

Finding Fish by: Antwone Quenton Fisher

In the memoir *Finding Fish*, I was scooped into Antwone Quenton Fisher's life. I read about who his mother and father were, how he grew up being a foster child, and overcame the obstacles of his life to grow into the man he is today. He faced challenges of trust, abuse, shyness, race, and self-esteem. This gripping biography sucked you into a story much different from my own.

In the beginning of his life he faces the challenges of trust versus mistrust, Edward Erikson's first crisis in life, “*when infants learn whether the world can be trusted to satisfy their basic needs*” (Berger, 131). Babies need to feel secure in their world through nutrition, shelter, and nurture given to them through the first two years of their life. They learn mistrust from neglect or abuse. Antwone has a great first two years of life with his foster mother, Mrs. Nellie Strange, “*receiving much love and security*” (Fisher, 23). However, after his second birthday, with the knowledge he will be leaving Mrs. Strange, Antwone shows insecure-resistant attachment by refusing “*any attempts to be lured away by toys and distance away from her, [Mrs. Strange]*” (Fisher, 24). This knowledge of removal by the foster mother and Antwone added to the insecure attachment further disrupting his trust in others because they were going to be separated “*regardless of her feeling for the child*” (Fisher, 25).

Antwone's insecure attachment follows him throughout life, as does his mistrust. When he left Mrs. Strange, he was brought in by a friend and cried until he couldn't cry anymore. Upon leaving the orphanage to enter the Pickett's house for foster care at age three, he refused to let go of his case worker and cried until another foster child distracted him. Also, when he was four, Antwone met his real mother. At first he was confused, but then he saw her as a nice person upon her retrieval of a toy Dwight, his foster brother, snatched from him. However, as more visits with his mother took place, Antwone appeared to see his mother as “*just another person he happened to be seeing*” (Fisher, 42).

In childhood, Antwone never told his friends or teachers about his foster status or what his

home life was like except in rare instances: “*The only person who knows I'm a foster child is Fat Kenny, but that is all he knows...And none of them, except Jessie, who doesn't give a damn, has ever been inside the Picketts' house.*” (Fisher, 183). This shows he couldn't trust his friends with his personal information, except Jessie, because he doesn't care.

As Antwone reached early adulthood and joined the navy, things didn't change with his attachment issues. He devised a two-year rule that started out as a policy “on seeing as much of [the world] as possible” (Fisher, 273). As the years passed and he turned twenty-five, he met a woman, Seiko Fukushima. She was the first real love of his life; however, as the two years drew to a close, he left her and sailed on.

After leaving the navy at the age of thirty, the two-year rule stuck with his job as a federal correctional officer at Terminal Island. Then he went to work at Sony as a security guard. Throughout this time, he didn't have any serious relationships.

To overcome and heal his mistrust and insecure attachment, Antwone first had to realize how liberating talking can be. The first person he opened up to and told his story was Commander Williams. Antwone says “*To talk was a liberation from the prison of silence, from the burden of my own secrets.*” (Fisher, 284). He had some father figures while in the navy: ‘*Chief Akiona, Chief Lott, and SHI Slikowski* to name a few (Fisher, 285). These people helped Antwone find trust in others, however that wasn't enough. After making up a next of kin for a surgery, he consciously became bothered with “*the notion that I knew no one to whom I was blood-related*” (Fisher, 299).

Filling this void was the final step in developing trust and attachment. He requested his case file information on being a ward of the state; however, this led to nowhere in discovering his mother. With the remembered information of his father's death, he requested information from the *Cleveland Call and Post*. This gave him the funeral home that attended to his father's death, which by receiving his father's death certificate, received the address of his father's next of kin. Then through a chance phone call reached Annette Elkins, his aunt. This opened him up to all his other aunts and uncles on his

father's side, which in turn helped him find his mother. This allowed him to completely forgive his father and mother and see them as their flawed, human selves. In finding his family he found himself, thus he believed in himself enough to find his dream job as a script writer. This kept him at Sony where he in turn found LaNette, his wife.

Antwone's next challenge in life was overcoming the abuse and neglect he encountered with his twelve year stay with the Pickett family, mainly Mrs. Pickett, Lizzie, and Willenda. Child abuse “*is deliberate action that harms a child's physical, emotional, or sexual well-being*” all of which Antwone experienced within the Pickett's home (Berger, 190). While neglect is the “*failure to meet a child's basic physical, educational, or emotional needs*” (Berger, 190). This abuse took its toll on Antwone, and although he healed from it, he responds: “*I will always have scars. On the other hand, when I think of Dwight and Flo and Keith, I know that I am among the most fortunate.*” (Fisher, 340).

Mrs. Pickett enjoyed beating Antwone for the smallest mistakes and verbally stating how insignificant he was. The first written instance of her verbal abuse was when Antwone goes to see his mother at the social services center. She makes her disapproval of the visit apparent, and Antwone writes of his childhood belief of the Pickett's as aliens having “*goat bodies with hooves and horns and Devil bugging-out eyes and long black sideburns,*” with Mrs. Pickett the “*alien leader*” (Fisher, 34). When Antwone is caught playing with the stove and lighting straw on fire, a rather cruel punishment ensues with Willenda smacks him hard and then Mrs. Pickett “*grabs my arm and begins to beat me with the flaming newspaper. I scream and scream as she and Willenda laugh and laugh.*” (Fisher, 49). Also, there were times Antwone as well as Dwight encountered being tied up in their basement to await for Mr. Pickett's return home for a spanking (with a belt).

Lizzie enjoyed verbally assaulting Antwone for many things, such as his skin color. However, her abuse grows as Antwone ages. By the time Antwone reaches the age of fifteen, Lizzie frequently takes care of Antwone while Mrs. Pickett takes trips to the South. Her worst example of abuse follows an accident where Antwone breaks his arm. She neglects taking him to the hospital. She waits until Mr.

Pickett comes home to take him three days later. During these three days he is sent to school with “*enduring fever, throbbing pain, and continued swelling*” (Fisher, 187). When Antwone grows to become an adult of thirty, Lizzie seeks forgiveness for her past actions that she is ashamed for. However, Antwone doesn't wish to see her or for there was “*no excuse*” for her actions, even though he hits of some forgiveness taking place (Fisher, 324).

Willenda's abuse, was in my opinion, the worst form of abuse possible, sexual abuse. Antwone brings these events into focus as a nightmare, but a true, recurring nightmare that started at the age of three. Her abuse happens in the basement of the Pickett home when she babysits. Willenda lures Antwone and slaps him onto the floor. Then she proceeds to demand him to take his clothes off as hers are now gone. When this episode is over and Willenda is satisfied, she acts as if nothing has happened, but it is apparent that Antwone mustn't tell anyone.

It is sad to read about this abuse that Antwone receives throughout his life, and to discover how it impacts his life. The abuse extends his mistrust and insecure attachment, as well and diminishes his self-esteem. The evidence of his abuse is shown is his hyper-vigilance, frequent absences from school, reluctance to talk to others, and depression. He also shows his abuse by reverting to wetting the bed at the age of six when he was previously potty-trained. Also in abused children, it is evident of “*fantasy play with dominant themes of violence or sexual knowledge*” (Berger, 192). This is shown through his romantic yearnings seen in the fourth grade, and the drawing of the naked couple in bed that he drew in the sixth grade.

In order for Antwone to overcome these forms of abuse, he first uses Dwight as an outlet as well as Dwight to him and they fight. Throughout his life Antwone fights to let off the steam of what his case worker, Mrs. Nees, calls a “*pressure cooker*” (Fisher, 208). Although, this outlet gets him into trouble with the navy causing Antwone to decided it is time to get help. This is when, as I've mentioned before, Antwone talks to Commander Williams. Over the course of almost two years, Antwone told Commander Williams his story, and in doing so he was able to “*release my anger slowly, and*

constructively” (Fisher, 284). Without Commander Williams, Antwone realizes he may be in jail because of his bottled anger and for that he is very fortunate and grateful for his help. Antwone also expresses that he was more capable to bouncing back from the abuse compared to Dwight and compared himself to an orange that is squeezed of pulp, but still an orange.

Next we come to Antwone's shyness. Shyness is a part of Antwone's personality and temperament. Personality and temperament are an individual's differences “*in emotion, activity, and self-regulation...These traits originate with nature, although they are influenced by nurture*” (Berger, 134). This means Antwone is naturally shy through his genes. However, through his abuse and mistrust, Antwone's shyness grew to consume and oppress him. He in turn became very soft-spoken and his head tilting downward for many years of his life.

In childhood, Antwone particularly notices his shyness when it is required of him to speak in class and whenever girls are around him. This prevents him from doing well in class, until the fourth grade when Mrs. Profit, his teacher, helps him work on his shyness. Her praise and determination in not holding him back a grade, allowed Antwone to develop his speaking skills and do much better in class. The girls were a different story for Antwone while growing up. While growing up he frequently romanticized about girls and marriage. However, his shyness prevented him from ever getting a girlfriend (along with the fear of Mrs. Pickett's actions if a girlfriend ever came to the house). He tried getting close to Freda, a crush that he thought about from when he saw her at fifteen until many years later, but that didn't work when he couldn't hold her hand. At first, Freda was understanding of Antwone's shyness, but when he was eighteen and still the same, Freda was disappointed.

As Antwone reached early adulthood, his shyness hadn't changed until the navy's Chief Lott got to Antwone. Chief Lott told Antwone to lift his head up. He also told Antwone to never let him see Antwone's head down. Then Chief Lott “attacked” Antwone's quiet, soft-spoken voice. He challenged Antwone to look at the person he spoke to and speak up so that he could be heard. Antwone at first thought Chief Lott was a bully and that he was just being rude. However, that impression changed as

Antwone realized how much Chief Lott's advice helped him. Also, Antwone's first love, Seiko, helped him break further out of his shy shell through her love and the happiness she brought him.

Although Antwone's shyness wasn't cured, he became able to manage his shyness and broke free from its oppressiveness and was able to meet his wife, marry her, and have a child.

Now we come to the racial aspect of Antwone's life. Being a black child born in 1959, Antwone was born before the Civil Rights Movement. However, Antwone was raised in Cleveland, Ohio, in a region that housed mostly black people. This sheltered him from many racial abuses that occurred during this time period.

Although, when Mrs. Pickett and Lizzie entered Antwone's life, he was subjected to some racial abuse that grew more apparent as he grew to become an adult. Mrs. Pickett always called her foster children: Antwone, Dwight, and Flo, "Niggas." This was the extent of her racial abuse, but it still affected their thoughts about their skin. Mrs. Pickett never called her children "Niggas" and they viewed that she called them "Niggas" because they were bad.

Lizzie influenced this speculation when the fourth foster child, Kieth, moved into the Pickett's home when Antwone was eight years old. Kieth was a tan-skinned and sandy-haired child of four. "*Mrs. Pickett treated him like visiting royalty*" (Fisher, 70). He slept in his own bed, while Antwone and Dwight shared one cot. "*The message I got from his special treatment was that being lighter-skinned made him better*" was what Antwone wrote in response to Kieth's treatment (Fisher, 70). This started Lizzie on making fun of Antwone's skin color, the color of her own skin I might add, by calling him "chocolate" and other brown candy bars.

This teasing resulted in Antwone's self-esteem taking a plummeting dive. He wished he was white, as expressed in his case worker, Mrs. Honhart's, statement saying, "*He said on his Sentence Completion Test, 'I want to be like my brother Kieth'*" (Fisher, 83). She believed that Antwone wanted to be a small child, like Kieth, for protection. However, Antwone saw Kieth as protected because he was white, not small, and this is why Antwone wanted to be him.

As the years grew on and Antwone was forced to leave the Pickett home at the age of sixteen, he was thrust into more racial prejudices. At his stay in Metzenbaum Children's Center, he experienced the outside world's racial prejudices for the first time. Antwone and a white boy at the center were on bathroom cleaning duty. It was the white boy's turn to clean and Antwone reminded him that he need to get the chore done. He responded with, "*Why don't we make Antwone do it? That's why we brought those niggers over here.*" to the white lady that was watching them (Fisher, 220). Antwone didn't like hearing that and took after the child to beat him up. The center's director wished to speak to Antwone about the incidence and when the lady was asked if the incidence really happened, she replied that it didn't. There were other occurrences throughout his life that spoke of cotton and slavery as well.

The racial acceptance of Antwone was a difficult thing for his to handle, but as he traveled through the world it helped. He was able to see that many people that liked his dark skin when he visited Asia and other areas of American in his job with the navy. Also, those that complimented him, such as Seiko when she called him handsome, helped him like his skin color.

Finally, we come to the daunting topic that ties to everything we've mentioned above, his challenges with his own self-esteem and self-concept. Self-esteem is "*a belief in one's own ability*" and self-concept is "*an understanding of themselves*" (Berger, 198). This plays into the second crisis of Edward Erikson were "*toddlers want self-rule over their actions and bodies*" known as autonomy versus shame and doubt (Berger, 131). It also involves Erikson's third crisis, initiative versus guilt. He battled through life while facing unbearable shame and doubt in himself, as well as embarrassment. His self-esteem made him overcome obstacles when it was high, but it also made him falter when it was low.

Throughout his childhood, his self-esteem and self-concept was worse off than low, it was nearly nonexistent! The abuse, and the racial prejudices of Mrs. Pickett and Lizzie trashed his feeling of self worth. Also the bullying at school was much to difficult to stand. That was until Mrs. Profit entered Antwone's life in the fourth grade. He just moved to a new neighborhood at this time and Mrs.

Profit's class was different from the rest. The desks were in groups of four with boys and girls facing each other. This made Antwone feel promise in his new school. She never played favorites as the other teachers' at his previous school did, and aloud everyone to participate. When it was evident that Antwone may have to repeat the fourth grade again, Mrs. Profit believed he could do better and allowed him to go on into the fifth grade and helped him excel in school by remaining his teacher through the sixth grade.

Into adolescence, Antwone remained in a higher self-esteem through his popularity in middle and high school. Although his abuse at this time was more neglect, school remained his strong point of the day. When Mrs. Pickett kicked Antwone out of her house, Antwone's self-esteem and self-concept plummeted again through the use of homelessness. Living at George Junior Republic did little to help his self-concept with the thought of "either here or homelessness." Then coming to his end of being a ward of the state, Antwone was determined to get into "*Cooper Art School to reach his goal of becoming an artist*" (Fisher, 236). He did not want to join the military, and sought out housing at the YMCA. This housing didn't work due to a man trying to molest Antwone, and by a man whom protected Antwone if he worked for him in his criminal business. In the end he resulted in living on the street, homeless.

In adulthood, Antwone's self-esteem was very poor with him living on the streets, and panhandling. When he finds Jessie and lives with him under his parent's noses, it didn't improve his self-esteem. After a little while Antwone is forced into homelessness when Jessie is killed. Then he finds Mercy, Lizzie's nice sister, and lives with her. The realization of coming into full circle back at the Pickett's, Antwone seeks the navy to stay. This helps his self-esteem and self-concept greatly. As he completed boot camp and graduated into the navy, he realized that he wasn't a "*lone figure.....[but] it made me belong*" (Fisher, 269). He didn't feel alone anymore, which boosted his self-esteem. Then when he excelled in the tasks given to him, such as landing the Hueys, he felt "*power, purpose, and importance*" (Fisher, 272).

My most curious feelings I felt while reading *Finding Fish* happened when Antwone was a child and someone around him died. The cases with Donald and the cool guy that died through unfortunate circumstances of being shot, the death of Brother, and the death of Mrs. Pickett's son, Junior all show Antwone's feeling toward death at the time. He was bothered by the fact that "*the world doesn't stop and mourn....that school and life go on, as if nothing has changed*" (Fisher, 172). This makes me wonder if he can't emotionally handle death at this time of his life through childhood and adolescence. However, when Jessie is shot and killed when Antwone is eighteen, he feels sorrow and doesn't think the world should stop. Instead, he thinks about "*taking charge of his life*" and "*Jessie's dying...was a lesson...that would help me in the future to better understand the circumstances of my birth and a key to forgiveness of the father who hadn't lived to be there for me*" (Fisher, 253). I thought his feeling of bereavement and grief were peculiar because I didn't witness death like this as I was a child. However reading "*Children as young as two years of age have some understanding of death, but their perspective differs from that of older family members*" I was able to understand more about the different thought everyone had about death (Berger, 567). I came to understand that this was how Antwone showed his grief as a child and an adolescent. He wanted people to know he was sad for the one that died and wanted a moment for others to be sad too.

I conclude Antwone's challenging life with the realization that although Antwone's life was challenging, he had many great experiences in his life. His first years with Mrs. Strange were great, as were the first few meetings with his real mother as a young child. Playing with Dwight and Kieth allowed him to remember that he was a child, and so did ditching school to stand on Parkwood's mailbox to taunt that police officers. His life in school with Mrs. Profit and being given special duties as putting on songs for lunch and turning on the projector for middle school were great highlights. Antwone graduating with his class at the age of seventeen was a great accomplishment. Receiving medals and honors in the navy, as well as traveling around the world was fantastic. However the most important accomplishment was finding his wife, LaNette, and having a daughter named Indigo.

Bibliography

1. Berger, Kathleen. *Invitation to the Life Span*. New York: Worth Publishers, 2010. Print.
2. Fisher, Antwone. *Finding Fish*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001. Print.