

BROKEN CHILD MENDED MAN



Adam Starks, Ph.D.

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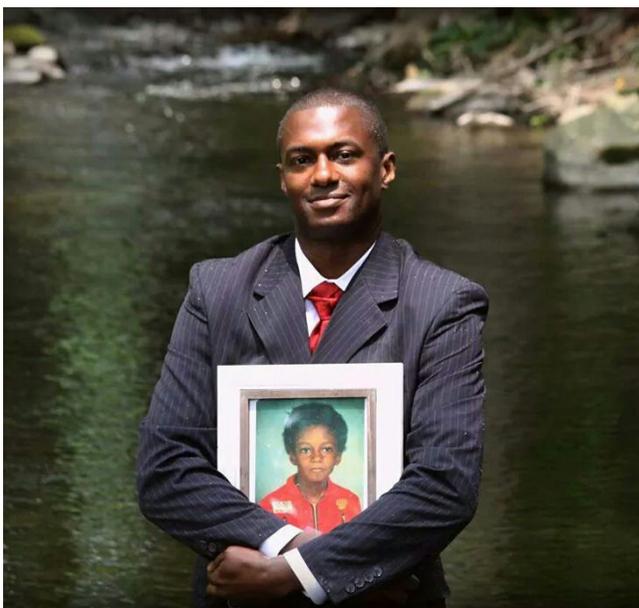
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DEDICATION

*To my beloved wife, Emily, my brilliant children Jayden, Isaiah,
Susannah and every person who has positively touched my life.
You have all inspired me to go the distance.*

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

*I prefer to be true to myself, even at the hazard of incurring the ridicule of others,
rather than to be false, and to incur my own abhorrence.*

Frederick Douglass

*As long as we define ourselves in terms of our pains and
problems, we will never be free from them.*

Eckhart Tolle

I can be changed by what happened to me, but I refuse to be reduced by it.

Maya Angelou

*Men judge more from appearances than reality.
All men have eyes, but few have the gift of penetration.
Everyone sees your exterior, but few can
discern what you have in your heart.*

Niccolo Machiavelli

Thank you for choosing to pick up a copy of my memoir. This isn't another story about a black boy who managed to survive the streets. Those accounts of overcoming urban plights are admirable, but this is a nonfictional account of struggles I endured before and during my years in foster care. Conversely, my survival tactics originated in rural Rappahannock County, Virginia as a poor country boy who was destined to do more than be defined by his circumstances. The preamble of my decision to write this book has to be accredited to the positive people who have come into my life within the past couple of years. It was their initial push to bring my story to light that motivated me to begin this process. At first, I reluctantly nodded in agreement knowing that I was afraid to confront a past never dealt with accordingly. I had to "get over it" as so many unknowing people eloquently put it and make a viable life for myself. I grew up determined to end the cycle, but not before nearly becoming a victim of my own self-destructive behavior during the process. Throughout my writing progression, I discovered the depth of my resilience and laid much of my burdened past to rest. I held back tears of a lost, broken child throughout the first few chapters of this book, as I relived the life of that lanky, nappy-headed, ashy kid who took on more than his fair share of childhood pain and uncertainty. Nevertheless, I was able to overcome those obstacles and break the generational cycle afflicting the Starks' family. That's not to say that I'm any better than other Starks' in Rappahannock County; as evidence put forth in this book will convey my flaws as a fatherless child coming of age in the foster care system.

Fast forward to today and I'd undoubtedly tell you that I'm a tremendously privileged man. In my past, there were plenty of chances for my life to divert into one of drugs, alcohol, or even imprisonment. Instead, I find myself expressing the most vulnerable details of my childhood, which in turn made me the resilient man I am. Today, I am a proud husband, father, community

volunteer and find myself full of aspiration to do more. In short, I have refused to be a victim of my circumstances. With the support of my Rappahannock County and Eastern Mennonite University communities, I turned out to be a contributing member of our society. For their peace of mind, I've protected the identities of everyone involved in my life by using alias names throughout the book.

Back to the original point, the kind of upward mobility I experienced is becoming rarer in our country, so it's important for me to convey to you that the secret to my success lies within an insatiable desire for knowledge and embracement of community. I deliver this story to the best of my recollection, not to garner sympathy but to give others inspiration to overcome and cope with hardships. I interject humor and other lightheartedness when I can, but truth be told, some of the reading is emotionally heavy and requires time to digest. In addition, the explicit language throughout the book is not intended to purposely offend anyone. This language was just an everyday part of my life. If you can understand that, then I encourage you to continue. If you're hypersensitive to such language, then you're going to miss the overall point of the book.

Notwithstanding, I've learned over time that there's a time and place for swearing. Seeing the world for what it is, cursing is the only thing I can manage to do some days.

With that in mind, navigating through the peaks and valleys of life, I have determined that lessons from my triumphs and struggles may provide value to others trying to process the hardships and risks that inevitably come with life. By way of reviving tucked away memories and extracting them into a worthwhile, compelling read, I hope you will discover both solace and resilience. I encourage you to let your hardships manifest into valuable lessons for your future. I don't have all of life's answers and probably never will, but coping with life's ups and downs will strengthen you in the present moment, thus sustaining your will to succeed in this uncertain

world. It's also important to remember that the definition of success is different for everyone. It arrives at different points in our lives based on myriad reasons. I did not discover what would define success for me until I was 33, and now I'm seeking to make the vision of Urban Light Initiative (www.urbanlightinitiative.org) a reality.

With the completion of my memoirs, I close the book on a turbulent past and make space in my heart and soul to embrace the present and accept the future. Ultimately, that is how we survive and learn to cope with the tribulations that may negatively affect us.

In short, embrace the hardships in life by learning from these instances and by striving to achieve inner peace. That was my path to contentment and self-realization. One of my foster mothers once said, regardless of your circumstances, no one owes you a damn thing. The message wasn't elegant by any means, but it stuck with me. Instead of being a victim of my past, I had to realize my potential and accomplish something meaningful during my lifetime.

If you're struggling with life in general, then this book is for you. I encourage you to face your hardships head on, accept the outcome and know that life will indeed get better from the lessons you gather along the way. As you continue on your journey, I don't recommend walking it alone. Seek those who will remain a positive force in your life and lean on them in times of need. Pay it forward as much as possible by reciprocating that offer to others within your community.

Helping others will alleviate your pain, but more importantly you will have a sense of empowerment in realizing how important you are in making this world a better place. I couldn't have accomplished anything without the three foster families who stepped in when they did, or the mentor who guided me through the college and financial aid process, or the high school track coach who encouraged me to think about college in the first place or the teacher who handed me a novel that would ignite a love for books that I never knew existed. You get the idea. Stand on

the shoulders of the influential people in your life and take your rightful place in this world. Only then will you be able to walk tall and withstand the hardships while blazing your own trail. The beauty and the curse of life is that it isn't scripted, but it's ultimately you who will determine its narration.

Section One: Hard-Knock Origins

*Hardships often prepare ordinary people for
an extraordinary destiny...*

C.S. Lewis

*Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls;
the most massive characters are seared with scars.*

Khalil Gibran

*Be patient and tough;
someday this pain will be useful to you.*

Ovid

*When I hear somebody sigh, "Life is hard,"
I am always tempted to ask, "Compared to what?"*

Sydney J. Harris

Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of overcoming it.

Helen Keller

*The two most important days in your life are
the day you are born and the day you find out why.*

Mark Twain

Chapter One: California Born

The simplicity and strength that came with the name Adam did not resonate during my formative years. The name itself, meaning *first man or man made from the ground*, adequately describes my journey thus far. From a more positive viewpoint, the strength and resilience signified in my name may have forced me to dig deeper psychologically, to hone in and rely upon my keen survival instincts. And if I managed to survive my childhood, the simplicity of it meant I would not have to fight the undetectable stigma and unnecessary battles so many black individuals have to endure throughout their adult years. However you decipher what's in a name, I can say with certainty that the name itself was part of the reason I internalized its strength throughout my formative years. Regardless of my mother's shortcomings, I eventually came around to thanking her for this name. Even though my mother chased an impractical dream of becoming a songwriter, heavily drank alcohol during my womb occupancy, and managed to lose us to the foster care system, she managed to bless me with a name that would not hinder my future attempt at achieving the American dream.

I was born August 26th, 1980 in Burbank, California at St. Joseph's Hospital and spent the first years of my life living in an apartment complex. I can only imagine that it was the standard-issue cookie cutter of every other apartment high rise in West Hollywood. I remember a lot of vibrant red and white. Red had to be my mother's favorite color since the only picture I have from this time period has her in a solid red wardrobe from head to toe. Red carpet. Red and white striped walls. Red furniture. Throw up a couple of green elements in the space and our place could've been a year-round Southern California Christmas Lounge.

It was the perfect scene for a little boy who liked vibrant colors, but the best memories with my mother had to be dancing around the room to a variety of music from the Temptations to Dolly Parton. She introduced me to the diverse genres that she grew up with, so I had access to good music early on. My favorite was Marvin Gaye's, *I Heard it Through the Grapevine*. Mom had that one on heavy rotation on her record player. The California Raisins were my first Saturday morning heroes. Any time that commercial came on the TV set, I had to do my rendition then ask Mom to buy me some raisins. She did one better and managed to get me a set of stuffed California Raisins for Christmas.

Looking back, my patchwork of memories during the first five years in California reveals a much simpler life compared to the challenges I would face moving cross-country to Virginia. My earliest recollection is falling out of my stroller onto a star at Hollywood Boulevard around two years old. Whether that meant I was destined for stardom or my mother needed to make sure I was buckled in more tightly next time remains to be seen. My mother already had another child, my sister Eve, six years earlier with the only man she would ever marry. Her alcoholism coupled with her blind, unproductive ambition led to their divorce well before I was born.

While we were in Hollywood, she managed to have relations with two more men who produced my other brothers, Noah and Christopher. Surprisingly, I do not remember much about either one of them during our time out west. According to Mom, Noah was born at Hollywood Presbyterian and Chris was born at UCLA. Mom said she decided to give us biblical names since she was told by a doctor in the early 70s that she would never have children. Supposedly, she continued to pray throughout the years, and she was blessed with my sister Eve, then me six years later and Noah in 1984. While Christopher is not a biblical name per se, *it began with Christ* was Mom's logic. The rest of us, including Moses and Matthew, who would arrive much later, were given

solid biblical names. Some refer to it as luck; however, the biblical names may have been our saving grace since all of us managed to make it out relatively unscathed by the possible fetal alcohol symptoms infants can face when expecting mothers drink heavily during their pregnancy. I've tried to find some sort of logical explanation, but luck doesn't even begin to describe how all of us managed to make something of ourselves later on in life.

My father was absent from the get go. I don't have his side of the story since I never met the man, so I can't offer a guess as to why he chose to abandon me. The blank line where my father's name should be on my birth certificate represents the same void I still feel today. I cannot help but think that life would have been so much easier if I had the ability to ask him for advice. Of course, that assumes he would have been stable enough to provide sound guidance. Although I do not know his side of the story, I always considered him a coward for escaping his responsibility. Ultimately, I could only hold him accountable by being a dedicated father to my children. His absence had the opposite effect on my psyche. Instead of a continuation, I chose to break the cycle and start anew. I made that vow early on as I was watching an episode of *The Cosby Show* one night. I wanted to be just like Dr. Huxtable and have a huge family that looked up to me. Gratefully, my sister's father went above and beyond to provide that foundational example. Although I struggled with false memories during my adolescent years, my father never existed during my stay in California. I have absolutely no recollection of Peter Miles McKissack, but according to my mother, he came around a few times after I was born before venturing off to Vegas to pursue a career in music.

The redeeming memories from my early childhood involved my sister and her father, Caesar. Although we did not live together, my sister always seemed to be by my side. She even nicknamed me Chachie after the *Happy Days* character. To this day I have no idea why, but the

name stuck during my stint in California. As for Caesar, I could not have wished for a better father figure in my life. Our travels together granted me the fatherly insight my little inquisitive mind needed at the time. Whether it was my wonderment as to why the moon was following our car or pondering why those basketballs were stuck on the electrical lines, Caesar always had a straightforward viewpoint. Typically I followed up with an, “Oh!” and kept humming to the tune on the radio or whatever Mom had stuck in my head.

Caesar always treated me to McDonalds, and I must have owned every Happy Meal toy from 1983-84. My burger or chicken nuggets and fries would be in each hand doing a happy dance before being gobbled up by me pretending to be the Hamburgalar. Afterwards, I recall Caesar dropping me off with my mother, and me entertaining myself with a skit featuring the Hamburgalar on a skateboard and Grimace chasing him along the carpet while they argued.

They never thought I was listening, but most of it had to do with Caesar lecturing my mother about her drinking problem. Caesar would eventually leave, and I would continue to entertain myself amidst empty Busch beer cans until Johnny Carson came on. Yes, his show was on way past a normal child’s bedtime. One of my favorite sayings as a toddler was, “Heeeeere’s Johnny!” That was the routine I looked forward to each day.

Although the moments were cherishable, I faced a lot of adversity outside of the comfort of Eve and Caesar’s affection. There was never a doubt in my mind that I would always be safe in their presence. Mom didn’t always leave me in their care, so I could only hope to hold my own when she sent me to spend the day with Gladys. Anytime I hear the music of an ice cream truck, I still think of her three girls who took joy in locking me inside a closet while they bought ice cream to eat in front of me. I remember sitting in the dark with a glimmer of light coming from underneath the door helplessly plotting my revenge, yet never carrying through with it since I

was always outnumbered. However, there were times when karma would take place. One time I got the idea to pee off of the balcony and show off my rainbow-shaped stream to the three sisters. One of them was impressed and got the bright idea to try it herself. She pulled her pants down, aimed, but the stream proceeded down her legs. I had a good laugh with the other two girls, but that was the extent of my ability to divide and conquer. We teased her until I left that day. The girl's lived in the same apartment complex, but I never knew how their mother, Gladys, came to know my mother. All I remember was being dropped off and the torture that ensued. Besides having all of the Twizzlers and Kool-Aid I could consume, Gladys was usually oblivious to the torment and dared any of us to disturb her while watching soap operas. Her girth and big hair curlers were intimidating, so I didn't dare test her command. As soon as my mom left, I couldn't wait for her return. I always wanted to open one of the windows to see if I could just fly away. The destination did not matter; anywhere but with those three demon spawn would suffice.

My mother never held a job, so I never knew where she went during the times. Upon returning to our apartment, I anxiously awaited Caesar and Eve to take me away, even though I knew it would not be forever like I always wanted. Some days they would arrive as I had wished and others they wouldn't. Sometimes Caesar would just drop Eve off for a few hours. Like every toddler, I had it in my mind that I was the center of everyone's universe and completely oblivious to the fact that they had lives outside of my self-absorbed bubble. I remember Eve demanding that Mom stop drinking so much alcohol to no avail. In an effort to look out for her brothers' well-being, Eve constantly criticized her but she hardly penetrated my mother's steadfast denial. I never fully understood the problem until I came to resent my mother for her alcoholism a few short years later.

All of that denial led to inevitable consequences. Due to mom's alcoholism and never holding down a job among other reasons, we ended up being evicted from our apartment during the spring of 1985. I recall looking at our belongings mom had piled up in the center of the family room for storage. She bent down to my eye level and assured me that everything would eventually be delivered to Virginia. I was only allowed to take a book bag full of clothes and some of my most prized Happy Meal toys. Whatever I had in that bag is all that ever made it to the eastern countryside. The night we had to leave California, Eve was sobbing and hugging me tightly in her arms as my mother led me to the back of the plane. Pulling away from her was emotionally painful, and I cried myself to sleep during the one-way trip to Virginia. I remember the sick feeling in my stomach and shaking from the fear of leaving everything I'd known behind. Whether I wanted to or not, life would have to go on without my beloved sister. Mom's dreams of becoming a successful song writer in Hollywood quickly faded away. Our memories of California would eventually fade away as well as every picture and belonging which was confiscated by storage due to failure to pay for the unit. In essence, the first four years of my life were hopelessly discarded.

Although I received a handful of letters throughout the years, I wouldn't see Eve again until she moved across the country to attend her graduate program at Duke University fifteen years later. I was at a track meet as a collegiate athlete representing Eastern Mennonite University in 2000. Beforehand, we went on to lead two completely separate lives. Thankfully, Caesar won custody of Eve after divorcing Mom years earlier. Her father's involvement proved to be her saving grace, and my father's absence would only lead to a turbulent childhood.