

Stories from the Forum magazine: July 2011

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Forgiving my parents helped me reclaim my life

I thought the sun rose and set on my father. When he was home, I was his constant shadow; I followed him everywhere. When I was seven, he left for work one day and never returned.

I remember sitting outside on the swing in the yard waiting for him, but he never came back. As all children do, I blamed myself. It had to have been my fault. I must have done something terrible to cause such a thing. The impact on my life was huge.

I became a loner. I didn't think I was lovable. I was painfully shy, and I was afraid to trust anyone. Fear ruled my life. I withdrew into my own little world and life was very painful for me. Even to this day, I am still a loner to a certain extent.

I wasn't good with relationships, simply because of the trust and abandonment issues. To make matters worse, I chose partners who drank excessively. In fact, I chose partners who helped me recreate my parents' relationship — a dad who drank too much and a mom who was very quiet, withdrawn, and emotionally unavailable — because that was my comfort zone.

I already had two failed marriages behind me; the third one was heading for the ditch when we lost our home and all our belongings in a fire. My mantra at that time was, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." I certainly didn't feel very tough, but I hung in there, determined to make this marriage work — against all odds.

Then, my son committed suicide. That brought me to my knees. From that day forward, my life changed forever. For the first eight years after his death, I couldn't talk about my son. I couldn't face reality and ran away from it by throwing myself into work. I felt dead inside. I drove myself day in and day out, just hoping to be tired enough to be able to go to sleep at night.

I blamed my ex-husband. I blamed my son's father; but most of all I blamed myself. I went through the "if only," all the "should and should haves," but none of that would bring my son back.

I remember having a recurring dream of being in a courtyard in the hot sun. High walls enclosed the courtyard on all four sides; beautifully carved wooden walls with a door here and there. In the dream, it became very hot. I got up and went through one of the doors. It felt like heaven inside—cool, airy, spacious, and pleasantly dark. I felt that I could rest there. I wanted to stay there forever, but then I would wake up and I really didn't want to wake up. Looking back now, I know that I was being comforted. Someone up there was looking after me.

The third marriage ended when I got emotionally strong enough to leave. My ex-husband found A.A. and, to this day, is a faithful member. In fact, he pointed me in the direction of Al-Anon.

We got back together after a year and a half, went through the honeymoon stage, and discovered that the problems were all still there—minus the alcohol. I knew I couldn't live the way we were living, so I left again. I know this doesn't sound too good: the alcoholic gets sober and the wife leaves. We should be walking off into

the sunset holding hands, but that just didn't happen. Today, we are friendly towards each other. I recognize that he has many good qualities and I wish only the best for him.

I firmly believe that because I was a sick person, I was drawn to sick people. Healthy people scared me—they were so honest, so happy, so well adjusted—I felt I couldn't measure up to that. It was only in Al-Anon that I began to feel safe enough to let others see the real me. At first, I didn't even want to go there. But, it was only there that I felt safe enough to talk about my life, my family, my mistakes, my regrets, my hopes, and my dreams.

Al-Anon taught me about forgiveness. And when I forgave, I let go of the hurt and resentment that I always carried around like an albatross around my neck. I forgave my father. He had sent flowers to my son's funeral. I found out where he lived and I started visiting him. The visits were very upsetting. After every visit, I'd tell myself I was never going back because we never once spoke about what happened.

I expected my father to say he was sorry, but he never did. He wasn't well; he was disabled and suffered from emphysema. I just couldn't bring up the past. I came to understand that he was only human, and did the best he knew. I kept visiting him over the years, and then one day, when I walked in, I saw his face light up. I suddenly realized that he did care for me—he was *my* father.

I don't know exactly when I forgave him, it just happened over time. And when he was dying, I was there. When I got to the hospital, I went over to him, touched him on the shoulder, and said, "I'm here, Dad." He was near death, he couldn't speak, he couldn't even open his eyes, but I watched as he raised his eyebrows, and I knew that he knew I was there.

I forgave my mother. Four years ago, I brought her home from the hospital to live with me. She had fallen, cracked two bones in her foot, and had a cast on her left leg up to her knee. I gradually came to know my mother and to understand that she, too, had done the best she could. Getting my mother to talk was the hard part, but she would talk if we were traveling in the car together. I learned a lot about her life. She had had a terrible life—one that I wouldn't wish upon anyone.

She told me that after my father left, he wrote to her, asking if he could take my youngest sister and me to live with him. She refused. She even told me that he had sent Christmas presents and money. I never knew that, and I am so glad she told me. Today, my mother lives in a special care home; she can't be left alone and her mind is not what it used to be. She doesn't remember much at all, present or past, and maybe that is a good thing. I believe that a Higher Power is looking after her, too.

Today, I thank my Higher Power for my life. My life wasn't the mistake I once thought it was. There were many times in my life as a young woman that I did not want to go on; I really did not want to live. I know that living is so much harder than dying and I do understand the thoughts behind suicide. Al-Anon has given me a wonderful sense of belonging. I don't feel alone anymore. It is a gift and this is one grateful person.

By Gloria B., Nova Scotia
The Forum, July 2011

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