

FINDING FISH

**Finding Fish:
A Story of Resilience**

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Finding Fish is a memoir of a man named Antwone Quenton Fisher, who is also the author. Throughout his book, it wasn't hard to see certain psychological concepts of human growth and development with Erikson's stages of development, the impact of abuse, the impact of a peer group and incredible resilience, as the reader is taken on a journey through Fisher's life in foster care homes, homelessness, and then his ultimate success as a human being.

The first two years of Antwone Fisher's life were spent in a foster care home with Mrs. Nellie Strange being his first foster caregiver. Reports from the state said that:

Baby Boy Fisher is doing beautifully in the foster home, where he is receiving much love and security. The foster mother commented, saying she thinks that he is spoiled. (*Finding Fish*, 2001, pp 23)

This initial loving environment set Antwone up for success as he learned trust, rather than mistrust as described by Erikson's Psychosocial Stages.

Babies either trust that others will take care for their basic needs, including nourishment, warmth, cleanliness, and physical contact, OR develop mistrust about the care of others. (*Invitation to the Life Span*, 2010, pp 19)

After Antwone was subjected to this loving environment and learned trust from his caregiver for two years, wherein he was placed in a new foster home. The new foster home (The Pickett's house) became hell for Antwone, as he was abused sexually, emotionally and physically. There were two other foster children, one of which was a young man just a year older than Antwone named Dwight. The two grew up together, even shared a room. They were given the same treatment of abuse, however, Dwight's reaction to their situation was very much different from Antwone's. Dwight lashed out with anger and tantrums and rebellion, while Antwone learned how to cope with the stress of his foster care situation with better resilience. This was interesting

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to me as I read the book. I believe that their different reactions could be due, in part, to the fact that Antwone had two whole years in which he was shown love by a caretaker, and at such a crucial age, while we have no idea if Dwight ever felt that same love from a caretaker. Evidence of this theory can be found in the book:

...I coped better by escaping into my imagination and living there, buoyed up by imagined love. Dwight couldn't subsist on false love; he needed the real thing—or as he might have put it, the real shit. (*Finding Fish*, 2001, pp 155)

Antwone had experienced love from a caretaker and knew how to dream of love because he had once been shown love, while Dwight may have never been afforded the same opportunity, as stated:

With love, Dwight could have been someone to impact on the whole society. He was that special and that smart, like any one of those enlightened individuals who come from the most meager of conditions. But without love, Dwight didn't work, and I believe everyone lost out. (*Finding Fish*, 2001, pp 160)

The very beginning of Antwone's life and the love exhibited there, made him better equipped to cope with the impact of abuse.

Throughout his time at the Pickett's, Antwone was exposed to various types of abuse, one form of which was sexual abuse. This is "a recurring nightmare from childhood, starting at about age three" (*Finding Fish*, 2001, pg 43) in which Willenda, a young woman and neighbor of the Pickett's, forced him several times to have oral sex with her. These are events that cause Antwone much heartache throughout his life.

As with other types of child maltreatment, the consequences of sexual abuse extend far beyond the trauma of the moment. Young people who are sexually exploited tend to fear

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sexual relationships and to devalue themselves lifelong. (*Invitation to the Life Span*, 2001, pg 325)

Antwone was able to see the effects Willenda's sexual abuse had on him when he began listening to records by Marvin Gaye. He considered himself a romantic as he listened to the lyrics of "Mercy, Mercy Me", "What's Going On", and "Let's Get It On" and would dream of the day that he could have a relationship like the ones Marvin Gaye sang about, but he seemed to naïve to the fact that the songs were very sexual; there was a sort of disconnect between romance and sex in his mind.

Maybe the topic of sex was still too tainted because of Willenda.... I didn't get it yet that romance and sex were connected. (*Finding Fish*, 2001, pp137-138)

This was manifest again later, in his adolescent years, with a young woman named Freda, to whom he was very attracted. They shared a connection and she was very in tune with his insecurities.

But somehow Freda understood that mine was not your run-of-the-mill shyness, that it was on the level of a brutal terror in my bones; and she never pushed me beyond my comfort zone. As normal as I tried to be, I couldn't undo the fact that most of the human touch I'd experienced in my life had hurt. So anything physical with Freda, even holding hands, was out of the question. But there were times when we walked together, just the two of us. (*Finding Fish*, 2001, pp 169)

As time went on, Antwone began to realize that being physical was an essential part of a relationship. When he was 18, he joined the Navy. During his service, he met a beautiful young Japanese woman, with whom he soon fell in love. They courted for months and months before physical intimacy. He briefly describes the event:

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At the moment that we were both completely naked, my old fears flamed from the caves of the past. But when I looked in her eyes I saw only a reason to trust, and my fear was extinguished. (Finding Fish, 2001, pp 295)

Although it had been nearly 25 years since the last time Willenda forced herself upon him, he was still overcoming the trauma of her repeated offences. Although it took some years, the fact that he was actually able to overcome such trauma could be due to the good impact that a peer group once had on him.

When Antwone went into the fifth grade, an incredible teacher/Godsend, was put into his life. Mrs. Profit was part of the “new” Antwone. He was given a new nick name, Fish, and was going to a new school and this woman became a big part of the “new” Fish. Mrs. Profit was very wise and understood that:

Getting along with peers is especially important during middle childhood, ‘central to living a full life and feeling good’. Difficulties with peers can cause serious problems, and being well liked is protective, especially for children from conflicted, punishing or otherwise stressful homes. (*Invitation to the Life Span*, 2001, pp 291)

Mrs. Profit created an environment in which the children in her class all felt equal, thus inducing a comradery between the children. She did not leave the back row of desks for the “bad” ones, nor did she favor the “better” kids. She arranged the desks so that they were facing each other, side by side. She also set the seating arrangement to girl-boy order. This arrangement was a life-transforming event for Fish. He was in a position to make friends with girls when he used to be incredibly and painfully shy towards them. Fish recollects:

Young as she was, Mrs. Profit really knew what she was doing. With constructive criticism, she encouraged rather than condemned. She found something to compliment in

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each of us—a neat paper, a goo attitude, an eager face—and rewarded the whole class for our overall positive efforts with impromptu parties, field trips, and other celebrations. We became a family. (*Finding Fish*, 2001, pp 124)

This time that Fish was able to spend as a student of Mrs. Profit helped him to become a confident young man through his adolescent years, and the beginning of high school. He entered with a renewed sense of self, and felt like he could be anything he wanted. This woman facilitated a means by which Fish could become resilient.

Ever since Fish was just a little boy, his way to cope with the daily stresses of life with the Pickett's, was to set off into a dream world of imagination. This worked for a time, but he was still struggling with school and would skip school. When Mrs. Profit came in fifth grade, a light turned on. He learned a new way to become resilient: through a healthy relationship with an adult. "A warm and supportive adult-child relationship enables resilience" (*An Invitation to the Life Span*, 2001, pg 277) which is "a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the contest of significant adversity". (*An Invitation to the Life Span*, 2001, pg 276) Not only did she teach his class about equality, she also taught the importance of spiritual balance. She held a moment of silence in which she lets the children know it is "a time to be quiet and lets us know that we can meditate or think about whatever is meaningful to us or to say a silent prayer." (*Finding Fish*, 2001, pg 125) This facilitated an out for him. He slowly began to feel comfortable speaking with God and he would tell God all about his struggles for a time, which helped release the burden of secrets that he kept with him.

Another key aspect of resilience is whether or not a stressed child can develop friends, activities, and skills. (*An Invitation to the Life Span*, 2001, pg 277).

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His resilience did not only last during his time with Mrs. Profit, but through the duration of most of his time in High School. He felt confident and became a DJ at the school, and had a lot of friends. An excerpt from the book exemplifies this:

This day, a tough kid has promised to meet me after school and fight me. When we get outside, a large throng of fellow students has shown up to watch. So the guy makes the first move, grabbing me forcefully and shoving me back. I stumble, regain composure and move toward him to push back when I look up and see he has disappeared. The crowd just grabbed the guy and sucked him in. the next day, with two swollen eyes, covered in bruises, the kid approaches me, saying, "Let's be friends." Apparently, my public didn't want anybody messing with Fish.

More than ever, school was my Haven away from the Picketts. It was my friends, our camaraderie, our activities; it was art, learning new subject matter, a new sense of academic accomplishment, and adjustment. (Finding Fish, 2001, pg 170)

When Fish was 16, Mrs. Pickett kicked him out of the house and so he stayed in an orphanage. He became very low at that point, but still excelled in school for the most part. He graduated and then was sent to YMCA and then ultimately became homeless at the tender age of 18 years old. He went through a lot of tribulations as a homeless man. He finally decided to join the Navy, which turned out to be the best decision of his life. A report was written about him by one of his commanders:

SH2 Fisher is one of the finest barbers in the Navy... his military appearance is always neat and his behavior is excellent. During a command inspection, Petty Officer Fisher was one of three to be recognized by Rear Admiral Butcher for an outstanding uniform. He gets along well with all members of the crew.... Responsible for the day to day

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operation and supervision of laundry operations, barber shop, and damage control... accountable for \$15,000 inventory of ship store items.... As services supervisor he has ensured that uninterrupted laundry and barber shop services have been provided to 325 crew members and 315 embarked USMC personnel... despite numerous problems caused by outdated equipment and an undermanned division... Awarded battle efficiency "E" Ribbon... His leadership and supervisory skills enabled to experience ZERO discrepancies during inspections... faced with sever shortage of manpower, he has reacted with a "can-do" attitude.... (*Finding Fish*, 2001, pg 298)

After Fish was released from the Navy, he got a job working for Sony as a security guard, which opened the door for him to become a screenwriter. It was there that he met the love of his life and married, has two children, and is a really great husband and father.

And so we see how Fish, throughout his life, showed so many core concepts of human growth and development. We see how important it is that, according to Erikson, an infant learns to trust vs. mistrust, we see the terrible impact sexual abuse can have on a person, the amazing impact that a peer group can have on someone, and the impact that adults can have on kids in enabling them to build resilience to adverse situations. Of these, I think the most important thing we can learn is that no matter the circumstance which a person can come from, the best thing to do is to love and give encouragement unconditionally. It is then that those who are in an adverse situation can feel empowered to rise above circumstance and become something better than the world in which they were raised.

References

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