

# Stories

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Recently, a friend and I were talking about our lives, how everyone has a story, comprised of things that have made, changed, and influenced their lives and how our culture influences our perspective whether we realize it or not. I got to thinking about my slow progress in growing up. A continuing process.

Years ago, while growing up in many different places and attending over 22 different schools, I would look with great envy at my classmates. In all the schools, the classes had cliques that were not friendly. I was always the outsider, not only because I was always new, but because in our private family life, we lived in a society that existed only in my mother's mind, a world of pretension that we children adopted and which further separated us from others.

I fantasized that the other children had parents that got along with one another, lived in houses where they had been born, got their clothes in real stores, not the Sally Ann (as we called the Salvation Army store).

And mostly I envied that they had friends. Once in a while I would be invited to join in a birthday party, but I never really fit...always a bit awkward, always on the outside. I tried everything to be more likeable to those to those deciding with whom one could be friends. In spite of everything, I made one or two friends in my last year of high school and they remain friends to this day.

As the years went by and I went out into adult life, I met people I liked, who liked me, with all of us on a more level playing field. But I always still felt that their lives had been more stable, that they had home towns to go back to, families filled with love and warmth waiting for them.

As time went on I began to know my friends and others well enough that I heard their stories. My story often paled even with the sexual abuse, times of poverty and constant moving. I had known what it was to be loved and sheltered, albeit sometimes marginal, with a bright mother who could be loving and funny, even while mentally frail. And, I learned that apparently inside those lovely homes of my classmates, things were not as they seemed. Much of the cliquing and snobbery was a cover up, fear that in our pretentious world, they would be shunned should anyone find out what was really going on in their families. I became very close friends with one or two of those people whom I had thought had had perfect lives, and my heart wrenched on hearing what they had been through. I began to see that my life was, with variations on the theme, actually sadly close to what seemed to be the norm. We were all in one way or another trapped, trying to find answers and different paths.

I read, collected stories and listened. I re-examined my life, and gave myself credit for what I had accomplished. I realized how I could easily have married into the suffocating safety of the society that I then envied, mentally and physically locking myself in and therefore out of many

of the possibilities of life. And I no longer wanted to be cool, but like the velveteen rabbit, I only wanted to be real. I no longer defined myself by what others thought.

Then, one day in my early forties, in one of those rare flashes of insight, I saw how grateful I was for the gifts gained from early upheaval, the strengths of being an outsider, the insights and fearlessness that I and others like me were able to put into our survival.

And now, many years later, I also know that the good life I have is due not so much to my abilities and the choices I have made, but also to the fact that my skin is white, my parents were educated, I live in America, both Canada and the U.S., and have had my fair share of good luck along with the unconditional love, help and support of others whether I deserved it or not.

And life's not over yet. It is a continuing story for us to share and learn from each other.