

# **My Experience of Separation and Reunion**

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I was born in Jamaica. My parents came to England when I was between one and two years old approximately. I had no memory of my parents whatsoever. I had no contact with my parents throughout my whole growth period, until I was eighteen. The task and responsibility of my upbringing was left totally to my grandmother who had no resources with which to support me. I felt that she brought me up the best way she knew how.

She told me that when I was a child I used to call her mother. Eventually, she had to explain to me that she was not my mother and that my mother was in England.

Of course this revelation had very little impact on me. For me she was my mother, the only mother I knew, because my mother and father never wrote to me (well not to me personally) during the eighteen years of their absence. I felt very far removed from them; I had no up-to-date picture of them, so I could not imagine what they looked like. It was almost as if they did not exist. They were so far removed from me that it did not occur to me that there was anyone for me to write to.

I went to primary school until I was nine and then went to what was then called the elementary school until I was fifteen. I then went on to secondary school, until the age of seventeen. I gained local certificates; my grades were average, nothing substantial.

I remember that I was very bright, but I was very shy and I had no self-confidence and certainly no faith in myself. Ever since my childhood, I used to experience extremely severe verbal and physical abuse from my aunt.

Every morning at 6.30 a.m. she would curse me out of bed, telling me that I was lazy, useless and good for nothing and that I should go and find something to do. She would beat me for no reason at all, till there were cuts and weals on my back. She used to say that I was stupid and could never achieve anything. As a result, I would not speak up; I was too afraid to make mistakes; I know all too well the severe consequences of making mistakes.

I would always stay at home. I was not allowed to go down to the playing field, to play with the other boys. My two other cousins who lived in the house would rebel and go to the playing field. To keep us at home, my grandmother would strip off all our clothes and put dresses on us. My cousins didn't care; they would still go to the front of the house and laugh with their friends and even run down the road. I was too embarrassed to let anyone see me in a dress. I was gutted, especially for the fact that I didn't break the rules, but had to suffer for no reason.

It was when I became sixteen that my grandmother got worried about my future and wrote to my mother, stating that I was about to leave secondary school and I needed support and direction. She promptly wrote back to say that she was not in a position to help me but sent my father's address. I wrote to him and within a month he

wrote back to me with some money enclosed. I then wrote to thank him and he responded to my letter by asking if I would like to come to England. I said yes. It took a year to sort the papers out, after which I came to England.

My father was very glad to see me, although things quickly changed. He wanted to be the dad telling his little boy what to do, when in essence my boyhood days were firmly behind me in Jamaica.

I never forgot the expression on my mother's face when my father took me to see her. She gave me very serious, searching looks as she scrutinised me slowly, from head to foot standing at her door without saying a word. I felt very odd at this stage. I found it very difficult to understand her behaviour. I felt for sometime time after that she thought my dad brought me to England to get at her. She had to leave him three times, then divorce him, due to his unfair behaviour. I sense that she thought for a while that dad might turn me against her, but this did not happen.

It was through a local church choir that I started to visit prisons. I quickly found out that there were no ghouls and monsters in prisons, but people. People who desperately needed someone to talk to. I quickly became a prison visitor (listener - befriender) at HMP Pentonville Prison, Kings Cross. I also regularly visited several other prisons and I have continued doing so for the past twelve years.

My quest to be effective led me to do a Diploma in Theology. Within the syllabus was an introduction to counselling and also child psychology. This fascinated me and I later started studying counselling at Birkbeck, then Lambeth College. I am now pursuing the Diploma in Intercultural Counselling at Lambeth College. My tutors are John McCormack and Aisha Dupont Joshua.

It was when I did the first year of counselling with Birkbeck College in 1998 that I was forced to confront issues from my past, issues which I had suppressed and others for which I was in denial. It was in one of our group sessions that I said that I was glad that I grew up in Jamaica, or that I would have been spoiled if I were brought up here.

The tutor then said to me, "Philroy if you were brought up here with your mother, the experience you had with your aunt may not have happened; she would have protected you..." This revelation hit me very hard; it caused a regression into my past. I began to remember that the abuse started from when I was a little child. I was very sad and angry and I felt that I was abandoned.

It was very strange getting hugs and kisses from my mother and sisters and being told, "I love you"; ah, it took me a long time to get adjusted to that, because in truth throughout my eighteen years before I came to England, I was never hugged or kissed, nor was I ever told, "I love you"... Well not until I discovered girls at fourteen....

I knew that my mother was telling the truth, when she tried to make up for those years by attempting to mother me. She wanted to wash and iron my clothes and ask me to come to her home each day for my meal; I declined the offer. It got to the point that I had to kindly say to her that I love and appreciate her and I will respect and

acknowledge her as my mother, but I do not need to be mothered at eighteen. However, I could do with a big sister. We kind-of agreed on that, at least in theory.

I have been working in Feltham YOI since April 1995, providing training, advice and support to young offenders who are about to be released from prison. Since January 2001, I have been doing voluntary counselling for the CARAT drugs project within Feltham Young Offenders. My clients are all male.

The government statistics state that over 80% of young people in prisons are coming from a single parent family. Most of the clients I have been seeing are coming from this background. (The objective here is not to start 'single-parent bashing', because they are often themselves victims of circumstances for which they have no control).

In exploring issues with my clients, they often wish they had their fathers around to give them the support, discipline and guidance they needed.

Most of my clients described their mothers as caring, kind, soft and gentle. One client specifically said that he wished his dad were around to teach him how to be a man. When he met with his dad, he gave him a flat to live in. He thought that now dad will come around and give him some well-needed guidance. He found out that his dad was not a good example and in fact his Dad was worse than him. He seemed gutted.

This twenty-year-old young, mixed race man spent ten years in young offenders institutions. He is bright, intelligent, tall and handsome, but he is in prison again with a six-year sentence hanging over his head.

My second client who is black spoke highly of his father whom he grew up with and who is quite successful in his job. His mother left the country when he was a baby because she had problems with the law. He only met her briefly in his teens before he heard that she died. He pined and longed for her; he felt that she would care for him like his friend's mother did.

He said that his dad goes to work early in the morning and comes back home late in the evening. He works hard, pays the bills and provides for him and his sisters and he's ashamed to have brought this embarrassment on his dad by his involvement with drugs and being in prison.

Even before he did any wrong his father would not talk to him directly, but would give his sisters messages to give to him. When his sisters left home, there was no one to talk to. He turned to peers in the community who led him into drugs.

When I began to work in Feltham YOI in 1995, it was very rare to find an Asian offender. The situation, however, has now dramatically changed due to the breakdown of Asian marriages and relationships. Many Asian mothers are now struggling with the responsibility of bringing up their children on their own, especially their boys. One mother shared with me the almost impossible task of guiding and disciplining her sons.

Traditional and religious lifestyles are in conflict with the European lifestyle. Youngsters from ethnic minority groups see their friends making decisions and choices and they feel that they have the right to do the same, which causes conflict and breakdown in the family.

Many of my clients claim that if they had more discipline and guidance, they would not have been in prison. Others state that because the boundaries between them and their parents broke down they ended up in prison. Also we cannot forget the negative effects of peer pressure.

Many of the offenders who attend the courses that I am running in Feltham can acquire certified computer skills, literacy and numeric enhancement, job search skills and confidence building training. They would leave the prison with enthusiasm, ready to work and to live law-abiding lives in the community.

However, they experience rejection and prejudice in the community from some if not most prospective employers. As a result they get disillusioned and feel that the only option for them is to continue to commit offences.

The situation is not hopeless by far, because there are agencies in the community who are trying their best to abate the situation. There is a great need for more youth clubs and other projects which will help to take our young people off the street, before they are caught up in the lure of drugs and fast money and are influenced by the 'Just Do It' campaign, without thinking of the repercussions of just doing it! There is a need for more mentors, especially black men, who will work with offenders in the prisons and after release.

I have often said to the lads I train, "If I had someone to talk to me when I was your age, the way I'm talking to you now, I believe my life would have been more productive". I have seen many ex-offenders going out of their way to greet me on the street and thank me for having them on my training course.

We, ladies and gentlemen, have got a great deal to offer. The fact that we're here today, I sense, means that we, as the 'wounded healers', are effecting change. We should continue to do so!