THE CATALYST

What I wish I knew then

At sixteen I fled an unsafe home into couches, shelters, and squalid rooms, slipping through systems that saw my grades, not my life. From abyss to footing, I've learned truths: trust your needs, reject perfectionism and people-pleasing, protect time, and show your uniqueness.

By: Rose S. Finch | Posted: August 25, 2022

This blog post discusses trauma.

When I was sixteen, I ran away because it wasn't safe at home. I couch surfed, stayed with friends, lied about my age to stay in a shelter, and rented squalid rooms in boarding houses. Eventually, I found a place to stay with some people in a derelict house. My rent was $35 per month. I slept on the floor and kept my clothes in garbage bags. I couldn't afford cardboard boxes.

I fell in with a bad crowd, the kind of people who gravitate toward and use vulnerable young people. Because I had nowhere to go, I became enmeshed in that situation, a place far too adult for an immature person who was lost. It was a dark and insular world, filled with shadows, secrets, half-truths, and shame.

I managed to keep going to school, and for a while, I kept up the pretence of normal. But after some time of going to school on a few hours of sleep, sometimes hung over with substance use, things started to slip. And even though I looked sleep-deprived and usually went without lunch, what caught the attention of the school guidance counsellor was my free-falling marks. What interested him most was my academic plunge, but he did not think to ask me about my situation. Or maybe he thought of asking and decided not to. "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps" was his advice to me.

For all sorts of reasons, I was falling through the cracks of the system. I craved the help and guidance of adults and could find no way to ask for it. The shame kept me silent. Only one of my teachers, a nun, noticed that something was wrong or chose to notice, and reached out. What if she hadn't?

It's been a long journey from there to here. From balancing on an abyss to a solid footing.

It might seem like stating the obvious, but living this way is not good for your mental health. I want to share what I wish I had known then and the lessons I learned the hard way.

- Just being here is a miracle in itself. The odds of coming into this world are mind-boggling and almost impossible. Always remember this, no matter how hard things get.
- You are the expert on what you feel and what you need.
- Being a people-pleaser will drain you of your energy and vitality faster than anything else.
- No-one will understand you and that's not really important. What is important is that you understand you.

- Being judgemental is based in fear. A day spent judging yourself and others is an exhausting day.
- Don’t count the days. Make the days count. Stop saying you don’t have time.
- Get clear on what is important to you and ruthlessly direct your time, attention, and energy to that. Don’t get co-opted by someone else’s agenda unless you choose to.
- Perfectionism is the fastest and surest road to unhappiness. Constantly seeking approval and being a slave to perfectionism is based in fear.
- Don’t be afraid of your uniqueness. Show the world who you are.

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