ESSAY

ADHD, Trauma, DEI, and Hope:
An Autoethnography

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I live in a small town with my husband and two kids, two dogs, and two cats. I've spent the better part of my adult life as a stay-at-home mom. I always thought that if I was privileged enough to bring children into this world, I would stay at home with them. Before we ever got married, my husband knew he wanted to purchase the business he was working for, so it worked out well for us. My origins are a bit hard to follow at times, so I feel like laying them out clearly might help with keeping track of my story. I grew up in a neighboring province until I left for university. I'm adopted, and while it was a closed adoption, I have since met my birth parents. When I was around seven years old, my adopted mother passed away from complications due to breast cancer. My adopted father remarried when I was nine years old, and my stepmother formally adopted me at fourteen. I have one adopted sister, who was adopted when I was five and a half, before my parents knew my mom was sick.

ADHD

I don't actually remember when I first started noticing differences between myself and the kids around me. I remember not really enjoying school and feeling lonely. But it wasn't until I was much older that I was diagnosed with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. ADHD has the distinct misfortune of being categorized by how it affects the people around you, instead of how it affects you directly. This was especially true in the 1990's and early 2000's, as research was only just beginning. I was the very definition of a wild child. Loud, obnoxious at times, and very distractible. I felt lost at school most of the time and didn't connect easily with my peers. When I was nine, my dad got remarried and we moved to a small town. It happened really fast, and I remember feeling like I couldn't catch my breath. Everywhere I turned, people had expectations of me I could not match. I had spent the previous years as a feral child with very little supervision, and now I had no freedom at all. My new mother had spent forty years single, and now had a husband and two children, and traumatized children at that. It wasn't until I became a mother myself that I understood how overwhelming and chaotic that must have been. Overnight, I was expected to be clean and tidy, respectful, and blindly obedient. After years of being left mostly to my own devices, I was being monitored and controlled in ways I was not used to. I tried so hard to be "good," but I never quite seemed to do or change enough to make anyone happy with me. No matter how much time I spent agonizing over my perceived shortcomings, it never got me anywhere, like a cruel carousel from hell designed to break my soul.

My problems with my life snowballed from this moment. Constantly at odds with classmates, teachers, and parents left me angry and alone. It certainly wasn't all bad—I had some very amazing childhood experiences—but it was overshadowed by this understanding that I wasn't deserving of the "good" stuff. To be fair to my parents, they loved me, but they just didn't understand what ADHD was. I struggled with many of the behaviors that make ADHD challenging—lying, stealing, outbursts, apathy, and a general disregard for authority. It felt like every single person in my life was fighting against me, purposefully singling me out as the only problem, a feeling widespread in ADHD. Teachers couldn't understand why a child as bright as I was couldn't produce better grades at school. With the lack of understanding surrounding ADHD, everything I struggled with was heaped upon me as moral failings. I was lazy, ambivalent, rude, destructive, selfish, ignorant, and lazy—yes, I said lazy twice. My inability to fight my own brain successfully presented as a lack of willpower, a lack of willingness to try, to be better, to "just do it." I spent most of my time wracking my brain trying to come up with ways to be accepted. I spent hours a day obsessing over what I could change to force myself to be "normal."

Most adults I spoke with socially, the ones not trying to control or teach me, found me articulate and bright, so why was school such a problem? School was hard for me because I lacked friends. I would make them easily enough, but eventually I would weird them out, or say the wrong thing, or come on too strong. I should also mention that teachers from that school still talk about that particular group of students as being one of the worst to ever move through that school. They were particularly cruel, and I never understood why. Turns out they were all dealing with their own trauma, many dealing with very little parental involvement. It was just my luck they all ended up in my grade, where I was the weird kid. I was alone, and worse, I was sure I would always be that way, somehow never enough and altogether too much at the same time. I was constantly at odds with myself, desperate to be anyone but me. I couldn't understand what was so wrong with me. I just knew I was.

I spent a lot of my time buried in books—anything I could get my hands on. My bookworm status afforded me an escape from the constant disapproval and disappointment swirling around me. An unfortunate sign of the times, I was seen as a problem, instead of a child with a problem. I was accused of being intentionally difficult whenever I had a problem, so I shut down. I was diagnosed with ADHD, and my parents made the decision not to medicate me. At the time, meds were less understood, and weren't accommodated in any way. My diagnosis at age twelve didn't change anything. I was so emotionally dysregulated that focusing on classes wasn't an option, and, as such, I was labeled as stupid, made to sit in remedial classes, and written off. I just could not figure out why life felt like it was on easy mode for everyone else and on expert mode for me. I had many talents that weren't academically related. I am creative, musical, athletic, and these outlets were my only source of self-esteem. They were also the first things to be taken away from me when I couldn't perform "normal" for those around me.

I want to be very clear that as difficult as this was for me, I also exhibited many behaviors that were concerning for the adults in my life. I was impulsive, angry, misunderstood, and lonely, and I lashed out often. This overwhelming vortex of chaos was a breeding ground for dysfunctional family relationships. I became a scapegoat for everything that went wrong in our household, and I carried that weight well into my adulthood. On the flipside of that coin, my parents did their best to love me, did their best to show me love, but it was an impossible situation, and I don't really know what would have made a difference besides time and research.

I had the great fortune of attending a boarding school in my grade eleven and twelve years. It was a performing arts school, and it was here that I got to be myself for the first time in a long time. I felt like I belonged there. I was still barely a shell of a person, having locked away so much of who I was in tiny boxes in my brain, but it was here I found people who genuinely enjoyed my company, and I excelled at the things I enjoyed. I still struggled with the subjects I didn't enjoy, and my parents still took away my joy if I didn't do well academically, but I was okay. I still struggled socially, but it was much less than in my hometown. I ended up graduating on time, despite predictions otherwise, and made plans to go to university. It also seemed to help my familial relationships when I wasn't living at home.

University is where I became a little more unglued. I had no structure, and I was at a loss because I couldn't figure out what my professors wanted to hear from me. It was more about opinions and understanding and I wasn't allowed to have those of my own. I began to suffer from panic attacks that sent me to the hospital, and I really struggled to understand where they were coming from. A tough roommate situation in my second year led me to leave school unfinished and join the workforce. I did, however, make friends in those years that have grown into a secondary family, and I highly value them in my life today.

Working in retail was my first real self-esteem boost, and I excelled in a sales position. My personal life was often a mess, but I always managed to have full-time work. I had many sketchy roommate situations, and I almost always had too much month at the end of my money. I still struggled with symptoms of ADHD, not realizing that is what it was, but I managed it okay. Those years were amazing for my social life as I finally built and maintained friendships in ways I had never been able to do before. Shortly after landing my first management position, I met my husband and we quickly started building a life together. He was the first person who seemed to really hear me when I spoke, and he mended so many cracks in my heart that I thought were permanent. Our marriage took work to build, but we both put in the effort, and it paid off for us. While I didn't believe I was worthy of the good things happening to me, I was still grateful for them.

Trauma

Sometimes I look at my life and wonder how much trauma there really is. Some comes naturally from being adopted, abandon, losing a parent, being abandoned again, being a pariah socially, and having a lifetime of ADHD symptoms I could not control held against me. I have psychological trauma in spades. I also carry a significant amount of medical trauma. It started with menstrual cramps at eleven, an accident at fourteen that required facial reconstruction, recurrent kidney stones from sixteen on, then panic attacks that sent me to the hospital, kidney infections, abscessed teeth, a breast reduction, more kidney stones, and periods that just kept getting worse and worse until they required narcotics to manage them. When I was a child, I dreamed of being many things, but the nearest and dearest to my heart was becoming a mother.

The day my daughter was born was one of the best days of my life. She was a quirky bundle of love from the beginning. She came via C-section and wouldn't breastfeed, but all in all, it was a fairly routine birth. My son's birth, while also one of the best days of my life, was another story. His head got stuck, my uterus ruptured during labor, and I developed a fistula. The delivery was so traumatic my highly experienced doctor took a leave of absence. That hospital stay was one trauma after another as the fistula wasn't discovered until a month after his birth. I struggled with caring for a newborn and toddler while in diapers myself. I leaked every six seconds and the doctors covering my doctor's leave just kept telling me to do kegels, and wait for my doctor to get back. While the fistula was eventually repaired, it started a chain reaction of medical complications that I still deal with today. Without the universal healthcare system available to me here in Canada, I doubt I would be alive today. Once, when I was bored and unable to sleep, I started adding up what all the medical procedures and surgeries I've had over the years would total. I stopped counting around three million dollars, mostly because it just made me sad, and acutely aware of how quickly medical debt can pile up.

My husband had owned his business for less than two years at this point and it was utter chaos. I was in and out of the hospital for the next few years, and I never seemed to get any answers. I developed IBS, depression, crippling insomnia, unhealthy coping mechanisms, and a wickedly dark sense of humor that I can't just let out anywhere. My kids got the worst of me. I was still battling my brain, but now I was also battling my body, and trying to raise my extremely energetic and adventurous children. My husband has been a primary parent on many occasions while also being the primary breadwinner, and he takes an active role in raising our kids and sharing our housework, but I was the default parent, the one who wanted to stay at home, and I felt like a failure! My dreams of being an involved and fun mother were flushed down the drain. Barely able to get off the couch most days, my energy level was exactly the opposite of my wonderful children. I felt like I was relying too much on my husband for care. Failure was a glaring reality, and I did not handle it well. I still feel shame when I think about how blind I was to my mental health situation.

The combined weight of a morally reprehensible chemical imbalance in my brain, a childhood filled with psychological trauma, and the adult reality of being a medically complicated spouse and parent was bound to have a huge effect on me. But I didn't see it. ADHD has a diabolical history of creating circumstances that condition its host to believe their needs are unworthy and somehow impossible to meet. While not "everyone" with ADHD falls into this category, many do, and it was my distinct experience. Unlike those who are diagnosed much later in life, I had the distinct experience of having a diagnosis, but no understanding of how it affected my life.

My children are the light of my life, but during their most challenging years I too resorted to viewing my children as the problem instead of having a problem. The older my kids got, the worse I felt about my inability to handle and manage their behavior and emotions. In the fall of 2019, my daughter's social issues led to a kind suggestion from a teacher that we have her evaluated. I was not surprised. I had ADHD, so my kids would likely have it too. We spent a few months with various governing bodies doing evaluations, and a diagnosis of ADHD became official. My husband was initially hesitant about meds, but I was anxious for her to try them, to give my daughter a chance I never had. The very day that Covid-19 lockdowns began in March 2020, we were in the doctor's office receiving her very first prescription of ADHD meds. It was eerie driving down some of the normally most congested streets of our city with zero traffic; five lanes to manage its usual business, with exactly one other car. When we got home, oblivious to what was going on in the world around us, my husband and I talked about moving forward with meds and what it might mean for our child. The next morning, she took her first dose and promptly spent the next seventy-two hours wide awake! We adjusted her meds a week later and found success. It was here that our attention turned outward, and we became aware of the pandemic raging around us.

As my days of pandemic homeschooling ramped up, I watched as the weight of the world seemed to fall off my daughter's shoulders. She was more regulated and vastly easier to communicate with. I spent days trying to teach homeschool in my dysregulated state, and I promptly fell apart. We had some difficult situations happening right outside our house, and we felt trapped. My husband had been diagnosed with psoriatic arthritis while I was pregnant with my son and had started an immuno-suppressive drug to manage his symptoms. I was also immunocompromised, so we took warnings very seriously. Not willing to compromise our health, or add burdens to the already overloaded healthcare system, we sheltered in place. My insomnia hit levels I had never experienced, and I was desperate for help. So I went to a cannabis clinic and, for the first time in my life, was finally able to quiet the spinning chaos in my mind.

Several months after my daughter started her meds, I decided that maybe I should try them as well. I could see the way they helped her, and I was so impressed by her bravery. Without her, I'm not sure I would have had the ability to change my own trajectory. I got my first prescription for ADHD meds about six months after she started hers. It was as if my brain, body, and heart could all speak the same language. I started reading everything I could get my hands on about ADHD. The joke is, with ADHD, insomnia, and a wifi connection, I have seen the whole internet. My husband and I decided to move away from our reactive style of parenting to a more whole-brain, gentle approach, and our kids blossomed. My son was also diagnosed and began treatment, and we were finally out of survival mode for the first time in a decade. I began therapy, lost 100 pounds, and we all started taking much better care of ourselves, inside and out. Covid-19 was still incredibly difficult, but we weathered the changes as best we could.

Once again, I want to be extremely clear, medication is often not enough for lasting positive changes: we researched, we confronted our own triggers, we dealt with our traumas, and I took therapy seriously. As a slightly funny aside, one of the immediate benefits of meds was that I was able to budget successfully for the first time in my life. When we were able to do so, we moved into a bigger house and the kids returned to school. As much as I was learning, and as much as I was finally understanding my own struggles, there was still a part of me locked solidly away in a very tiny box, buried in the back of my brain, convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that I was still the worst human being in existence and completely unworthy of the good things happening in our lives.

In 2023, I found my chronic pain worsening after a season of remission. My IBS symptoms also returned, and I was once again "chronically ill." I went to my doctor, and told her I needed a better, healthier life. During a routine exam, a tricky-to-diagnose disease was found, and I finally had some of the answers I prayed for: Adenomyosis, a diabolical disease that gets routinely under-treated because it is a "women's issue" and we "deserve our pain."

Luckily, I found a doctor who heard and understood me. I knew going in that a hysterectomy, if granted, would take 8-10 months, especially given the backlog after Covid-19. Three minutes into our appointment, after tearfully listening to me tearfully describe what my life had been like, my doctor asked me what I wanted to do about it. She agreed to a hysterectomy without missing a beat, warned me it might be a wait, and sent me on my way. I was floating on air! I had spent a good portion of my life struggling with this issue. While shopping that same afternoon, I got the call. Could I be ready in five weeks? I said yes because I have a phenomenal support system around me, and then I spent forty minutes happily sobbing as we made our way through the store. On November 24th, I went in for my surgery.

When I woke up from the anesthesia, I learned that while successful, there was a complication. Due to previous damage and my bladder being adhered to the organ they were trying to remove, my bladder ruptured. My doctor, being the stellar human being that she is, had a urologist on site and immediately repaired it laparoscopically. Unfortunately for me I needed a catheter for recovery, and while I initially heard it would take four weeks, after some very uncomfortable interactions with the urologist’s front staff, I learned it was no less than seven weeks. My Christmas would have to change drastically. With the four-week timeline, I would have been able to still make it home to my parent’s place in the neighboring province, but with the seven-week timeline, travel was impossible. Okay, all good, it sucks, but I’ve done this before. I came home elated at how free my body felt from pain, even with the intrusive and painful medical intervention. Three weeks after getting home I had to go to the emergency room. I had developed an abscess and severe bladder infection. I spent eight days in the hospital unsure if I would even make it home for Christmas. I was low. I developed a severe yeast infection from antibiotic use and lying on rubber sheets. I am eternally grateful for Canada’s healthcare system, because without it I never would have gone back in and discovered the dangerous abscess. I was miserable. Slowly but surely I started to improve and I made it home December 21st. My parents and sister live far away, so they decided to drive to us for Christmas once my sister made it home from her province. Without going into too much detail, there was a “fall out” before they could leave to come to our place. I was trying to be supportive, but I was weak, and as it turns out, bladder infections of that severity can make you paranoid and delusional. It was a rough couple of weeks. I took a break from my phone, and I had to return to the hospital once more as the bladder infections just kept coming.

Our “village” really showed up for us. We had non-stop support, and as a side effect of the falling out, I had some of my childhood trauma addressed and healed. It was strange having my energy, imagination, and self-worth all come piling back into my consciousness at once. It was painful. I learned my friends don’t think I’m stupid, which was a huge revelation, and I suddenly had thus unwavering certainty that my existence has worth.

DEI and Hope

I embody a lot of stereotypical ADHD traits. For example, when it was time to put my thoughts together to write this autoethnography, I decided to paint my primary bedroom instead. Our house has all beige walls, and I *loath* beige. I enter what is known as hyperfocus easily—I can knit for hours and hardly get up from the couch. I still struggle to start tasks I'm unsure of, but with meds it is easier. My family, both immediate and extended, have been through a lot. Healing takes time, and intentional focus. While many things are better, we have a way to go, and that's okay. My greatest hope comes from the interactions I have with my community. ADHD is now quite common, and we are seeing content about it saturating social media. Supports in schools are readily available and easier to access than ever. I can go on Instagram and see people struggling with the same things I deal with. Where I used to feel alone, now there is a visible community.

Unlike me, my children will grow up knowing that that community exists. Our schools take neuro-divergence seriously and regularly use accommodations in classrooms. Canada makes use of diversity, equity, and inclusion programs in ways that benefit our children immensely. What we are learning now is that these programs benefit all children, not just the ones who fit into its parameters. The school in our small town uses emotionally intelligent language and teaches it to the students. My kids have language for how ADHD affects them that I never had growing up. We talk about the why's and how's on a regular basis, and we struggle way less when they have the right language to express themselves. Children with ADHD can appear nonchalant even while their heads are spinning, they can appear apathetic, even oblivious, and still be incredibly deeply feeling beings. Where I suffered alone internally, my children are being taught language and methods for dealing with their emotions and the world around them that make a difference. These scientifically researched advances wouldn't be possible without DEI programing. Every child benefits from this. What happens to the world when the kids we raise in it are well-regulated and emotionally intelligent?

My faith is vitally important to me, and I have clung to it without knowing why at times. I am deeply empathetic and acutely aware of my privilege; I am white, cisgender, heterosexual, and Christian. I have always known that every human has the same worth, however I also know all my secrets, my most awful thoughts and feelings, so I didn't believe it for myself. It took a delusional thrill ride down a paranoia roller coaster from hell to make me realize I have the same worth, that the people who surround me don't show up out of a sense of duty, or obligation. It took relying on friends and family to make me realize that I bring value to their lives just as they do to mine. It took my husband gently holding my face in his hands and telling me I was far from stupid to allow me to believe it. It also took letting every part of myself, even the dark parts, back into my consciousness to realize that my faith isn't what makes me special, but rather that my faith is a relationship I am actively a part of. It is special because it includes me, not in spite of me.

I don't subscribe to the hotly contested "rules of religion" that humans have been fighting over for ages, I simply believe that Jesus taught us to see ourselves in the people around us, even the ones who look, act, believe, or worship differently, and treat each other accordingly. Devoid of conformity and coercion, my faith means diversity is welcomed, better yet, necessary for peaceful human existence. What I see as my strength, source, God, or spirit, doesn't have to be experienced the same way as the person next to me. Growing up the way I did made me believe that conformity is the only way to be a successful human, but every experience I have had actually points to the reality that diversity makes us stronger, open and honest in communication, and that a healthy curiosity makes us happier and healthier. Making space for the variety of human existence is the only positive way to move forward. So I vow to try and meet humanity where it is, instead of where I think it should be, fit into neatly categorized boxes that don't serve anyone well. I have come to understand that the depth and breadth of our experiences are so varied and singular that I have no business even attempting to decide what is "normal," let alone working fruitlessly to achieve its impossibility.

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