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## PROFILE

## On Hardship and Growth



On man's struggle to regain health, balance and self-worth

Colby Smith is no stranger to hardship. He grew up in a dysfunctional family, in which both his mother and father suffered from alcoholism, divorcing when he was a small child. He came home from college one vacation to find that his mother had moved-without leaving a forwarding address-and has been on his own ever since. Despite the lack of adult support, Colby managed to graduate from Elmhurst College outside Chicago and start work on an advanced degree at the University of North Carolina. He withdrew from the speech communications program in 1988, two years before he ended up on the street.

Colby lost his apartment when debilitating arthritis forced him out of his job. The pain had begun in his feet, then spread to his hands and other joints, eventually becoming so unbearable that he could neither stand nor sleep for prolonged periods of time. The constant physical and emotional strain increased his vulnerability to other ailments, such as chronic bronchitis. The homeless shelter in Greensboro, N.C. maintained a three-month limit on stays, so he alternated between the shelter and the street, sometimes even ending up in the local hospital. Indeed, his low point came one bitter cold winter night when, nearly delirious with pain and fever, he stumbled into the emergency room where an attendant risked her job by giving him a bed for the night. Her kindness probably saved his life.

"Being homeless for so long is a crushing experience psychologically. You lose all desire and all belief in yourself," he says. "Because the shelter tells you when to go to bed, when to be out, and when to eat, you end up not having any control in your life. It's almost like being a prisoner in a prison camp."

Colby, now 51, found two small, but hugely significant, ways to introduce some control into his life during five bleak years without a home. These two pursuits ultimately helped restore his health and dignity. First, was reading. He became an avid reader during the many days he spent seeking shelter at the Greensboro Public Library. Books on nutrition and health were his favorite topics and one book in particular, *Food for Life: How the New Four Food Groups can Save your Life* by Neal Barnard M.D., struck him as conveying "real truths" about the human body. Dr. Barnard's writings led Colby to a second important step-becoming a vegan vegetarian. Vegans forego all animal products including dairy. "Sometimes I'd go for dinner in the shelter and the only thing they'd serve was meat and maybe a few vegetables," he says. "But I was trying to gain some aspect of control of my life, so [vegetables were] all I would eat even though I became gaunt." Gaunt-but, free from bronchitis, which Colby attributes directly to giving up dairy products such as milk and cheese that contribute to mucus production-and free from chronic pain.

"When I became vegan the pain went away," he says. "But, if I eat cholesterol, I get pain back right away. I think what happens is that the blood vessels have a tough time going through the damaged joints, so if you add those big cholesterol, artery-clogging things to your diet, they don't get through at all. They just pile up and cause swelling."

Colby developed his views on health through personal experience and by continuing his voracious reading. Reading turned from a hobby into a vocation in 1993 when Colby found a job evaluating writing tests from students in grades 3 through 12 for a Greensboro-based company that contracts with public schools around the country. He started taking the bus to work with his sleeping bag and backpack in tow, then storing his gear under his desk during the day. Earning some money-though still not enough to rent his own home-opened other possibilities. For example, he had read a book about the importance of melatonin in the diet and finally had money to buy this natural hormone for himself. "To this day, the only way I can sleep is with melatonin," Colby says. "I would never give it up."

Getting enough sleep began to change his life, so did a friend's suggestions to apply for public housing. At that time, in the late 1980s, there was a federal directive to put the working homeless near the top of the list when housing became available. So, Colby didn't have to wait long before an apartment opened up. By then he had been working a steady job for two years and saving nearly all his money. "My hope had been to keep working and build up a work record, then maybe meet someone who needed a roommate and buy a used car so I could get to my job," he remembers. "I ended up saving about \$3,000 so when the apartment opened up, I had the money. It would probably seem crazy to most people to be homeless with that much money in the bank."

The move into public housing may have meant that Colby spent less time in the library, but his devotion to books remained as unwavering as ever. Not only was he reading everything he could find about health and nutrition, but he also finally had the chance to purchase more of the vitamins and nutrients that he read about. In addition to melatonin, he began taking COQ10 to improve general health and ginkgo biloba as a memory/brain function enhancer. Also on his daily regime is calcium and magnesium for help in sleep and chromium picolinate to build lean tissue and metabolize fat. Vitamins C and B, zinc and selenium appear on the list as antioxidants, and Colby uses DHEA to fight depression. Mixed amino acids help increase his body's production of growth hormones. Finally, he uses DHA and flaxseed to obtain the necessary fatty acids missing in his vegan diet and uses vitamin E as a protection against potential negative aspects of that DHA.

Colby's copious use of flaxseed oil came after he read about studies on populations who live long and healthy lives and consume a tremendous amount of flaxseed oil. He notes that even Mahatma Gandhi spoke of the health benefits of flaxseed. "I don't use oil at all in my diet-no butter, no margarine-so I researched flaxseed and figured it would be the safest type of oil to take. It also helps with certain skin conditions, such as psoriasis, which I suffer from," he explains. "And although I mentioned all these [vitamins and supplements] for specific purposes, I realize that they all work in concert with each other. By the way, I feel great. I haven't even had a cold in five years."

Noting that most large animals are vegans too, Colby has not wavered in his conviction that a vegan diet offers the greatest health advantages. He eats plenty of fruits, grains, vegetables and lentils. Whenever he sustains an injury or undergoes surgery-such as having his wisdom teeth extracted-he'll fast. "You can heal in about half the amount of time if you release your body from the chore of digesting," he says. Indeed, Colby says he managed to avoid surgery to repair a severed salivary duct in his cheek by fasting for ten days. His face had been severely lacerated during a mugging in February 1999.

Of course exercise also plays a key role in Colby's life. He had an early gift for sports, excelling in track, football and tennis at different times during high school and college. These days, Colby gets his exercise on the job as a mail carrier. He moved out of public housing March 1, 1999 and currently shares an apartment with a friend. His days without a home seem firmly behind him-but he doesn't regret a single moment of the experience.

"Of everything that happens to us in this life, we probably gain the most from the hardships. I've gained from every one of the experiences I've had and grown because of them," says Colby. "They've given me a capacity for understanding-things like the plight of the poor and the situation in Kosovo-that's probably beyond most people." -Twig Mowatt

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