

The Ongoing Cycle

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Sometimes, life feels like an ongoing cycle you can never escape. Whether you're 11 or 19, you'll always remember those feelings of powerlessness.

The dark basement of the middle school counseling department kept you way past school time. You couldn't find any joy for the upcoming Christmas holiday on the serious looking school social worker who eyed you with concern. You felt lost trying to piece together their whisperings of "DCF," and "Children's Hospital Psychology Evaluation." A massive police officer asked, "What's going on at home, what puts you in danger?" However, the 11-year-old you did not find any comfort looking at the gun strapped in the police's pocket and listening to the distressed social worker conclude her lengthy investigation by calling you a "liar." Feeling as tiny and powerless as a 3-year-old, you swallowed the growing feelings of self-disgust and begged, "Can I please go home?"

"I want to go home, please." The nineteen-year-old you cried again, remembering the same cycle repeating. It all happened so fast. Suddenly, the police were yelling at you for your student ID, and you found yourself escorted to the counseling service in another basement. All you could think of is, "OMG, please don't make this happen again and again." The 3, 11, 19 year-old you hid behind the Christmas tree and whined in unison, "You're not here to help, police always lie and hurt you!" They searched you against the wall, undressed you at the ER, and marked the scars on your body. You're being held on Section 12, starving without a meal, half-covered in a flimsy hospital gown, with a hospital guard eyeing you cautiously at the door. You were a circus animal - just

like the last time they sent the 11-year-old you for a hospital evaluation.

"I'm doing fine. I just want to go home," you tried to act clear-minded in the best adult voice like a 30, 40-year old. Nineteen didn't seem mature enough to them as fifty, but age didn't really matter. Every time they sent you somewhere, you were no more human to them than a stigmatized mentally ill girl or just "some thing" to be observed. The 11-year-old inside you screamed in your mind, "Don't you know that asking for help can get you trapped?" You knew you needed to respond without hesitation, insisting you're fine, or they would assume the worst. The 3, 8, 11, year-old you echoed, your parents already taught you what not to say to the social worker at that young age. "Always say it's a culture misunderstanding, or the outside world will take you away from home and leave you in foster care alone." The 19-year-old knew how to act at this moment - smile calmly until you're out of danger and escape the system.

"I want to go home," the voice resounded inside the 19 year-old you, reminding you of the time it came from the kids in the group home and orphanage you volunteered for. The 15, 16, 17 year-old volunteer you couldn't whisk them away to a perfect place. Still, you always wrapped their tears into your arms, trying to comfort them. "I understand, we'll see what we can do, alright?"

"When can I go home?" The 13-year-old girl you mentored at the group home tried to hold back her tears, curling up next to you. The 17, 18-year-old you watched her put on the brave smile in front of

the police and child protective service investigators as she claimed everything was fine at home, then immediately broke into tears in your hug. You saw the 3, 8, 11..... year-old you in her brave yet heartbreaking eyes, knowing how it felt to tell a fairy-tale-like home story and hope the Christmas wish for a peaceful home would come true one day.

“Was there anything wrong at home? What was this DCF involvement about?” The ER social worker looked up from the lengthy treatment history form. The 19-year-old you felt your past selves scream, “Why am I being questioned about history with child protective service again, now that I’m a 19 year-old adult?” Cautiously, you repeated a lovely home story, just like that 13-year-old girl you mentored and the 3, 8, 11 year-old version of you always prepared to recite. You bursted into tears once the social worker walked out. Now as a 19-year-old, you still couldn’t promise the kids you mentored a happy solution, nor could you run out of the cycle that’s haunted by the investigation over and over again.

“You’ll be admitted - you’re not going home tonight.” The ER room with its beeping machines, holiday decoration, and pink-clad nurses faded away. Your masked smile washed away with your tears. The 3, 11, 14, 19, and all the versions of yourself crashed into each other in this endless cycle, tearing powerlessly with no place to run.

“How come you all get to go home for Christmas, but I don’t?” You cried curling up behind the exit door you’d not be allowed to open for the next ten days. It’s another Christmas in the hospital, the 11-year-old you reminded your 19 year-old self. No Santa or Christmas tree again. In fact, you haven’t seen any trees or plants over a foot tall at all in this isolated psych unit. No one would come to rescue, no wish would be granted, no outdoor fresh air time - it’s too slippery and snowy, the staff claimed.

“Can I go home for Christmas?” At the group home, the 13-year-old girl unwrapped the tiny Christmas gift you brought her, repeating the question again and again. The 18 year-old you could see hope radiating

from the girl’s eyes as you wished her a peaceful Christmas Eve at the end of your volunteering. “Let’s hope the next Christmas will be better,” all you could do was hold her hands as the two of you prayed together.

But now, you’re the 19-year-old whining like a 3-year-old in the nurse’s warm hug as she headed out the locked door by the end of her Christmas shift. The nurse met the 19 year-old you with a sympathetic sigh, reminding you of the time when you met the 13-year-old girl with the best comfort you could provide. No matter how much you empathized, the 17, 18 year-old you knew that you couldn’t take home every wounded child, just like the nurse couldn’t take home the 11 or 19-year-old you. You always see the 3, 11, 14, 19 year old yourself in the tearing eyes and suffering of your clients. Yet, now you’re deciding the fate of the clients in front of you, like those 30, 40, 50 year old professionals who sent you away so many times. It’s as struggling and painful to be that powerless 3-year-old seeing others deciding your fate, as it is to feel like that 30, 40, 50 year old witnessing the clients struggle and the kids cry, “I want to go home. I don’t want to be here.”

“I don’t want to be here. I just want a place to call home.” Your tears soaked the stuffed animal. It’s always there for the 8, 11, 14, 19-year-old version of you that’s locked up in the psych unit, under the supervision of child protective service, or sleeping in the cold airport lobby. The 19-year-old cried silently in your bed as the footsteps and flashlight check-in came by every 15 minutes on this terrifying Christmas night. Ever since you were 4-years-old, you learned to distinguish the footsteps, fight, flight, freeze, or fake asleep as your parents fight. Once again, other people are deciding your fate.

But eventually, they’ll release you back into the cycle. No matter if you are 3, 11, 19, or feel like 30, 55 years old, the tears and tough decisions never end.

“Welcome back!” You’re finally released back to BC - the place you call home. The Christmas decorations at the counseling basement are gone, but the 19

year-old you can't feel happier hearing your therapist wishing you a happy birthday. You're turning 20, but still putting together the 19, 18, 11,...3 year-old inside you. You wonder how to walk across campus worrying about being thrown back to the 11-year-old cycle again? "I see a lot of hope inside you," the therapist says in that sincere tone that always comforts you. Now you realize you've always tried to provide the 13-year-old girl and all your clients with that comforting, supporting voice, which your therapist finally offered to the 19-year-old you.

"I will not stop caring." The statement of the therapist becomes your new mantra, knowing you will always care for your clients with the deepest empathy. The humanity from that therapist helps you integrate and embrace the many versions of yourself from all ages. Life can feel like an ongoing cycle because they are all actively inside you, but you don't have to feel trapped. When you see your 11, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, year-old self in the eyes of the clients you serve, you will do everything in your power to pull them out of the cycle. Being a 30, 40, 50, 60, 70 year-old adult with the power to decide the other 11 or 19-year-olds' fate is not what is most important. The most valuable thing is the promise to always remember how it feels to be 11 and trapped in the cycle with no Christmas wish granted. As you walk by the Gasson basement and think of your therapist's kind words, you know the 20, 21, 22, 23, 24 and many upcoming years of you will not stop caring for all the souls so they can find the hope that's always been inside them.

Every age of you came together when you handed that 13-year-old young girl the Christmas card that read, "One day, we'll create our safe homes and no longer be trapped in any cycle anymore."

Note:

This piece was written in March of 2019, during my freshman year, prior to the recent pandemic, racial injustice protests, and political polarization that has occurred over the past year. My narration of this story might sound differently now as I continue on my healing journey. Yet, the similar "ongoing cycle" has continued to be reenacted and continues to impact individuals and society collectively even when it's forgotten at times. My hope is that this piece helps us to think more humanely and ethically about the history of psychology, medicine, and social services disciplines so we can truly care for the suffering others.