and I knew what to say when they interviewed us; we had been well schooled in espionage and resistance. It was so easy for me to chuckle and say that everything was fine, and ask innocently, “Did I do something wrong?” This would make the interviewer backpedal and apologize for accusing our family of suspicious behaviour. By the time I was seven, I was a master of the interview. The early development of those communication skills surely landed me more jobs than I can count later in life.

It wasn't always enough, however, to smile and say things were okay. Sometimes the facts were so evident that my sister and I were placed in state custody. I distinctly remember being placed in a childcare center called Merrymount¹ with my sister when I was in grade three. Merrymount was full of kids, perhaps hundreds, and my sister and I had to sneak away from the staff when we could to collaborate on strategies. We knew that our mother was in the hospital, but we didn't know why or for how long. Thank goodness the staff didn't have the time to drill us for information, because we may have slipped up without the strong hand of our mother to guide us. We did our time, carrying out the chores assigned to us in a robotic fashion.

Mom got ‘better’ from whatever ailed her, and we threw ourselves into her arms as she came to pick us up from the kid factory in London, Ontario. We were on the move again. She informed us, as we exited, to put all of this behind us.

1 “Merrymount Children’s Centre was established in 1874 as the Protestant Home for Orphans, Aged and Friendless. When the child welfare system took responsibility for the wardship of orphans in the 1890s, the Home began to focus on residential care for children of families in crisis or transition. A new home was built as a Centennial Project in 1967 and at the time of its opening, the name Merrymount was adopted to reflect its non-denominational approach.” From <http://www.merrymount.on.ca/index.php/about/our-history/>

We picked up where we left off, except she seemed to drink a lot more. That was not a good thing because it meant that the money became scarcer, and that she became scarcer. Her drinking also threatened to expose our family, because sometimes we would be locked out of the house, waiting on the stairs for hours for her to come home drunk and angry. My sister was a rock during these times. She helped my mother get in the house and to bed. She knew exactly how to calm her down so she didn't throw anything. My mother was a thrower; she would throw the closest thing in range squarely at your head if she didn't like how things were, with no regard for the potential consequences. I learned this the hard way when I was five and she whipped a padlock at me, leaving a permanent, seven-stitch scar on my forehead.

When I turned 12, my mother informed me that I would be living with my dad in Prince Rupert for a while. I thought this was odd because I had never met him. All I knew of him was that he lived in British Columbia and worked as a carpenter. I lived with him for the next two years and discovered he was also a pretty unstable, transient alcoholic, but at least he held down a job and paid the bills. He also sent me to a few counsellors. I remember hearing one of them say if I could be honest with myself, the rest of it would work itself out. I resolved that I would always be as honest with myself as I could. After two years of living with my dad, he kicked me out. I guess he got tired of dealing with my lateness and irresponsible behaviour. But who knows? I returned to live with my mother, but by that time I had already given up on being raised by any blood relation. It didn't really matter anymore, as I knew it was only a matter of time before I set out on my own.

Hitting the streets at 15 was the least of my worries. I had lost all hope, all connection to and all faith in the society around me. I remember sleeping in a parkade on a piece of cardboard when I was 16, waking up periodically when a businessperson would uncomfortably walk around me. I was shocked and angry every time: I had no clue how a person could walk by such a tragedy without so much as a word. My bitterness from being neglected by nearly every human I had encountered expressed itself in a rant to a street outreach worker one day. I flatly stated that I would never become "one of those people." His answer resonated with me for years to come, and triggered a turning point in my self-awareness:

"What makes you think you would be one of those people, if you got off the street?"

I had always associated success, wealth, belongings, property and nice clothes with selfishness. That was the mode of my cultural upbringing: those people who had become successful had done so on the backs of others. It was perhaps my mother's way of rationalizing why she had only known deep poverty – rich people were somehow evil and selfish. The idea that I could be moderately successful without compromising my belief system was a revolutionary one for me, and I carried this new hope with me for years. I would not be like them; I would be Derek. I would not lose my identity or my concern for others if I started my career, in fact, I could even develop a career for the *purpose* of helping others if I wanted to. It was mentally liberating, to say the least. I don't remember the outreach worker's name, he was just a supportive person hired to talk to young people at the local Native Friendship Centre. There was no agenda to his role other than to sit and talk. We didn't set goals or try to develop 'outcomes,' we just shared stories and talked about life. This kind of discussion is a luxury to street people. Most support people are now assigned to tangible roles, and are so busy filling reports and checking email that actual conversations with clients are a rarity. But this guy had the time for me and time is most certainly a huge factor in healing—time away from the damage means time to move forward. Every hour I had talking to a person outside of my street peer group was an opportunity to find a source of inspiration. The program this counsellor was affiliated with had a drop-in component, and I remember all of the counsellors being very honest, down-to-earth and accessible.

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Though I spent the five years between the ages of 15 and 20 bouncing around the country, homeless for long stretches, I did occasionally manage to sign up for a program or two, which helped me immensely. I took a nine-month job entry program in Kelowna, British Columbia, which taught me some commercial cooking and life skills. The program included a few weeks of group therapy with a highly-skilled psychologist that was brought in specifically to work on our family of origin issues. I had yet another life-changing epiphany: it seemed as though I wanted the approval of the people around me, but what I really wanted was acceptance and

approval from myself.

All these little tidbits of knowledge about myself came together when I came to Victoria, British Columbia. I was still travelling from place to place, staying at various shelters and eating at soup kitchens. Victoria's Streetlink

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shelter, run by the Cool Aid Society, was the best I had seen in the country at the time. It was new and the staff was progressive, connected and engaged with the residents. The food was leagues above the other shelters in terms of nutritional value and I slept in a room by myself, since

Cool Aid was moving away from the large dorm rooms common in other shelters. All these details spoke volumes about the concern and care they offered to clients – and it touched me deeply. I remember lying there in this nicely kept room feeling truly cared for. This was such a rarity for me at the time and made me feel wonderful.

I got off the street after being around Streetlink for perhaps a month. Maybe being treated with dignity allowed me to feel better about myself, or maybe I was tired of suffering, but I never looked back to the streets again. I worked in trades for a few years, and then I really started to put together all these pieces about myself that I had accumulated along the way. It was horrible that society had left me to my mother's illness growing up, but through all these different programs—all this indirect and direct mentoring, counselling, and honest concern for my well-being—I started to heal from all the wreckage. I quit the last of my drug habits and entered a program called The Victoria Life Enrichment Society (VLES).

If there were an addictions recovery model I would apply to every single community on the planet, it would be the one I discovered at VLES. This was a life-changing, one-month program that was held in a nice, well-kept motel. The food was fantastic and the focus was on choice and believing in the human capacity for positive growth. There were feedback sessions (one-on-one sessions with counsellors), but most importantly there were several hours of intensive group therapy each day. We would be in a group for three hours in the morning, break for lunch and do a few more hours of group therapy in the afternoon. I was in a small group of men with various reasons behind their addictions: stories of abuse, neglect and loss filled our days. It was tiring, but we dug deep and learned how to support each other with the

help of the well-trained facilitator. What made VLES amazing was the staff: they were all very progressive, used evidence-based practices and were all masters-level professionals with a passion for their work.

After my stay at VLES, I hit the ground running. I started to volunteer at the local Alano Club. I upgraded, entered college, then university, majoring in psychology and cultural geography. I did very well in school and I started to gain valuable experience through my volunteering, which would eventually propel me into my decade of work with the homeless and addicted individuals in Victoria, British Columbia.

As I got deeper into my career, I started to reflect on how I had managed to escape death on the streets, and how I managed to not only survive, but also excel beyond my dreams. Memories are fuzzy when I look back, and sometimes, it's just a mish-mash of key moments surrounded by vague contexts. What always strikes me is that my greatest leaps forward were supported by an intense motivation and a belief that I was okay and that things were going to work out; both of these gave me a great sense of hope. It should be known that each of these growth periods in my life was accompanied by someone who actually believed in my potential. These were people who were not simply spouting terms like 'client-centred' and 'non-violent communication,' but people who lived those concepts, who trusted that I may actually know what I need in my life. They spent lots of time with me and other clients because they knew it wouldn't be wasted.

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When I look around at the current climate for homeless people, I still see the same things work. Carl Rogers (an influential American psychologist) had it right: we need to trust the inner workings of the person. If we truly embrace the idea that every person on the planet is being the best they can be, with the best tools they have available, the solution is very simple: give them better tools, and stop assuming that you have to convince them of something—you don't.

I know this sounds radical, but people only want to take what they need. Perhaps I took a few welfare cheques and bought drugs with them. When I look back, I realize I needed those drugs at that time. They were better than

suicide for pain management.

When I look back at the most helpful resources that did the most to get me off the street, they were not goal-directed; the case workers were simply present and listening, while I created goals that I felt ready to accomplish in my own time. As a parent, I use the same style to raise my kids—a mixture of harm reduction, active listening and trust in the natural sense that kids (and all people) have of right and wrong. I don't need to put so much energy into pushing my kids into some idea I have of who they should be, and I think they appreciate it.

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Neither do I push my clients—if anything, they push me to see new things every week. I make it a habit to get out of the way while providing support, and they surprise me every time. People are amazing.



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Derek is a consultant living in Victoria, British Columbia. While Derek spent the first 20 years of his life in substantial crisis, he went on to become university-educated, and has been working in the field of social work for over 12 years as a Case Planner, Needle Exchange worker, Homeless Count Coordinator, Shelter Coordinator, and now as a Coordinator with the Coalition. He is the author of the blog: “Formerly Homeless,” and is a tireless advocate for those experiencing homelessness.

Derek grew up in various communities in Ontario, Alberta, and BC, but settled down in Victoria in 1991, where he got some help from the Victoria Cool Aid Society. He credits his recovery to some awesome peer support, and a couple of extra helpful frontline workers who saw the value through his crisis-based lifestyle. He also found some inner strength through his music, playing 7 different instruments in a number of different bands.

Derek would like the world to know that there is more than just hope in the lives of people experiencing homelessness, there are real solutions for real problems, and he is determined to advance those voices in the battle to end homelessness.