

Assignment #1 – *The Broken Cord*

*The Broken Cord*, by Michael Dorris, is a first-hand account of raising a child with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (1990). The child of focus, Adam, was adopted by Michael at the age of three. Michael is half Native American and wanted to adopt a child of similar ethnic background. Adam is full Native American; his birth mother lived on an Indian reservation. Adam was up for adoption because his mother was an alcoholic; she was neglectful and tied him to his crib as an infant, leaving scars on his wrists and ankles. Michael was is a scholar of social sciences, and strongly believed that a love and a good learning environment could get Adam back on track developmentally. Much of the narrative focuses specifically Native American culture, Michael's career, and the several family members that joined Adam and Michael in their lifelong journey. Both Michael and Adam bear several individual, familial and cultural characteristics that have influenced how Adam developed over time.

At the age of twenty-six, Michael Dorris describes himself as an "ex-would-be-hippie, candidate for a Yale doctorate in anthropology," and an instructor at a small college (Dorris, 1990, p. 1). Michael grew up as an only child to a long line of single mothers, because the men in his family had all died fairly young. The combination of these factors drove Michael to adopt a child as a single father. Before Michael came along, Adam's life had been quite severe. He was a premature baby, abused by his mother, and deserted by any remaining family members (p. 38). In his first years with his father, Adam was described as being well-mannered and having an "appealing face" (p. 110). His learning disabilities were very close to being acceptable, but he never could quite accomplish tasks other children could do with ease. Even with the encouragement and patience of a few great special education teachers, Adam could not keep up with the other kids of his age.

Michael's undying belief that Adam could learn just as well as the other children may have hindered Adam's abilities. Michael pressed him to thrive even when subjects such as Civics were far beyond Adam's cognitive abilities in the ninth grade (Dorris, 1990, p. 129). While a nurturing and caring environment probably did help Adam to improve, there were still biological impacts from his birth mother's alcohol addiction while he was developing in the womb. Influences from Locke provided parents with the idea that a child is a blank slate (Schreier, 2008, January 9). He also believed that children are "perfectable" with practice, and said that children can be molded by education and training. Michael grasped onto these ideas whole-heartedly, rarely considering biological disparities as a reason for Adam's struggles. In contrast, Rousseau's concepts of nature include letting a child develop at their own pace, instead of pushing them to succeed. Rousseau said that children will develop naturally and actively take what they need. It is important to keep in mind both nature and nurture when raising children. Adam may have benefited from having more time to develop his cognitive and social abilities.

One important aspect of Adam's development includes his family setting, which was ever-changing, but a stable and loving home. Michael dated a woman for a while, who Adam became attached to, but the relationship abruptly ended (Dorris, 1990, p. 40). When Adam was six years old, Michael adopted another boy, Seva (p. 96). Two years later, he adopted a girl, Madeline (p. 106). When Adam was thirteen, Michael married Louise, who adopted all three of Michael's children. Seva, Madeline, and Louise are all Native American like Adam and Michael. In time, Michael and Louise added two baby girls to their family, Persia and Pallas (p. 130, p. 142).

It is likely that Adam benefited greatly from the presence of his siblings. Some benefits of having a sibling include opportunities to improve upon social learning by imitating successes

and observing family interactions (Schreier, 2008, February 2). These benefits are amplified when siblings are close in age. They can share “experiences, perceptions, [and] comfort.” In a video about the Theory of Mind, which is the idea that one can imagine what another person may be thinking, cooperative play was shown to increase the frequency and number of connections in the brain. This is because playing with another child increases novel play, or creativity. Even though Adam was experiencing these interactions in school, playing with his siblings at home may have allowed him to progress to a point closer to normality.

Native American heritage is heavily discussed in this story. Soon after Adam’s adoption, Michael took a job at Dartmouth teaching anthropology and starting up a Native American studies program (Dorris, 1990, p. 42). Michael’s connection to his heritage was fairly strong, and strived to pass these values on to his children. This was accomplished partially through trips to Native American reservations for pleasure and research. When Michael picked up Adam, he discovered that the distant “system” he had been blaming for Native American disparities had directly affected his son (p. 78). Confining Native Americans to reservations with little to no resources mediated oppression among the Indians. They were stripped of their rights, and therefore turned to drinking as a way to cope with the cycle of poverty, death, unemployment and other negative life events (p. 87). The four rules of the Lakota society are generosity, bravery, fortitude, and moral integrity. Drinking was also seen as a way to be generous. Turning down a drink is an insult to the host. An overall increase of drinking, in both men and women, had occurred within a fairly recent time period.

This sudden increase in alcohol consumption has had an impact in several areas of Native American life. One area with very negative effects includes women who consume alcohol while pregnant. The children of these mothers tend to have developmental delays both before and after

birth, disorders in the central nervous system, and specific abnormalities of the face and head (Chomitz, 2000, p. 21). This is called Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, and is the most avoidable cause of retardation in the world. Alcohol is considered to be a teratogen, which is a chemical that can cause birth defects or abnormal development (Schreier, 2008, January 14). This is the disease that Adam has. His symptoms were present early on, including “low birth weight, small cranial circumference, hyperactivity, repetitious mistakes, an early failure to thrive, attention deficit, [and] seizures” (Dorris, 1990, p. 79). The obstacles Adam was required overcome were numerous, and yet Michael strived to give him every opportunity to succeed as a normal person.

Although Michael may have been too pushy, he also never gave up on Adam. He gave Adam a nurturing and caring environment. While Adam was growing up, the information about Fetal Alcohol Syndrome was not widely known. This created several barriers in treatment and special education measures for Adam. Michael did the best he could with this heart-breaking disease, even with the numerous factors affecting both himself and Adam. Although there could have been improvements in the approach to Adam’s development, the caring atmosphere Michael provided for him was more than Adam had ever experienced before he was adopted.

### References

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