

My name is Azeya Webb. I was born in Toronto Canada, but have spent a majority of my life in Rochester New York and Flatbush, Brooklyn.

I was raised by my mother Jameelah Coleman, Aunt Tamu Coleman, Grandmother Tracy Coleman and Cousin Ayesha Coleman, in a dysfunctional household. My mother birthed me at the age of 13, and developed schizophrenia around the age of 24. My aunt who was a decade older than my mother developed schizophrenia and bipolar disorder when I was very young. My grandmother was a drug addict throughout my childhood and sobered up when I was a young adult.

One of my earliest memories are of carving pumpkins every year with my mother for Halloween. We would scoop out the guts of the pumpkins, bake the seeds, and carve intricate designed jack-o'-lanterns. I can remember how frequently it snowed in my home town, often snow fell from September to sometimes May or June. It was always covered in a sparkling white film. My older cousin Ayesha and I would take old cardboard boxes and use them as sleds on snowy school days. And on regular days we would slide down the long flight of stairs in our apartment complex.

I remember when I was 6 and the Alcohol Tobacco and Firearm team broke down the door to our home, throwing smoke grenades in as my cousin and I choked on the thick smoke filling our home. The red light of their assault rifles blinding me as I was confused to what was happening. They yelled "get down on the floor with your hands on your head!" And I began to sob uncontrollably, until the officers lowered their weapons saying "oh, they're just kids."

On another occasion I remember sitting in our family car with my cousin, or locked in our bedroom as my aunt prostituted herself in order to earn enough money to afford food and essentials for the week. I remember the countless fights my mother and aunt would get in, until one day my aunt stabbed our neighbor in the face with a screwdriver leading to her imprisonment. I remember my uncle being shot in the face in front of our building by a rival gang member. I remember watching as my grandmother would come home so high she was unable to speak, and would plop her 98 pound frame onto the couch, picking at her flesh until she bled. I remember the fear and trauma that circled my life.

My mother was eccentric and we barely got along. She was rather volatile and had difficulties expressing her emotions. Whenever she would get upset with me she would storm off and give me the silent treatment, hours later she would come back with gifts and treats as an apology. The only way she knew how to show her love was with material possessions. I can count on one hand the amount of times she has told me she loved me after the age of 12. One of those times, was the day before she died. When she developed schizophrenia, our relationship became more turbulent. During the beginning of her illness she was physically and emotionally abusive. She developed auditory hallucinations that would threaten her or myself. She began to believe that our friends, loved ones and political figures were all robots out to destroy her. These paranoid delusions led to her isolating herself. After a certain point she was unable to take care of herself so I took on the responsibility. If I didn't feed her, she didn't eat. If I didn't pay the bills, they

didn't get paid, If I didn't clean, nothing would be clean. She hardly ever left our home, I remember how excited I would get on the days when she did.

My aunt was a boisterous, outlandish and humorous woman. She was always full of life and laughter. She was diagnosed with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder when I was very young. She suffered from visual hallucinations and catatonia. I remember her depression was so bad that she would lock herself into her room for days, sometimes for more than a week. My cousin Ayesha (her daughter) and I would sneak into her room every two days to make sure she was alive. During these times we would also clean. She never left her room, not even to use the restroom. Instead, she released her bowls inside of disposable red party cups. The entire top floor of our home was filled with the foul aroma. After her depressive stupor we would empty her room of all of its furniture and possessions and spray paint the carpet to paint over stains left from spelt cups. She was an interesting person. Possibly one of the wittiest woman I know. And one hell of a cook. She was the first person in our family with a culinary degree, and ran a vegan restaurant during the 90's. You would be amazed at the various ways to make vegan cornbread.

My grandmother, Tracy, is what you would call a straight shooter. She was brutally honest but in such a humorous way it was hard to be upset with her. My Grandmother is the most amazing chef! To this day, I believe she has magical cooking abilities. I swear she could make a peach cobbler out of flour and strawberry jam and you would question were the peaches even came from. My grandmother is my rock, after acknowledging my mother's illness she stepped up and became my sole support system. However, when I was younger, my grandmother was a drug addict.

When I was around 14, I spent the entire summer with my grandmother. I remember at one point she left my cousin Ayesha and I in the house for 5 days without food. My cousin and I had prepared for this by saving all of our allowance in an envelope in our shoe closet which Grandma never found. But this time was different. When we went to retrieve our stash, it was gone. My grandmother stole it. She came home on the 6th day so strung out on crack she was unable to speak. Her arms were raw and bleeding from her picking at her flesh because it felt like bugs were underneath her skin. The humorous part of this story is, 3 days after she came home she replaced all of our funds, as though we wouldn't notice that she had stolen from us.

My and my mother's roles reversed after her illness. Despite my love for her, caring for her was leading me to lose my sanity. I had given up many times. I became anxious, paranoid and could barely walk down the street without having a full blown panic attack. I would look for signs in clouds and symbols in my environment to help me determine what steps to take. My anxiety around mental illness led to my inability to work. As a result the lights and gas went off in our home. I felt I was failing as a daughter and caretaker. I couldn't manage my own mental health how could I manage my mother's? The months leading to my mother's death I smelt, what I described as death. I assumed I was dying. I would speak to friends and loved ones who all looked at me as though I was losing it. I smelt the most intense stench on Monday August 8, 2017. Everywhere I walked the stench of death filled my nostrils. I remember walking around my workplace hoping I could escape it. I started to think, this was it. Either I was going to die or that thin line between my insanity and sanity had finally snapped. On Wednesday August 10, I found out that the exact moment she had passed corresponded with the moment I smelt that

intense stench the previous Monday.

Long before my mother died, I developed a complex where I was looking for my white knight; a partner who would whisk me away from my dysfunctional home. I assumed that I had found him. The idea of leaving behind my dysfunctional family was amazing to me, but I had decided that I would not abandon the woman that raised me while she was suffering. I was all she had after all. I decided to go home after a two day leave of absence and had a weird sensation when I woke from my slumber. I was numb. I felt nothing, I felt dead and I couldn't comprehend why. That day on my way home, I decided after 3 years that I would finally buy a phone. Just in case my mother ever needed to reach me. In my excitement I called my partner at the time. Walking jolly up my apartment stairs, I stared in confusion at a pink slip from United States Postal Services (USPS), stating I missed a package two days prior. I thought to myself of bizarre the missed package was, seeing as my mother never left our home. Entering the house my cat at the time frantically clawed at my leg, running back and forth from me to my mother's bedroom. I assumed he was just excited to see me. I stopped in the doorway sniffing the air, it smelt like rotting fruit. Rotting bananas to be exact. I called for my mother with no response and assumed she was out. Walking into her room I saw her leg and was excited to tell her about my new purchase. Walking fully in I saw her half way off of her bed. I tried to shake her to wake up and get fully onto the bed with no response. I stopped, and stared at her body while wondering why she was so cold. I looked at her flesh and then turned my gaze to my cold finger tips in confusion. I touched the cold flesh of her arm and then stopped—staring at her. Then I noticed foam coming from her mouth and my confusion grew. I saw the pinkish blue discoloration of her skin, and noted the bloating of her body and that her toenails were beginning to fall off. Then it dawned on me. I began to repeat "she's dead" over and over again on the phone with my partner. Then I hung up the call and dialed 911.

The part of this experience that truly scared me was being told by the operator on the other line to pull her off the bed onto the floor. I didn't want to touch her that made it to real for me. But, I had to. Rigor Mortis had set in, and she had already released her bowels. She was so heavy I didn't think I could pull her off of the bed. But eventually she gave as her body crashed to the floor with a thud. She hit her head on the way down and I remember my fear and wanting to console her, but being stuck in fear not wanting to touch her again.

After this incident I had a string of bad luck that made me question my idea of self. I lost my mom. Then I lost my cat, home and all my belongings all in one day. My home was under my mother's name. Once she passed I had very few rights to the apartment and was unable to afford both her memorial and rent. This led to me losing all of my belongings and having nowhere to house my cat or myself. My family eventually stopped talking to me, and I was left alone without support in one of the most expensive cities in the world. I worked hard to raise the money for my mother's memorial. I carried my mother's ashes on my lap, along with my luggage and cat carrier from New York City to Rochester; all while asking myself were did i get this strength from?

After returning back to NYC I moved in with my significant other and realized it was a poor decision. He was controlling and manipulative, but I had no other form of support. Although he was caring and always there, his co-dependency was too hard for me to handle while I was grieving. On top of all this, I came to the tough realization that if I left his side I would be

homeless. I began to rationalize his behaviors and place a large part of the blame on myself. I believed that I was the damaged one. I just didn't understand love because I was never shown it. I thought I was the person who was ruining our relationship. There were times when I believed it, especially once his family members began to refer to me as damaged and broken. But I knew that I could never be broken, bent but never broken. I eventually came to understand that I was none of these things, and even with all my trauma and grief I made sure to remind myself of that. I took on two more jobs on top of my full time job. I packed my belongings while he was at work and left. I went homeless, because I valued myself and my sanity more than I ever would a relationship with someone who did not value me.

I jumped from couch to couch, shelter to shelter, job to job. Waking up at 7am every day to head to work and coming home—wherever that was at the time—at midnight. Once I was able to afford a roof over my head, I broke down. It was the first time I was alone since my mother had died. The first time I had an address, the first time I had my own bed and my own space. This was 7 months later.

After my ordeal, I started noticing aspects of myself that manifest as roadblocks to my growth. I was independent to a fault, withdrawn, paranoid, and stubborn. I had trust issues, and I was afraid of success. When I would receive blessings, I instantly began to think I was going to die. I became angry and my anger turned to rage which turned to violence. I had more altercations in the following months than I had in my entire life. Everything was a trigger for me. I questioned if I was a bad person and if all the trauma that I endured was my karma. These questions came up so frequently that I began to genuinely believe that maybe I wasn't the good person I assumed myself to be. I began to think maybe my thought patterns were so negative I attracted negative energy. And then I realized I struggled with God so much, because I couldn't forgive myself. And I wasn't sure if I wanted to. I felt that the combination of being my mother's caretaker and receiving signs that I ignored prior to her death, maybe I was responsible for her passing. I could live with the guilt but I couldn't forgive myself.

The general structure of my life circulated around instability and mental illness. One of my most traumatic memories occurred when I was around the age of 10. I was a tall 10 year old, by the time I was 12 I was already 5'9. Towering over most of my peers and teachers. I remember it was in the middle of winter, a fresh coat of snow covered the ground and its surroundings. I always focused on the beauty of the world to cope with my chaotic home life. And on this particular day I focused on the twinkling snow fall as I listened to my aunt tearing apart our home. She destroyed it, breaking the door to our oven, knocking out all of our windows, tearing the shower curtains, the leather couch, and the glass table shattered into a million pieces. Everything was broken. And yet I was more upset that, thrown all over the home and outside sidewalk, were the small sparkling gemstones that she placed in a vase as decoration. It was my favorite part of our home.

When my cousin and I woke to go to school, my aunt informed us that we wouldn't be attending that day. Instead we were going to accompany her to the store. She grabbed a hammer and knife. Initially asking us to carry a butcher knife on each of our bodies. But our discomfort with the idea led her to change her mind. Off we went out of our broken front door.

I picked up the small gems I was so fond of out of the blanket of snow along the way. And then it dawned on me we were going to rob the store. My aunt was never able to sufficiently feed us, which often makes me wonder how I even had the nutrients to grow to my 6ft stature. While walking along the street a truck passed by us, my aunt stopped them asking for a quarter to use the pay phone. When they refused she grasped her hammer knocking out the back windows of their vehicle. Almost immediately as the truck sped off staggering along the snow covered payment, a cop car approached. The officer rushed out of their vehicle yelling for us to freeze his gun pointed directly at us. The officer tackled my aunt to the ground forcing her to drop the hammer. I remember thinking 'this is ours, we should bring it back home' picking up the hammer then standing back up. But before I could look back at my aunt I was being tackled to the ground by another male police officer, and my cousin was frozen stuck watching as both her mother and I were being cuffed. I began to cry as my aunt yelled "she's just a kid!" I was pushed against the cop car still crying and noticing as people gathered onto their porches to watch the show. I remember being so embarrassed wondering what they must think of me while yelling "I'm only 10!" Repeatedly. Then the officer apologized while taking the cuffs off me and placing me into the back of his vehicle. He tried to explain to me that my actions would lead to a minor offense being placed on my record.

I was taken to the precinct with my older cousin. We sat there in silence as we were ridiculed and questioned by two officers. I remember sitting there as two officers of color spoke amongst themselves. One officer said "of course it's the nigger children. That's the problem with these people. Look at how young they are and already on the road to prison." This was my first time experiencing the criminal justice system and realizing the impact that growing up with a guardian living with a mental illness can have on your life's outcomes.

Despite the pain, trauma and difficulty I experienced. I managed to crawl from out of the dark pit of struggle and depression and worked harder than I ever have before. Working four jobs I eventually saved enough money to afford a roof over my head. I became the teacher for the nonprofit organization named Young New Yorkers, and I began to create and develop an artistic style that allowed me to express and relieve the pain and depression I was experiencing. I began to receive notoriety as an artist and touch other people who were able to relate to the emotions portrayed in my work. And best of all, I began to sell work!

I honestly never imagined myself in this field, as a teacher for an alternative sentencing program. I have cycled between dead end jobs and mental health nonprofits for the majority of my work history. However, after graduating from college, I promised myself that I would work in a field that positively impacted my community. Thus, I began to work as a credible messenger.

Although I never imagined myself becoming a part of this profession, it has allowed me to reconnect with a part of myself I had lost. A part I sometimes felt myself yearning for and puzzled as to where it had gone. I reconnected with my confidence. I recognized how my resilience and trauma could be transformed into a tool that would allow me to heal others; after all healed people heal people. This profession allowed me to continue my journey into self-actualization and took me one step further to becoming a fully functional human being.