

A story about life encumbered by undiagnosed Attention Deficit Disorder.

Drifting Too Far From Shore

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CHAPTER 1 What's up Doc?

Attention Deficit Disorder? ADD? Never heard of it. At least not until I was forty-seven. What the hell is it? Something to do with brain functioning or malfunctioning or different-functioning. I don't know. I'll tell you what I do know, though. ADD is not some annoying, trivial childhood condition like acne that goes away the older you get. No sir. From my experience, ADD does not age well.

In 1996, a child psychologist evaluated my daughter to find out if she was suffering from anxiety. It turned out that she was fine. The doctor said she seemed a well-adjusted ten-year old in no more need of therapy than your average kid. That was good to know, of course. Half joking, I mentioned to the doctor that maybe it was her parents who could use some therapy and I didn't just mean my ex-wife. When the doctor asked me what I meant I told her that my life was a bloody disaster.

"What sort of disaster are we talking about?" she asked, perhaps thinking I was having a midlife crisis or something. Anyway, I tried to give her a quick snapshot of my situation but she cut me off, telling me that she wasn't licensed to counsel adults. She gave me the name of another psychologist who she thought might be useful. My medical health insurance still had a few months left on COBRA and it did cover fifty percent of mental ailment charges so, what the hell, I made an appointment with Dr. Helena Hale.

About a week later, I was sitting in Dr. Hale's office, which was in one of those flimsy wood-frame houses with vinyl siding in a residential area of south Huntsville. The office felt quite comfortable though, like being in someone's living-room. It didn't have the clinical harshness of a modern office block. Anyway, this is Alabama and as an expat Brit from London, I appreciated the casual and relaxed atmosphere of the place.

"The reason I'm here," I began "is because my life has become a bit of a disaster and I am rather curious as to why this might have happened." Well, I was a lot more than curious, but we British do enjoy the understatement, don't we? Dr. Hale was one of those cool, quiet psychologists who pause before they speak and weigh their words precisely. I like that. I also like the more animated forceful manner of Dr. Roger Rinn, but I'll come to that gentleman

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later. Dr. Hale seemed to be studying me. She had an intelligent, thoughtful face which was calm and calming. She looked younger than I was, perhaps in her middle thirties, and wore her hair long and straight. On the walls were several plaques. The Doctorate from Harvard caught my attention and I thought briefly of Pooh all those years ago.

“Tell me what you think has gone wrong in your life,” she responded quietly.

“I’m not sure where to begin really. So many things seem to have gone wrong that I’m beginning to feel a little like that chap Job in the Bible.” Her expression remained inscrutable.

“What sort of things?” she asked, looking at me through dark-rimmed glasses. She got up from her desk and moved to an armchair so that she was sitting facing me but more informally with her stockinged legs tucked under her.

“You know, the normal things,” I responded. “Marriage ending in divorce. Losing a job. Business collapse. Family feuds. The sort of unfortunate events that happen to people all the time. But here’s the thing. If just one unfortunate event had happened, that in itself would not justify psychological evaluation. Divorce or job loss is just a part of life sometimes and we simply have to suck it up, get over it and move on, if you know what I mean.

“But it seems to me that my situation is a little peculiar. Like many marriages, mine ended in divorce, which is certainly not unusual. However, it was just the last of a string of failed relationships, sort of a trend you might say. On the professional side, my business recently crashed in flames with absolutely no possibility of any revival whatsoever. Furthermore, feuds and lawsuits have ripped my family to shreds, consigning me to the status of some sort of renegade outcast with criminal overtones. And on more than one occasion I’ve allowed vast amounts of money to slip through my fingers.

“My origins have been rather privileged, yet my current circumstances are decidedly dire. My life seems to have taken on the characteristics of a riches to rags saga for which I can find no reasonable explanation. It all seems a bit senseless to me and yet I can’t help feeling that there might be some underlying cause that connects these outcomes together.” Dr. Hale remained silent, inviting me to continue. So I did.

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“My current circumstances are not so unusual. There are millions of people who don’t have jobs, don’t have college degrees, don’t have any money and whose marriages have failed. But how many of them previously earned six figure salaries, owned expensive houses and cars and jetsetted about the globe? Those that did probably recovered from their misfortunes using the talents that earned them their wealth in the first place.

“I could understand and even accept my circumstances had they been caused by some catastrophic outside event. For example, my grandfather in Germany had his first business wiped out during the Second World War. I’m sure he was annoyed about it, but there was little mystery as to his misfortune. He was minding his own business building up a successful company in pre-war Germany when his crackpot Fuehrer declares war against everybody. Germany then gets bombed to smithereens and old grandpa was lucky to come out alive, never mind still in business. Anyway, his was a perfectly legitimate way to end up in poverty. He did, by the way, pick himself up after the war and build another business, thank you very much.

“But in my case, there have been no outside events, no wars, no stock market crashes that have contributed to my predicament. My misfortunes may very well be self-inflicted. As I mentioned, my upbringing and surroundings have been more than adequate for success. I know many people who have become quite successful with only a fraction of the advantages available to me both as a child and throughout much of my adulthood. An old school friend, Ray, from a dysfunctional family in working-class north London and without the benefit of higher education, nonetheless has become a respected professional in the jewelry trade. Furthermore, he married a delightful girl and has a family with all the usual trauma that goes along with it. Ray has made the most from the cards he was dealt.

“My old chum Graham is also someone without a college education who, through hard work and perseverance, now owns a fortune in London property and spends his time on the golf course. Many of my peers, some from modest backgrounds, some from advantaged, have attained varying levels of success and accomplishment. Invariably, their lives have grown more prosperous and more stable over time. In contrast, mine shows the opposite trajectory.

“Of course it’s possible that the reason for my situation is that well, I’m an idiot. You know, thick as a brick, a certified nitwit. If that were so, it would

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certainly serve as a satisfactory explanation. Stupid people born into wealth squander their opportunities and end up destitute all the time. And believe me, I have done rather stupid things on more than a few occasions. However, numerous intelligence and aptitude tests that I've taken over the years indicate that, for better or worse, my level of intelligence is at least average. Actually, I usually score above average but who knows what that really indicates. The point is that I'm not brain dead.

“So this brings me back to my original question. If I'm not a complete moron and as I did start off life with so much advantage, why the hell have things nonetheless gone so consistently wrong?” I stopped talking and frowned at the carpet. I doubted whether Dr. Hale had any idea what I was really complaining about. At the end of this initial session we agreed to a schedule of regular consultations to investigate my perceived dilemma.

During the next sessions, I did most of the talking, describing my history so that Dr. Hale could develop an understanding of my psyche and circumstances in order to try to find the explanation I was seeking. I think it was during our sixth session that she had me sit at a computer screen, holding a little button that I had to press in response to a light flashing on a monitor. The blasted test went on for about an hour and she was studying me the whole time.

At our next meeting she told me that the results of the test along with what she had discerned about my history had brought her to the conclusion that I seemed to have a moderate to severe case of Attention Deficit Disorder or ADD. When I asked her what the hell that was, she started talking about the functioning of the brain and all sorts of chemicals firing and not firing and reuptake this and deficiency of that and quite frankly I wasn't really following her.

Over the following sessions I began to understand how something like ADD could bugger up so many things in a person's life. The more we discussed it, the more plausible it seemed that ADD was the culprit. However, the best confirmation that ADD was in fact my problem, or one of them at least, was the recommended medication. Ritalin has been prescribed to ADD children for many years. When I took my first dose, the effect was immediate and dramatic. It was like Popeye gulping spinach. Suddenly I could focus with tremendous intensity and for hours at a time. For the first time in my life

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I could think long and hard about just one thing. Finally I had some control over my brain's performance. I could tell it what to think about rather than having it spin wildly in any direction it chose. Never before had this been possible. This staggering, stunning discovery rocked everything I knew about myself and my life. Suddenly I could achieve things. Anything. Anything I chose to study, I could now sit down and apply myself for hours on end. Never before could I do this. It brought tears to my eyes to realize that if only I'd had Ritalin decades earlier so many things would have been possible.

What happens to someone who takes medication after having ADD his whole life? Are they instantly cured and do they immediately start behaving like "normal" people do? Hardly. Imagine a person who lived for forty-seven years with bad eyesight. Let's say he was long-sighted so he could see things far away but books and newspapers were a blur. Then one day he puts on a pair glasses and can finally see the words. Are his problems immediately over? No, because while he can see the words, he still has to learn how to read. Giving him glasses is just the initial step in solving his problems. He must first study the alphabet and then develop reading ability. Furthermore, a non-reader for most of his life, he is undoubtedly under-educated and there will be much he doesn't know. So while getting glasses is a tremendous help, big problems remain with a great deal of work to do before his problems are alleviated.

In the same way that corrected eyesight does not itself a reader make, so a medicated disorder does not instantly sweep away all problems. While medication can positively modify the electrochemical functioning of the brain, it cannot miraculously establish the millions of complex inter-connections of logic, emotion and intellect that are learned throughout a lifetime. All that medication will do is temporarily restrain some inner obstacles. Maybe.

Like the above-mentioned non-reader, there is a great deal of learning to do to build those many skills that ADD hobbled. In addition, many old habits and behaviors, constructed as compensating devices and defense mechanisms, need to be modified or removed. Medication is a part of the solution but by no means all of it.

All my life I thought it was normal to have a thousand thoughts swimming around in my head simultaneously, like a whirlpool, and you had to be so

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quick to snatch one as it zipped briefly within range. It's like watching multi-channel TV with somebody else continuously flipping the channels. Now with medication, suddenly I had control of the remote.

Finally I knew what it was like NOT to have ADD. Now I felt that I could achieve anything if I set my mind to it. SET MY MIND. There's a thought. I never could set my mind. I set the book in front of me. I set aside the time when I was fresh so I could read the book. I sat down to read the book. But if it was a textbook or mandatory reading, within a few moments, eyelids would droop and muscles would contort uncontrollably. After the first page was read, either my head would be on the table or I'd have to stop reading and get up to relieve escalating physical discomfort. With the best will in the world, it was invariably impossible for me to force concentration. Physically, my body wouldn't let me. And this from someone with enough will power to run marathons. Failing to concentrate though is just the tip of the iceberg of the complications that ADD can cause.

Forget about ADD's impact on your education. So what if you don't do well at school. Be a plumber. They make good money. Forget too about its impact on professional life. Money isn't everything. What about personal relationships? What about evaluating risks? What about valuing people? What about emotional development? Don't you use your brain for all these things? Of course you do, and if you've got ADD and don't know it, the consequences can be disastrous.

Unfortunately after a few months I had to stop seeing Dr. Hale. Without a job, my medical insurance expired and I didn't have the money to continue. Nevertheless, she had provided me with a plausible explanation and had given me some insight and tools with which to experiment.

Anyway, enough of this medical psycho stuff. This book is about someone who has ADD, has always had ADD, still has ADD but lived forty-seven years of his life without knowing anything about ADD. If you want to know what happens when ADD lies unrecognized and untreated, read on. But remember who's doing the writing here. For me to get this book written, I've had to rush through a lifetime's worth of experiences jotting, down bits and pieces that seem relevant to the issue at hand. Sometimes I wax descriptive, sometimes I don't. If ADD is the common thread that has influenced my life,

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then please read this story bearing in mind that it is the repeated cycles that are the key rather than any single event.

When somebody writes their autobiography they better have something interesting to say, lest they be labeled a self-absorbed narcissus. Let me reiterate that it is not the actual events described in this book, nor even me as an individual that are my primary focus. Really, I'm just using my own life's story to illustrate my contention that undiagnosed ADD causes significant trouble throughout life rather than just in childhood. In order to demonstrate this phenomenon, I have had to get down and dirty with some of the details in order to paint the most realistic picture and not for self-glorification purposes, not that there is a great deal to glorify anyway. Actually, this is the second time I have written this book. In my first effort, so as to keep the details of my life private, I made all the characters fictitious, disguised myself in the third person and gave only veiled description to what are inherently personal experiences. When I asked my good friend and Pulitzer-nominated poet Bonnie Roberts to critique my work, she admonished me so wisely, saying, "write honestly and trust the reader." Her sound advice drove me to rewrite my book as honestly and wide-open as I can, trusting that whatever value it may contain will become apparent, even mixed with my indiscretions.

One last point before I get started. Let me not blow ADD out of proportion. Compared to brain cancer and a host of other really serious conditions, perhaps ADD should be regarded as trivial after all. I mean, it's not life-threatening as far as I know. Nevertheless, while relatively trivial, ADD can still be a thorough pain in the ass if not diagnosed sooner rather than later. This book is directed toward quantifying just how much of a pain ADD can be when diagnosis arrives very late in life.

ADD won't be mentioned again until near the end of my story. All the events happened as described. There's much more stuff I could put in but that would tax my limited powers of concentration as well as my rapidly evaporating financial resources.



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