

-Stories from the Forum magazine: May 2008

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Finding my way, learning life skills as an adult

It wasn't until I entered the doors of Al-Anon that I began to release the pain and resentment that voraciously consumed me. Though I came because of my partner, it became quickly evident that the root of my anger was the result of seeds planted by my parents.

I would love to give an extended history of my childhood growing up with alcoholics but truthfully, I do not remember most of it. I remember that I never saw my mother or my father while I was growing up. They never attended any of our activities. I rarely recall them being at home, always arriving after we went to bed and leaving before we awoke.

The one instance when my parents did make an attempt to be present was also the last time I would ask. I had been complaining that they never attended my basketball games. Perhaps in a weak moment of guilt, they both agreed to make the next home game. Of course, we were late because they had to stop at the liquor store. I was already frustrated as we pulled into the parking lot, and I ran into the gym to find my team already warming up.

Many of my friends rushed over, "We didn't think you'd make it." Obviously, I couldn't tell them why we were late. I immediately felt ashamed and embarrassed. Later, after too many trips out to the truck for beer, they simply left. No goodbye, no "we'll pick you up later." They didn't even bother to find out how I would get home. I was on my own.

As a result, I learned survival skills, not life skills. I spent years clinking around like a pinball, trying on jobs and relationships that did not fit. Needless to say, I wanted to feel noticed, appreciated, and loved. But because survival is a position of defense and not of intent, I always felt I was at the mercy of someone else. Furthermore, the superficial, temporary things that society tells us we need got me no closer to knowing who I was and what I wanted to be.

Basically, I had no direction. I wasted a lot of time because people saw my need for acceptance and approval, and they began to manipulate me to fit into their plans. Similarly, I became an expert at deciphering what someone's picture of me was and cutting myself into pieces, rearranging them over and over to get them to fit.

The anger I had towards my parents had not resolved one thing in my life. It is fair to say that my entire childhood was spent seeking a role model and my entire adult life was spent trying to compensate for this lack of confidence. What Al-Anon helped me see was that I no longer had to live their legacy - I needed to create my own.

In the rooms of Al-Anon, I was astonished that I could say anything and no one would berate or negate the things I had just said. This was the first time I really felt listened to. I learned there is power in simply speaking my truth. People in my life had always been hypercritical, so it was an extravagance that whatever I said was accepted at face value.

Moreover, I believe that transformation occurs when you practice new things. Once I learned that to was safe to say anything I wanted, I slowly began to replace years of negativity, criticism, and false expectations with positive intent, forgiveness, and trust. I began practicing taking risks and being tender with myself and others.

As I began to uncover my parents' origins, their unfulfilled dreams, and their pain, my life began to make more sense. I began to have some compassion. I saw that I was a fulfillment of my mother's dream to get an education and my father's dream to have financial freedom. I saw that though they were not very good parents, they passed on some gifts, but I simply could not acknowledge them until I did a Fourth Step inventory.

Today I know that my life is my responsibility, and I have to work on it every day. I wanted it to be a one-time fix, but my life's journey is constantly moving. My parents are a reminder to me that I could stop digging into my own defects, but then I would also stop growing.

My parents did not stop drinking. I was 33 before either one of them acknowledged any remorse for the way we were raised, and even then, neither was very convincing in their apology. My father died two years ago from lung cancer. My mother is still actively drinking.

Al-Anon helped me to see alcoholism as a disease, to give my parents the dignity to make their own decisions, and to continue to put my attention into creating my own life by minding my own business.

By Karen F.

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Who qualifies for Al-Anon? What I learned

I was suffering in a verbally abusive relationship - not my first - when I attempted to join Al-Anon. I'd heard that it could help me with my problems. I went to a meeting and asked a woman afterward if I had to know someone who drank to join. She said I did.

Disheartened, I phone the central office in my area and asked the same question. I received the same response.

Ten years and two more abusive, obsessive relationships later, I dragged myself to an Al-Anon meeting hoping I finally qualified. The latest relationship disaster was with a man who had decided to stop drinking 13 years earlier. I didn't know if that meant he was an alcoholic, but I decided that had to be enough to get me through the door. I was desperate.

To my relief, no one asked me for my credentials. The woman I asked to sponsor me didn't ask me if I knew any alcoholics. Eventually I told her what had happened ten years earlier. She shook her head in dismay and told me that if anyone came to the meetings and related, they needed to be there.

I've attended meetings and worked the Steps for more than five years now, and the program has changed my life. I still don't know if there are any alcoholics in my family, but I suppose I really do qualify because I'm in a wonderful relationship with a man who has been sober in A.A. for eleven years.

Needless to say, I welcome newcomers with open arms, and if they ask me if they belong in Al-Anon I tell them that's up to them to decide. I encourage them to try out different meetings and tell them that if they feel like they belong, they belong.

I know now that I did qualify all those years ago. Every one of those earlier, difficult relationships had been with adult children of alcoholics. Alcoholism had most definitely and profoundly affected my life. I just didn't know it at the time.

By Anonymous

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