

## ENGLISH'S MOST CHALLENGING FOUR LETTER WORD... AND MY LIFE

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*Zammarron explores how his early childhood trauma impacted him and his ability to ask for the help.*

I must have been four or five years old that hopeless, bleak, and terrifying night when, as a small child, my innocence was violently and mercilessly ripped away. At that time, I did not know how to say those Herculean words: Help me!

“Anyone, please, help me!” is what I wanted to scream in fear, in outrage, in misery, yet in darkness I remained mute. I would continue to agonize in silence as that first night became many.

With unresolved confusion, pain and rage in both my heart and mind as I grew up, I started acting out. I became violent, surly, and combative, lashing out at any perceived slight or offense, no matter how innocuous, all of which led me to be labeled a troubled child.

In retrospect, such conduct on my part was a manifestation of my desperate need for help in banishing a demonical, so-called human, someone who used me, as a mere child, as an object of sexual gratification. Despite my most fervent wishes, no help was forthcoming. No bright, white-robed, heroic angel came to my rescue and cast out that malignant spirit of the night.

Those traumatic experience, coupled with maltreatment and domestic violence in the household, multiple parental separations, a history of depression in my family, an alcoholic father, poverty, racism due to being biracial (Hispanic and Caucasian), and educational impairment, dramatically increased my risk factors for “Adverse Childhood Experiences” (ACE).

“The federal government’s Center for Disease Control and Prevention has endorsed the ACE’s Risk Accumulation, which analyzes the impact of ten individual adverse childhood experiences. Among the referenced experiences are a constellation of problems involving the precise issues of ‘executive function’ and ‘affective regulation,’ both of which the underdeveloped teenage brain struggles to

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<sup>∞</sup> I will likely die in prison or get out as an afflicted senior. This may be my just fate. Nevertheless, I live life as if I will be released tomorrow. Thus, I am currently in college and pursuing a paralegal degree, with the hopes of being a benefit to my community, whether that’s inside or outside of prison. Education and assisting others in their fight for basic human rights is my peaceful protest – a protest against a draconian system that wishes to stigmatize and ostracize the broken.

process properly. Deficiencies with respect thereto often manifest as violent behavior directed at self or others, substance abuse, and depression.”<sup>1</sup>

As it pertains to me, not knowing how to ask for help as a child, grew into a mindset during my early teens where I remained numb and unchanged, and persistently acted out. I began to associate with other teens who, like myself, had been labeled as “troubled.” As a negative-behavior reinforcing group, we all began experimenting with copious amounts of alcohol and drugs, which for me kept my psychological, evil spirits from permanently destroying me.

*If only I would have reached out for help!*

I fully understand what I did can in no way be justified or excused. Just thinking about my crime makes me feel like getting up as fast as I can and running away from this paper and pen. I want to run from guilt, run from shame, run from fear. However, I must take full responsibility for my unconscionable actions. I killed an innocent man and victimized so many others, which resulted in the court imposing upon me, at sixteen years of age, a justifiable sentence of ninety-seven and one-half years, what is essentially a life without the possibility of parole, or what’s commonly called a “methuselah” sentence, named after a biblical figure who reportedly lived to be 969 years of age.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, even after my arrest, sentencings, and transfer to prison, I had not fully awakened and dialectically questioned myself. I continued to act out, and when one acts out in prison, the administration has a place for you called the Secure Housing Unit, or simply the SHU (pronounced “shoe”), or what I refer to as psychological and physical hell. Once in the SHU, prisoners are usually locked in a cell for twenty-three hours a day with nothing to do. As a result, one thinks of the past, the present, and the future. As Carl Jung once said, “No tree, it is said, can grow to heaven unless its roots reach down to hell.”

My day of reckoning came when my father drove nearly five hours to visit me, and he could not give me a hug because I had been placed in the SHU for having a physical altercation with another inmate. There are no physical contact visits for prisoners in the SHU. As a result of safety and security concerns, one is separated from his visitors by a thick sheet of Plexiglass or has visits via videoconference. This imposition prompted my father to interrogate me regarding my actions and the reason why I had been placed in the SHU.

Subsequently, my father looked at me with profoundly sad eyes. With a sigh, he placed a hand on his head and asked, “Why, son, are you not changing? I know I made many mistakes and was not the best father to you kids... but I just want to hug my son.”

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<sup>1</sup> JAMES GARBARINO, MILLER’S CHILDREN: WHY GIVING TEENAGE KILLERS A SECOND CHANCE MATTERS FOR ALL OF US 11 (2018).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 8.

Days later, in my cramped, cold prison cell, I thought of my father and his words and countenance. I stood at my metal, icy sink and critically looked into the mirror for the first time and saw the image of the person I truly had become. I thought of Socrates' words, which I had just read, "[t]he unexamined life is not worth living." Tears began to flood down my face and moisten the dark concrete floor. The air seemed to escape the small cell. As I placed my hands on the wall to steady myself, I suddenly came to the painful and all too stark realization that I had become like that very specter of evil that had victimized me in my childhood, not only to the person I had killed and his family but also to my city, my state, and even my country. Moreover, I was a profound and unremitting disappointment to those I professed to love the most, my own family, as I had betrayed the devotion and trust they had for me.

Engaging in deep retrospection, both that day and the remaining period of time I was in the SHU, I finally said to myself, "[n]o more!" It was time to truly change for the better. I needed to confront all the demons and transform my mindset. As Carl Jung is believed to have once said, "I am not what happened to me, I am what I choose to become." I prayed to God and asked for his divine assistance. With faith, I began to work toward the difficult task of self-education. Even though it was not mandated by the Department of Correction policy, I sought out help from the Mental Health Department. Over time, the chains, which bound me, fell off, and I became free.

Upon reflection, I realized that most prisoners were inwardly weak and hurt individuals who, from my perspective, had never uttered from their lips that mighty word, "help!" This made me wonder about both my inner self and society as a whole. Why is it so difficult for us to vocalize that particular four-letter word? Is it pride, fear, honor or insecurity that cocoons us, or is it some other reason?

If, like me, you were victimized psychologically or physically as a child, you are all too aware of how such abuse in early childhood development wreaks widespread havoc in a person's life. Yet in spite of the pain and shame, I assure you that you can heal those wounds. Yes, the scars will forever be there; however, you can win the fight to have a joyful life and conquer your demons. Don't let it ruin your life or others'. I urge, plead, and advise you to seek out professional assistance. Please get help!

As for me, it is a hard fact I still owe an unpayable debt to society, so I do my best to help other men exercise their own demons by being an example of courage every time I articulate, without reservation or embarrassment, the word that the world perceives as most emancipating: help.