

Stories from the Forum magazine: January 2012

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Overcoming grief, despair, and anger—a father's tale

I did not come to Al-Anon willingly. I was, after all, too worldly, too well educated, and far too experienced to require help from anybody. My grief and despair for a son caught up in the disease of alcoholism and drug abuse persisted despite all my efforts to cure him or to have him cured. Such were the actions I believed a responsible parent was supposed to perform in our society. I expected him to stop. His conduct was contrary to those I believed to be the hallmarks of our "class." Yet he persisted.

My despair did not sustain me. My grief did not sustain me. Neither did my eventual anger at alcoholism, drug abuse, drug dealers, and purveyors of alcoholic beverages, educators, his friends and acquaintances sustain me; nor did any other person, place or thing, including me, that I could remotely associate or blame for his condition. And so, as Al-Anon has pointed out, I became frustrated and angry.

The first lesson I received from Al-Anon, and for which I am eternally grateful, was the knowledge that I was not alone. We seem to live in a society in which we compete with each other to be more popular; have more toys; dress better; have a better job; be more athletic or handsome—to be "more." Consequently, there exists an emotional distance between each of us because we are competitors.

Our institutions pander to this need to feel superior to our neighbor. It is reflected in our advertising, our entertainment, the things we eat, wear, and read, our homes, cars, working environments, even our friends and acquaintances.

To me, at the time, Al-Anon seemed to be suggesting that there was a simpler way to live and that this simpler way was a better way; one in which I could accept the support of my fellows un-constricted by the notion that I was losing some obscure competitive advantage.

The people I met in Al-Anon seemed to be better able to deal with the uncertainty, pain, and despair in their lives than I was. I wanted to be a part of that. I also discovered that the social status in the larger community in which we all resided meant not a whit to any of my new Al-Anon brothers and sisters. I was, at that time, confounded that the concept of "class" was not even a remote consideration within the Al-Anon community; that everyone had the same social status, rendering the concept of "social status," and all its baggage, moot.

Knowing that I was in a group of people who were experiencing the same grief and despair I was experiencing somehow nourished my soul in a way I had never experienced. When I finally worked up the courage to share my experience - to tell my story - (I didn't have any "strength" or "hope" yet) with the group, I was surprised at the reaction. It took courage for me to admit to what I saw as my failings to be a good parent to these relative strangers.

In the larger community, I felt that my worth as a parent would be measured against the result: my son was an alcoholic; therefore I was a bad parent. What I got in Al-Anon instead was understanding and support. What I did not get was judgment.

I think we all realize that the larger society in which we live is one in which we are constantly engaged in measuring others and ourselves against some standard. One of the many beauties of Al-Anon is that it subscribes to neither the standard nor the measurement. In the Al-Anon community, we ask only that we keep each other's secrets, accept life on life's terms, and follow the dictates of our hearts as expressed by what we have come to know as our Higher Power.

What a blessed way to live!

By Andy H.
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