

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Finding Strength in Adversity

Val Hogan · Monday, August 19th, 2024

Humble Beginnings

In the heart of Roanoke, there lay a circular stretch of run-down housing projects known as “Indian Village.” This place was no canvas for fairy tales, no cradle for happy endings—just a grim stage for the raw, relentless drama of violence and survival. Just a mile away from where the police killed my father, it was here that my fragmented life began.

The overture of my life’s tragic symphony starts with my father, Eric Scott Lee, a name now echoing with unfulfilled dreams and lost potential. His life was violently cut short in what should have been a routine encounter with the police. Strangled to death in a moment of sanctioned barbarism, his passing shattered the fragile foundation of our family. This grotesque miscarriage of justice catapulted my mother into a storm of grief and responsibility she was woefully unprepared to bear without him. She had to raise her one-year-old baby on her own.

The nights without electricity were oppressive. The air hung heavy with humidity and the scent of mildew. Streetlights cast long shadows through our paper-thin curtains. The hum of air-conditioning units nearby and the wailing of sirens broke the silence. The darkness was thick, almost tangible, wrapping around me like a suffocating blanket. In those moments, I often found myself staring at the ceiling, tracing the cracks with my eyes, imagining they were maps to a better place.

My Grandmother, the Rock

In this grim world, my grandmother was the rock that anchored our family. Her presence was a lighthouse in the storm. With her, I found warmth, security, and love. Her hands, worn and calloused, could transform the simplest ingredients into a feast, filling our tiny, dimly lit kitchen with the aroma of home-cooked meals that spoke of love and resilience. Her voice, soft but firm, could calm even the wildest tempests of our household. She was my guide, my protector, and the glue that held us together.

With her memory, I recall trips to the dollar store, which were a cherished and joyous time. She would let me pick out dolls and little rings, indulging my preferences without judgment. These small tokens were treasures, reflections of my true self, and she never denied me that solace.

She was the one who held my hand as we walked to Life Tabernacle Pentecostal Church every Sunday, where the fervor of the congregation and the scent of old wooden pews mixed with the

promise of salvation.

A Childhood of Unfitting Roles

I knew I was different somehow. While other boys my age were playing with trucks and toy soldiers, I found delight in the nursery, playing with dolls. Eventually deemed too old for such activities, the dolls were my solace, through playing with them I told stories of a structured life that I wished I had. The nursery was a sanctuary where I could escape the harsh reality of my home life, if only for a short while once a week.

The church was a blessing and a curse. They knew they had a kid with a little sugar in their tank on their hands. They loved me when I sang the lead roles in the Christmas plays, my voice soaring through the sanctuary, filling it with a genuine love of God. But outside those performances, my refusal to fit into the mold of a normal boy was a constant source of tension. One Sunday, the congregation brought me up to the altar, laid their hands on me, praying for my soul. The heat of their palms, the wailing of their tongues, and the smell of sweat and spit and desperation are burned into my memory. They were trying to exorcise the femininity out of me, to make me fit into their world.

The Fall from Grace

My mother's descent into addiction began shortly after my grandmother passed away from cirrhosis. Grief-stricken and lost without her best friend, she turned to alcohol and pills to fill the space that my grandmother used to hold. The house became a place of sorrow and chaos. The smell of unwashed bodies and cigarette smoke replaced my grandmother's home-cooked meals. The hymns of Sundays turned into the muffled sobs and drunken ramblings of my mother and increased fighting between her and my stepfather.

Two years later, I found my mother drooling and reaching out at nothing on the kitchen floor one day after school. At the age of 32, she had suffered a massive stroke. The hospital became our new reality, with its sterile smell and the unending beeping of monitors. She lived, but not without a total shift in personality and ability. Our survival now hinged on the meager survivor benefits from my father's death, a pittance of five-hundred-and-fifty dollars a month that barely covered our most basic needs.

I was thrust into adulthood far before my time. I had to take on the tasks that my mother used to fulfill. I looked after my younger half-siblings, juggled bills, and tried to maintain some semblance of normalcy, all while navigating the new experiences of our day-to-day life.

My stepfather, unable to cope with the weight of our crumbling world, sought solace in meth. Rage and drugs flowed through his veins, turning home into a battlefield. His hatred for my dead father, who was still technically the one who provided for our family, twisted his soul. "Faggot," he'd spit in my face, choking me, eyes crackled and burning. "Do you think you're the man of the house?"

I'd look him dead in those bulging eyes, defiant, wearing my mother's clothes and makeup smeared from his spit. "I don't think I am a man, and I wouldn't call this a house," I would say.

Isolation and Responsibility

I wasn't allowed to talk to kids my age. Our life was a secret, hidden behind closed doors. What

happens here stays here, or else we would be separated by the government.

Responsibility fell on my shoulders. Cooking, cleaning, laundry, and tending to my bedridden mother and cleaning the potty chair by her bedside after each bodily function was completed. The smell of ammonia and bleach lingered on my skin, my hands stinging and pink from scrubbing. The burden of care was relentless, with no appreciation, just survival and the promise of a loving family.

My stepfather's addiction turned him into a monster. He'd disappear for days, then return in a frenzy, eyes bloodshot, reeking of sweat and chemicals. His outbursts were violent and unpredictable. "Who do you think you are trying to raise my kids? Those are my kids, you don't tell them what to do," he'd scream, grabbing me by the hair, dragging me across the floor. The pain seared through my scalp. His breath, hot and sour with the stench of burning plastic, would fill my nostrils as he pulled me close to his face by the neck.

Eventually, this broke me. I'd get away, curl into myself, trying to become as small as possible, hoping he'd lose interest. Some days were better than others, but I remember pressing my face into my pillow, trying to muffle my sobs. The pain was all-consuming, I couldn't do anything right.

The Escape

Running away at 18 was an act of desperation, not courage. I didn't want to leave my mother, but there was no way for me to take her with me. She couldn't walk and had to take medication every day, and I don't think she would have gone with me if I had a solid plan. She loved all of her children and would never leave any of them behind.

The streets were unforgiving. The cold of the night, the rough texture of concrete under my arm while using my backpack as a pillow. I quickly learned to hustle. Men would offer shelter, food, money, but there was always a price. Their touch was possessive, greedy, leaving me feeling used and discarded. I had run headlong into a different kind of hell, trading one form of survival for another. Sleeping with men for shelter and basic necessities, not realizing what I was doing. Manipulation became my power, but it was hollow, leaving me more broken and confused with each encounter.

A False Haven

It was during a routine visit to a plasma center that I first encountered the suspicion of being HIV positive, a suspicion that was confirmed shortly thereafter at a local Drop-In Center. This diagnosis became a catalyst for my subsequent descent into drug and alcohol addiction, as I struggled to cope with the weight of my health status and the accompanying societal stigma.

The gay bar, The Park, meant to be a haven for the local LGBTQIA's, introduced me to a new life. The sensory overload was comforting to my ADHD mind. The beat of Rihanna remixes playing, the lasers and smoke machines, the scents of sweat, alcohol, and smoke—it was a world away but somehow familiar to my childhood home. I could lose myself in dance and drink.

My autism had once shielded me from my stepfather's hatred and the judgmental stares of others, but here, in this neon-lit purgatory, I felt every whisper behind my back, every disdainful glance. They cut deeper than any physical blow ever could. The gay crowd, the very people I thought would understand me, seemed to sense my struggle with gender identity and punished me for it.

Their looks of disdain were like daggers, piercing the fragile armor I had built around myself.

After being a patron for a few months, I got a job there. The irony was not lost on me—working in a place that both embraced and rejected me. I traded my feminine nature for a semblance of acceptance. I became a chameleon, suppressing my true self to blend in, to be palatable to the crowd. I dressed in ways that masked my femininity, spoke in tones that betrayed none of the softness I felt inside. I performed masculinity like an actor in a tragic play, each shift on stage, my audience the very people who could never truly see me.

I fell deep into addiction there. The escape offered by the flashing lights and pulsating beats was not enough. I needed more. I began drinking every day, the alcohol numbing the pain that throbbed inside me like a persistent, unrelenting wound. But even that wasn't enough. Coke became my companion, the sharp, bitter lines offering a brief, exhilarating high that made me forget, for a moment, who I was and where I was heading.

The lines of coke blurred the edges of my reality and created beautiful illusions, making the connections more genuine, making me feel like I found my family. The alcohol flowed like a river and was free for me; it drowned my sorrows and washed away my fears. Each night was a step further into oblivion, a desperate attempt to silence the screams of my suppressed femininity and the crushing weight of leaving the family that I was responsible for.

In the darkness of The Park, surrounded by people who were just as lost as I was, I found myself spiraling deeper into addiction. The nights grew longer and longer until I was in a perpetual state of darkness.

The Park was a false haven, a place where I learned that not all who claim to be allies truly are. It was there, amidst the flashing lights and pulsating beats, that I realized the greatest battle I faced was within myself, and the greatest acceptance I needed was my own. But first, I had to hit rock bottom, and The Park was the stage where my descent played out in vivid, agonizing detail.

The Cataclysm

My twenties were a blur of suppressed gender and reckless abandon. I partied to drown the pain, each drink a temporary escape. I got clean a few times, moved to Richmond, restarted, went back to my old ways, restarted again, a vicious cycle. My last relapse was a cataclysm. In a fit of rage, I destroyed my lover's home and bleached his clothes. The chaos mirrored the storm inside me. The smell of bleach, the sight of his clothes in ruins, his face twisted in shock and disgust—these memories haunt me now.

My breaking point was not just about the damage I caused, but the realization that my life was one of destruction and chaos. The person staring back at me in the mirror was unrecognizable. I had become hollow and centered in self, consumed by my addictions and unresolved pain. I knew I had to change, but the path to recovery was not clear.

Accepting My Nature as an Addict

Accepting my nature as an addict was a crucial step. It is not a label of shame, but a part of my identity that needs care and understanding. I learned to recognize what initiates cravings, to seek support, and to forgive myself for my past. The journey to recovery is not linear; it is filled with setbacks and challenges, but each step is a step forward.

Understanding addiction as a part of me, not the all of me, is the thing that finally made it click. It allowed me to see my strengths, my resilience, and my capacity for change. It removed shame from the equation. I learned to navigate my emotions, to find healthier ways to cope, and to slowly build a life that supported my recovery.

Amid challenges and great changes, the principle of “doing the next right thing” emerged as an easy-to-remember structure to guide my life. It has been a mantra that not only influences me through tough times but also serves as a moral compass steering each decision and action.

Adopting this principle involved a deep shift in how I approach each day. Whether it was deciding to attend a support meeting, reaching out to a friend when feeling isolated, or taking time to engage in self-care practices, each choice was a step towards reinforcing my commitment to recovery and well-being. It meant learning to prioritize actions that align with my values, enhance my mental health, and support my sobriety, even when such decisions required significant effort or discomfort.

Safe Haven

That spiral landed me at Safe Haven, a shelter for veterans and people with HIV. An unexpected sanctuary. Here, I began to rebuild. The smell of disinfectant here was different, cleaner, more hopeful. They let me stay on the women’s side, and for once, I was seen and respected for who I truly was.

Safe Haven was more than just a shelter to me; it was truly a second chance at life. Recovery meetings became my sanctuary, volunteering my path to redemption. Conversations in the courtyard with men who had seen the horrors of war and yet found the capacity to respect and support a transgender woman like me—it was a testament to the unexpected allies one finds in unlikely places and when not looking. My commitment to sobriety and spiritual awakening was met with admiration, a rarity in a world that often saw me as an anomaly.

Stability, finally. For the first time, genuine happiness. An irony, finding joy in a homeless shelter. The warmth of a hug from a fellow resident, the shared laughter in the courtyard—these simple moments meant the world to me. Free from financial worries, I could heal and grow.

At Safe Haven, I connected with my true self and rediscovered my caregiving spirit. Caring for others, something I had been forced into during my childhood, became a choice and a source of joy.

I found comfort in faith, not in the punishing, fearful faith of my childhood, but a faith rooted in love and acceptance. I was able to connect with a compassionate God who saw me, knew me, and loved me. The teachings of love, compassion, and forgiveness guided me, helping me forgive myself and others. This spiritual journey was intertwined with my path to self-acceptance. I learned to see myself through the eyes of a loving Creator, embracing dignity in this.



Joy in Helping Others

Six months into this stability, *Layers of Change* was born. I decided one night that it was totally within my capabilities to start and run a nonprofit organization. It wasn't a meticulously planned venture but a beautiful and faithful leap. My mission was clear: support transgender and gender nonconforming individuals, provide the refuge and respect I had found. *Layers of Change* is not just an organization; it's a testament to community power, human strength, and the need for safe, authentic spaces. I am currently using all of my lived experience to make this organization a success.

Helping others became a source of profound joy. I found purpose in having a nice chat, supporting those around me, sharing my story and listening to theirs. Each act of service was a step towards healing, each connection a reminder of our shared humanity.

One of the most transformative moments was when I brought a young trans person to their first recovery meeting. Seeing the fear in their eyes, so familiar, and then witnessing their relief and gratitude was overwhelming. It was a reminder of why I fought so hard for my recovery, why I needed to be there for others.

Advocacy and Inclusivity

In the broader context of my community involvement, doing the next right thing has meant advocating for transparency, inclusivity, and respect within the various spaces I navigate. It has led me to take active steps in creating and participating in initiatives at Layers of Change that empower not just myself but also others who are marginalized within our community. From developing programs that address specific needs of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals to ensuring that these programs are accessible to those with different abilities, each action is a testament to the commitment to live by this principle.

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