The Chameleon Effect in Foster Care

Anyone who spent any time in foster care can attest to the fact that we have to learn quickly to adapt in order to survive. It’s not that our lives are constantly in danger, although it sometimes feels that way. But the trauma of being mistreated by people who should have protected us, of feeling abandoned by everyone who could have intervened and didn’t, and of being with strangers (sometimes nice strangers, but strangers nonetheless), requires coping mechanisms. One coping mechanism is the ability to adapt quickly. This includes learning who can be trusted, who’s in charge, and who to be wary of. It’s a skill that we acquire—usually without even knowing it’s happening.

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I’ve spent my entire life wondering why I was born, what I’m supposed to do with my life, why I was born to people who didn’t want me and raised by people who barely tolerated me. If there is such a thing as an existential 6-year-old, it was me. Add to that introspective personality a life-long career in the insurance industry where we analyze every little variable down to whatever minuitia we can identify as possible factors that contribute to loss, and you wind up with a personality that questions and analyzes ad nauseum. I can’t help it.

I’ve been blessed to go from abandonment, abuse, poverty, and homelessness to great relationships with amazing people, unconditional acceptance and love, wealth, and stability. I know that I have these things not because I was smart, educated, or lucky. I have these things because God gave me opportunities and empowered me to step up to do the work necessary to have what I now enjoy. He did it for me, and He’ll do it for anyone willing to do his or her part. If I can do it, you can do it.

As I noodle on exactly HOW I went from foster care to millionaire, I’ve identified characteristics I developed, coping mechanisms I employed, and skills I acquired that all came together to help me survive, overcome, and succeed. In my writing, speaking, radio show, and online course, I try to lead others through their process of identifying those skills, talents, and abilities in their lives. What I’ve learned is that those things are the keys to our success. One of those keys is what I call The Chameleon Effect. It’s our ability to adapt to different environments, rules, personalities, cultures, religions, food, humor, expectations, and so on.

When you move every two or three months and live with different families or in group homes where random people are all thrown together and expected to co-exist, you learn quickly how to survive. In the same way, people who were raised by alcoholics, addicts, or mentally ill people had to learn to adapt to the inconsistent, unstable behaviors of those people.

The resulting ability to adapt is the same.

So, what’s the significance of The Chameleon Effect? Regardless of what we’re thrown into, we can make it. We can be who we need to be in any given situation. We can survive an encounter with a hard-core gang and a meeting with the governor without missing a beat.

When I was freshly emancipated at 16, I shifted so fluidly through all the environments I found myself in; an observer might assume that I was putting on Academy Award worthy performances. Because of the survival skills I’d acquired in dysfunction and chaos, I knew to “act” the way others in that environment acted. I wasn’t conscious of it at the time. I just automatically adjusted to whatever environment I found myself in.

At high school in the morning, I blended in by being a good student. I looked the part as best I could. I arrived on time, behaved as expected, paid attention, did the work, and didn’t ever cause any trouble for anyone.

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At work, I conducted myself the way I saw others conducting themselves. After school, I would go back to my apartment, put on my “work clothes” (the one outfit I had that was presentable in an office), and hurry off to work in the insurance agency. I adjusted my voice volume, tone, and language. I did my best to emulate my boss. In the most professional-sounding voice I could conjure up, I said things like, “Per your instructions...” and “To confirm our conversation, no coverage may be bound without your written instruction accompanied by a premium deposit.” (I smile as I’m typing this, remembering how very different this new language was from the street I grew up on. No one in my hood talked like this.)

As soon as my car would turn onto the street where I grew up, I would shift into “white trash ghetto girl” mode. I made defiant eye contact with the Hells Angels, nodded subtly to the gang members I grew up with, and waved and smiled to the old woman who sat on the porch with her rosary beads. I knew within seconds of walking into the little shack I’d grown up in what was going on.

After work, I’d go check in on my grandparents. Yes, I took care of those people who abused me. They were old and sick. Actually they weren’t that old—I’m now about the age they were then and feeling better than I’ve ever felt in my life. But after a lifetime of drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes, they weren’t well.

As I drove away, I would shift into “college student mode.” Driving onto the campus of the local community college gave me the sense that I was doing something with my life—going somewhere and taking charge. Driving away from the shack I grew up in and toward the place that represented my future started a powerful shift in me.

Through the years, I’ve become congruent. Rather than shifting to whoever I need to be in different situations, I am now the same person on Saturday night as I am on Sunday morning. I’m the same person in my personal life as I am at work. I’m the same person when I meet legislators as I am when I speak to foster kids. I like being congruent and consistent. It’s easier. It can be exhausting being different people in different situations.

I’m grateful that I have the ability to adapt to different people, cultures, religions, rules, and expectations. If I need to adapt, I can quickly recall that skill in the same way that we can recall riding a bike. People who haven’t had the childhood training on adapting to survive are at a distinct disadvantage. Those of us who know how to be who we are expected to be in any given situation will always survive and find a way to thrive. We’re tough. We’re resilient. We can make it through anything. We know how to be chameleons.

About the author: Rhonda Sciortino, author of *Succeed Because of What You’ve Been Through*, is the National Child Welfare Specialist for Markel Insurance Company. Rhonda is a foster alum who chairs the Successful Survivors Foundation. Her weekly radio show can be heard at [www.rhondasradioshow.com](http://www.rhondasradioshow.com). Rhonda can be reached at 804.339.0534 or by emailing rhonda@rhonda.org.

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