
Antwone Q. Fisher

Finding Fish

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Q: In Finding Fish, you describe your upbringing as a foster child in fairly stark terms. Do you think the foster care system is inherently flawed?

A: I would hate to sound pessimistic, but I think there are problems that can't be avoided like young people becoming social workers and deciding after a few months or a few years that they are going to do something different with their lives. That creates a situation where a kid has to get to know someone else all over again. Children arrive at a place where they don't trust the jurisdiction they are under and feel as though they are alone in their circumstance and that the social workers are only strangers passing through.

Another area of concern would be lack of resources for programs that could improve lives of children in foster care and educate the public to the need of good foster parents and adoptive parents and many other areas in this matter. I think that it's not a great enough priority to the powers that be to provide better lives for children in these unfortunate situations.

There are a lot of problems that would be solved if only the community would become more involved and volunteer to be mentors and extended family to foster children. I think that a child who is in foster care for two and three years, with no real feeling of permanence in a family will feel unwanted in the world. Adoption should be an option for those children.

Q: What was it like for you to read the reports of social workers and psychologists charting your experience in foster care? Why did you decide to include those third-person accounts in your memoir?

A: It was enlightening to read what my social workers had described in my childhood records. Reading their details was confirmation; it was proof that I hadn't dreamt the whole thing. That foster family actually existed.

I used the records in my memoir to validate my memory to others.

Q: Did reuniting with the Elkins and Fisher families change the way that you think about your place in the world?

A: Meeting the Fishers and Elkins made me more confident in my being. Finally, I had living proof that I came from somewhere. Yes, it makes me know that I have a place in the world and that I belong to something.

Q: Would you characterize yourself as a survivor? To what do you attribute your will to persevere in the face of the many obstacles of your childhood?

A: I suppose I would consider myself a survivor. We are all survivors in life; even people who have had better childhoods. You survive. I don't like the idea of saying survivor because it makes me feel handicapped. Feeling handicapped makes me feel that I am not as capable of succeeding as others. I've come to realize the power of words and I would rather not use that word in reference to myself. Call it pretending, but it works for me.

I was able to persevere because I wanted to be normal like I felt everyone else was. I wanted to be liked. I wanted to live. I never wanted the negative things my foster mother said about me to be true. I wanted to show others and myself that I am worthwhile.

Q: Did you ever learn what became of your first foster mother, Mrs. Strange? Did the publication of your memoir enable encounters with any other "lost" figures from your past?

A: While filming the movie, Antwone Fisher, in Cleveland, someone who knew Mrs. Strange had read the book and brought me her picture and told me that she had died some years ago.

I think I have met and reconnected with everyone that I felt I had lost. Everyone who was meaningful to me in some way. Even some members of my foster family showed up at book signings in Cleveland and in Florida: That was really bizarre. The most interesting encounters were reacquainting with my childhood friends such as Michael Shields, Sonya, Fat Kenny, and Fred: One of the saddest discoveries was that my foster sister, Flo, died in the spring of 1999, lonely and unfulfilled, of a brain aneurism. It broke my heart.

Q: The story of your life is not only the subject of this memoir, but also of a major motion picture. What aspects of your newfound fame have you found especially rewarding or challenging?

A: The most rewarding aspect of having a memoir and film about my life is that opportunity to write more, I would think. Having a voice, after growing up voiceless is a real accomplishment and I feel good about where I am. There haven't been very many challenges simply because people don't know what I look like, but I am still basically shy, so having to speak in front of people is challenging.