

Bears, Foster Homes, Resourcefulness, Love, and Endless Opportunity

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I was around 12 years old, my mother decided to take my 5-year-old sister and me on a trip from Detroit to northern Michigan. There was not a lot of planning involved, and all we knew was that we were going to be gone for two weeks. There was no decision made about where we would be staying or what we were going to do once we got there. We simply got in the car early one morning in late summer and started driving north.

After several hours of driving, my mother would stop at a hotel of some kind. We did not have air conditioning or a pool at our house, so my mother often chose motels that were centered around pools. We loved being able to jump in the pool, then cool down in the air-conditioned room. In the evening we would typically go out to eat at a small local restaurant in whatever town we were in. The next morning we would wake up late and drive some more.

We were headed to Mackinac Island, a popular tourist site in northern Michigan. We took several days to get to the island because we did not drive more than an hour or two each day, and we kept getting sidetracked. We might stop in a small town that had a nice lake, and spend some time in a lakeside cabin or take another detour.

When we finally got to the part of Michigan where Mackinac Island was situated, we missed the ferry going to the island that day, so we decided to continue further into northern Michigan. This was a lot of fun. My mother was getting bored of driving and there were many long open roads in this area, so she started teaching me to drive. Incredibly, I found myself driving on long open roads and I learned to drive quite easily. We meandered around Michigan for a few days and then headed back to the area where we would finally take the ferry to Mackinac Island.

Mackinac Island is a nice place, and there are no cars allowed there. In order to get to the island, you need to park your car in a parking lot and then take a ferry. The ferry ride took at least 30 minutes, from what I remember. I had a very good time at Mackinac Island, and years later, I ended up planning a wedding there at a place called the Grand Hotel, which never happened--but would have been very nice.

We stayed in the cheapest hotel we could find on the island because it was very expensive there. Even in 1982, staying at the biggest hotel on the Island, the Grand Hotel, cost more than \$200 a night--more than we could afford. Being on the island was like stepping back in time because there were horses and buggies there. Overall, the island had a very touristy but fun and laid-back manner about it.

It was very hot that summer and we decided after the second night that we were going to return to the mainland. When we got up in the morning, my mother was not feeling well at all. We gathered our things together and headed to the ferry, and my mom was walking quite slowly. She thought she had gotten food poisoning. On the ferry ride back from the island, she started to get sick. The large waves and the rocking of the boat made her throw up. The boat was very crowded and my mother's vomit started running up and down the aisles, getting on everyone's feet as the boat buckled back and forth.

"Gross!" people started screaming.

My mother was very sick, but I was unsure what was wrong or what we should do. When we got to the shore my mother said she wanted to check into a hotel right by the dock because she felt so ill. I checked us into a hotel, and I could tell my mom felt bad, like she was ruining our vacation:

"I think I will feel better if you go get me a shake. Can you go get me a shake?" she asked.

I went and got her a shake. She never drank it. Within a few hours we realized that Mom was incredibly sick. She started to ramble and become incoherent. I decided I needed to take her to the hospital. I helped her into the car and drove her to the hospital, which was around 20 minutes away. The people in the hospital were very surprised when I drove up to the emergency room, because I was so young.

My sister and I waited in the emergency room for the next few hours. It was a small hospital with bad lighting. It appeared that we were the only people in the emergency room. My little sister seemed very frightened. I told her it would be okay.

After we had been waiting there for a few hours, a "granola-looking" man with a beard appeared:

"Your mother is very sick," he said, and he started to ask me several questions. The questions were about things like where we were staying and so forth. As he was asking us questions, my mother was being rolled by us in a wheelchair. She was so sick she did not even look over at us. She appeared to be writhing in pain. In not so many words, the man informed us that he was going to be taking us to a foster home and sending other social workers to pick up our clothes and so forth from the motel.

While this sounds like it was going to be a real disaster, in reality it was something I was not all that terrified of. In fact, to me it sounded like a downright adventure. My parents were divorced and I knew that my father would be more than willing to take care of my sister and me, if necessary. My sister was not by my father but by my mother's second marriage, but I knew that whatever happened, we would stick together.

Unfortunately, my mother had been coherent long enough to tell the social worker and doctors that she had sole custody of my sister and me. The social worker informed me in no uncertain terms that I was not to contact my father and that he would not be contacting my father either. This is something I do not understand to this day; however, this is how it went. Within a few minutes, the social worker was driving my sister and me deep into the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, to stay with a foster family. It would become one of the most surreal experiences of my life.

The social worker was a nice guy, but he was a state social worker and was doing his job. He started asking me questions in a roundabout way, about whether my mother used drugs, drank a lot, if I had ever been molested, and all sorts of other things. I was smart enough at the time to understand that he was probably programmed to do this, but his questioning

became annoying to me, despite his best intentions.

About 90 minutes into the drive, we were in the middle of nowhere, when he pulled into a gas station on the side of the road.

"We're here!" he said. My sister and I got out of the car and the social worker took us up to a small house that was next to the gas station. We went into the living room, and I was introduced to a middle-aged woman who appeared to know the social worker quite well. The two of them started talking about the money that the family would be getting paid for taking care of us, and the fact that my mother was sick. The social worker also started asking various questions about a bunch of other kids who were apparently also staying there. Within a few minutes, the social worker was gone and my sister and I were sitting in the living room, not sure what to do.

I noticed that a little doorbell went off in the house every time a car pulled into the gas station next door. We were located on a desolate country road, and the gas station was not all that busy; however, while my sister and I were sitting there, right after the social worker left, the little doorbell went off, and the woman told us she needed to go "pump gas." She ordered us not to move.

I looked outside and saw her, standing with a gas nozzle that was hooked up to someone's gas tank. She started cleaning the car windows with a squeegee. It was quite a site. After she had finished, she came inside and began to lecture my sister and me about various procedures we needed to follow.

The first thing that she told us, which was very serious in her mind, was that after 10:00 p.m. each evening, the male foster children (the rest of whom I would soon be meeting) all needed to stay in the basement, and the women needed to stay in another certain part of the house. There were numerous kids staying in the house, and the woman did not want the boys and girls frolicking together after a certain hour.

- In no uncertain terms she told us that if I came upstairs after 10:00 p.m. I would be sent away.
- She also told us that we were not allowed to use the phone and that if we used the phone, we would be sent away.
- She told me I was not allowed to touch the cash register in the gas station and that if I touched the cash register, I would be sent away.

I do not remember all of the regulations; however, there were several of them. After the lecture, I was shown where I would be sleeping in the basement, along with several of the other foster kids. However, for the time being, I was put in her son's room.

There was no television in the house, apparently because we were in too remote of an area to get reception. (This was in the early 1980s, before satellite television and so forth). For me, the enjoyment I got came from watching birds in the woods, talking to the other kids every chance I got, and taking long walks outside. There was nothing else to do.

Since we were all living in a gas station in the middle of nowhere, I quickly found out what the people there did for fun. Most of the "fun" involved some sort of relationship with animals and fish, and related mostly to killing them. The first night I was there, and every few nights thereafter, the mother and father drove the rest of the foster kids and me to the dump, 25 minutes up the just-about-abandoned road that the gas station was on. It is hard to explain, but going to the dump was something I looked forward to. The parents and all of the kids looked forward to this as well.

On the surface, the reason for going to the dump was that after the trucks had dumped stuff there during the day, and the area had quieted down, all sorts of bears started to appear, to scavenge in the dump. Our car, along with other cars, would sit around 50 yards from the dump site, and we would all watch the bears eat the trash. Thursday was always the *finale* of the week, because this was the day that the operators of the dump site burned all the trash. There were huge plumes of smoke, and the bears were more entertaining, acting much differently than on the other days of the week.

All of the foster kids, including myself, looked forward to going to the dump in the evenings, mostly because it was a time during which everyone got to be together and feel like a family. There is something about being together in a car doing nothing, watching a bunch of bears, that can really bring people closer together.

The experience of many of the kids in our foster family was also quite sad. When the couple took care of a kid that they liked, they would adopt him or her. The kids who had been adopted were incredibly grateful. They seemed to worship the woman and her husband. The kids who had not been adopted were all either trying to get adopted, and were doing their best to be liked, or they realized that they never would be adopted because the family did not like them; therefore those kids had withdrawn and become angry, it seemed. These kids had given up, in some respects, and even to this day it hurts me to think about them. I often wonder what has happened to them.

The foster family could not afford to take us to movies or do other sorts of things, so they took us to watch the bears. I will never forget those nights. What struck me the most about this foster family is that they did everything in their power to make a living--in the middle of nowhere.

The parents were paid by the State of Michigan for taking in foster kids. I know they did not make much from it, but whatever they did make, they made it go as far as they could. They were, I think, genuinely good people who had some skill with raising children, and they were making use of this skill. They knew they could do well with this.

The gas station they ran sold smoked fish. The fish came from the various rivers that dotted the area. The father had built a few hut-type contraptions, and each evening he would come home with fresh fish, and he would build a fire to smoke some of the day's catch. He sold the fish to cars that drove past, and I think he also sold it to other people who lived in the vicinity. One day I spoke to him about how he caught the fish and he told me that he did not catch them, but American Indians living in the area did. He said they used gill netting in order to catch the fish, and that only they could do so, because it was illegal for non-Indians to fish this way.

While the man did not make a lot of money selling the smoked fish, I was still impressed that he had started a little business in the middle of nowhere, peddling his commodity to the few cars that drove past every day. All up and down the highway in both directions he had set up crudely painted signs that said things like "fresh smoked fish - 2 miles", which tourists and other passersby could easily see.

The couple's natural son, with whom I shared a room, worked in the gas station with his mother. He helped pump gas and sell fish. He had graduated from high school and was not going to college. There was not really enough work to keep him busy in the gas station, though, because there were only a couple of customers an hour at best, and his mother could actually handle most of the business, in addition to also raising all the foster kids. When I was staying there, with great pride his parents purchased him a kit and training course to start a new career.

The kit consisted of a very cheap plastic briefcase that had a little iron in it, and it was filled with all sorts of tubes and so forth, which could be color matched, to repair rips in restaurant booths and chairs. According to the boy, once he learned how to do this, he was going to be able to make up to \$250 a day, repairing restaurant booths and chairs. While he sat in the gas station waiting on the occasional car, he played around and experimented with his kit. He had so much ambition; his plan was to drive 90 minutes each day to the nearest cities and start repairing restaurant booths and so forth, when he was done with his training.

He was one of the lucky ones, and the other kids looked upon him with a lot of respect because he was skilled. They believed that he was really *going places*. There were other kids near his age, around 15 to 17 years old, and I have no idea what happened to them. But I knew at the time that they were probably frightened about the world out there. They did not have the same luxury of sitting around a gas station, learning new skills. When they turned 18 years old, they would have to leave the foster home, or whatever foster home they were in, and they would be 100% on their own. They had no one to care for them and no one who loved them. They had no skills and the world *out there* seemed to be a very frightening place.

While my sister and I were understandably not thrilled about being in the foster home, we also had a sick air of superiority, since we knew that we had people who loved us and that we would probably be okay. My sister had plenty of other family members in addition to my mother, and even if something bad were to happen, she knew that she did not have anything to seriously worry about.

We had no idea how our mother was doing, and no one told us. After I had been at the foster home for a few weeks, I was called to the telephone one afternoon. It was my mother. She had apparently been extremely sick and was completely out of it, still barely able to speak coherently. She had been airlifted from the Northern Michigan hospital to the University of Michigan hospital. Incredibly, the doctors were never able to identify what was specifically wrong with her. She had started to heal and then ended up having a stroke, somehow.

My mother was understandably not happy that we had been in a foster home for so long. As soon as my father found out and we were allowed to contact him, he drove nonstop the eight-plus hours outside of Detroit, where we had been situated, and picked us up. The new school year had already started back in Detroit, and my sister and I had missed the first few days.

This particular experience had a very strong impact on me. I was so impressed with the family that I stayed with because I learned that no matter where you are in your life, it is possible to find success, love, and happiness. Despite being in the middle of nowhere, the family had used their skills and resources in an incredibly effective and efficient way.

- They had love to give, so they brought kids in as foster children and helped raise them. In addition to helping children in need, this also helped them earn a living.
- They lived near Indian reservations and they figured out how to purchase fish cheaply from Indians, and then smoke and sell it to tourists passing by.
- They lived by a road, so they were able to sell a little bit of gas and make a little bit of money from this.
- They were not the sorts of people who went to college, so they made sure their son learned a basic skill to repair rips in restaurant booths and chairs. They took great pride in this.
- They did not live near any form of theaters--did not even get television because they were in such a remote location-- so they figured out a way to enjoy themselves by going to watch the bears.

The late summer and early autumn that I spent with the foster family was among the most educational and inspirational times of my life.

- When I got back to school, designer jeans were all the rage, I remember, and all of the kids were pestering their parents to buy them \$100 jeans.
- Kids all wanted a game console called "Coleco Vision," and they were hounding their parents for this as well.
- Kids' parents were driving them to soccer practice, making them lunches to take to school, and more.
- Moreover, in the city where I lived, there were tons of businesses selling everything from Italian sherbet to expensive bikes.
- There were movie theaters every few blocks. My father purchased a new Cadillac, and he was so proud of the leather seats.
- On the weekends, one of the dilemmas I used to have was which roller-skating rink I would be going to.
- I saw that the kids around me received genuine love from their parents, and the environment gave them an incredible number of opportunities--so numerous that it boggles the mind.

There are such incredible differences in the opportunities and the resources that are available to different people. After my experience in the foster home, I was left with the understanding that there is such an amazing number of opportunities out there, and we absolutely need to make the most of our resources, whatever they may be. I also became a bit angry, I think, at kids who were spoiled and people who are spoiled with all these opportunities, and do not realize it.

Take the job market in a major city, for example. There are so many potential jobs and things you can do, it is really overwhelming. Many people spend their time talking about the opportunities that are not there. An attorney making \$200,000 a year may be extremely angry that the only job he can get pays \$175,000 a year. An attorney who does not get a good response from the first few employers to whom she applies may get discouraged and simply give up the [search for a job](#).

The truth is that there are so many opportunities out there for us; it is mostly a matter of how you look at the world and the opportunities you allow yourself to see. No matter how bad things get, there are always opportunities.

I went to see a Michael Moore movie, *Capitalism: A Love Story*, recently. This movie essentially laments the state of the world and the complete absence of opportunity out there. However, in this movie there was a scene that really caught my attention. All along, the movie is talking about the high number of foreclosures and so forth that are occurring throughout Detroit, and how bad the [real estate market](#) is. The filmmaker then shows a house being boarded up, in order to prevent the occupants from going inside.

I watched this scene and was struck by an interesting idea: The man boarding up the house for the bank, had a job. In fact, the movie mentions repeatedly how busy this man is. When most people look at a city like Detroit, they focus on the idea that there are no opportunities--yet here is a man who is busier than ever, boarding up houses. Everything is about the opportunity that you see and take advantage of around you. It is all about how you look at the world.

If you had a house on a road 90 minutes from civilization, could you make a living? This is what the foster family did, and it still amazes me, after all these years. It shows that there are countless opportunities everywhere.

There are people in other parts of the world, in our own country, and everywhere that simply do not have the same number of opportunities that are available to us. The foster family that I met consisted of some very happy people, but what impressed me the most about them was that they knew how to take advantage of the few opportunities that were around them--no matter how small these opportunities were. They used all of their skills and all of their resources to make the absolute most of where they lived and of whatever opportunities were around them.

There are also the matters of connection and love, and feeling close to other people. Many of the foster children I met did not have any love in their lives or anyone who cared about them. They longed for some sort of human connection, but did not get it. They had no one. The less love these kids had, and the fewer people around them who cared, the worse off they were. The love others have for us and the connections we have with others are also a huge resource. You should feel grateful whenever you have this. There is so much that you have that others do not. You should acknowledge and appreciate all the opportunities and resources available to you.

Strive to make the most of every opportunity that exists out there for you. There are plenty of opportunities everywhere. Be grateful for this. Be grateful for where you live. Be grateful for the people who care about you. Be grateful for your life.

THE LESSON

Success, love, and happiness can be difficult to find in any situation, yet still there are an amazing number of opportunities in the world. Different people have different opportunities and resources at their disposal; you need to identify your own and use them in the most efficient possible manner. The volume of available jobs in a large market, for example, as well as the means to attain them are so great as to be overwhelming. You must strive to make the most of each opportunity that exists for you, and always remember that opportunities exist no matter how bleak the outside conditions may be.

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