

Alcoholism in the Family

What is an alcoholic? What is abusive or addictive behavior? I struggled with the answers when I was young. My mother and father were heavy drinkers for most of my childhood, with differing personalities as a result. When I was eleven, I purchased my first book on alcoholism. For the first time, I read about AA's Twelve Steps of Recovery, or just Twelve Steps and other philosophies relating to abuse and recovery. By the time I turned 13, I had read a dozen more books on related topics including abusive behavior.

I strove to understand how these things could be applied to my father and, to a lesser degree, to my mother. Mom always loved me and expressed that love. When Mom drank, she didn't love me, or express that more or less. She wasn't much different when she drank too much either; just more open to the point of extremes and more likely to lash out in anger to my father but not often me. When my father drank, he went from sometimes nice to mean spirited or just mean. He wasn't physically abusive, but his sharp tongue became a razor-sharp sword of verbal abuse when he drank. He didn't act or express love easily or much at all either way.

Hence, my reading was mostly aimed at understanding my father. I came away with some positive conclusions. First, I realized it wasn't me, I wasn't the problem. Secondly, I realized both his alcoholism and behavior in general were deeply rooted in his issues with the grandfather I never knew discussed in *The Pursuit of Healing*. Lastly, I learned how to separate myself from my own emotions to be able to think logically and to a degree clinically.

Mom seemed like an invincible rock, at least until that Labor Day eve when I was 12 and she blitzed through a telephone pole at 50 miles an hour while blitzed. She barely survived after many hundreds of stitches and many surgeries later, all while I was in seventh grade. My father lessened drinking as he had to be there for her, and he was for our move to a peaceful rural location for my 8th grade year. Mom recovered and he was our sole support for the first time in five years. Before High School, we moved to High Bridge and drinking worsened again for both.

For some, becoming an alcoholic is due to a "triggering event" in someone's life. This was true for my father. I believed my mother when she told me that my father was the predominately good person that she saw in him before I was born, or at least before I can remember. I believe and have for so long that the change in my father was set in motion by one event in his life as mentioned in *Pursuit of Healing*. That didn't mean he wasn't an alcoholic before that, but more so that his drinking increased in frequency and volume.

My father always liked to entertain, and that was made easier in late 50's and early 60's with great jobs at Pepsi-Cola, rising to the position as Eastern Sales Manager. At that time, that involved meeting and entertaining with celebrities that advertised for Pepsi with a very nice expense account. For my father, he had many favorite haunts, but none more than Toots Shor's where his Pepsi-Cola expense account bought regular, frequent rounds for cronies including Howard Cosell, Gordon McRae and others.

I remember going there during a weekend that included the Easter parade, dressed like Mom's doll. I was eight I believe, going into that world famous bar saying I was Tom Cassidy's son.

Jack Lescoulie, the former Today Show sports anchor host, made time for the kid whose father bought those many rounds. He said there were no sports stars there to introduce me to but took me over to introduce me to a game show host, the relatively new sidekick to “Here’s Johnny,” Mr. Ed McMahon.

When I was just turning nine, my father got fired from Pepsi for “liberties” with his expense account and other unknown issues. Concurrently, his drinking led to his very successful janitorial business, including several Catholic Dioceses as clients going belly up. We went from a family that owned four homes, living in what was called a very nice and now an upscale town (Mendham, NJ) to moving to a rented home on the edge of a small town. We went from my father being the breadwinner of the family to Mom in that role at *Lee Bradley’s*, the antique shop/art gallery/restaurant and home combined. When we lived there, he worked making sour cream at a dairy on the overnight shift, various bar tending jobs, and then eventually he went back into sales and did better when her accident forced him to step up.

Mom never forgave him for his many dalliances or losing the eight-acre Mendham property with three homes, a stream and pool made from damming up a branch of the stream. She reminded him constantly and more so when fueled by the liquor. Fights resulted, and she regularly threw things at him, like full glasses of Fleishman’s over ice. He responded with verbal taunts, all of which I sought to avoid. In Mendham, I had the woods to find peace, or my best friend who lived one house down. At Lee Bradley’s where we lived thereafter, I hid in the attic, or if fighting was on the second floor, in the basement.

It was in that attic that I began reading about alcoholism and abuse with flashlight in hand. I vowed then that I would avoid fights and yelling with my wife in front of my kids. I almost always held true to that, typically ending arguments quickly or fleeing when my spouse was loud or over emotional. Collectively, my three kids have not heard as much parental negativity in arguments in their lifetime as I did one winter in Long Valley. That is not to say that they shouldn’t have heard less sarcastic comments and more.

These battles between Mom and Dad continued for years, and for years, I suggested to Mom they should get divorced, starting when I was about eight. Instead, she held on to more pleasant thoughts of the past and drowned her sorrows more in that bottle. When I was 13 and we were then living in High Bridge, with Dad traveling and philandering again, things worsened, until that day she lost it, wielded that large knife, and tore all his custom-tailored suits Pepsi had paid for in that bloated expense account and destroyed much of his writings including a book.

They divorced shortly thereafter, but her drinking continued to grow. She never really worked through my High Bridge High School years, bringing in money for food, gas, her Benson and Hedges, whiskey, and the phone bill by cooking for room and boarders at the house, sometimes selling a few antiques to dealers. Yes, as she reminded me, she fell walking up the hill behind the house to get the cat I let out, and her knee was never the same. That was not a handicap past a year or so as the real handicap was the whiskey.

I built on the *Lee Bradley’s Years* and continued to learn about hard work, beginning full time work at the first convenience store in the County in my freshman year of high school. I supported

Mom and was also the facilitator, allowing her to drink and drown her sorrows through the mortgage, taxes, insurance, and utility payments that I started paying the month before I turned 15 and lasted until the house was sold just before my 19th birthday.

A year after her divorce, when I had just turned sixteen, I had a private meeting with her former divorce lawyer, the esteemed (to me and others) Judge Herrigal, who I got to know the summer before High School as I worked to help remodel his large farmhouse. He saw the slippage due to pain and more so alcoholic influences in Mom and how all over the place she had become. After we spoke, Mom agreed to place a mortgage on the house for all I put in that would have an accruing principal balance. A little over a year out of high school when the house was sold and I got my money back, about \$11,000, a fair amount then. That was the money I put into the stock, equipment, remodeling, and advertising in my Deli/convenience store I opened just before I turned 19. Mom bought the building with the proceeds of the sale of the house, and I again paid the overhead, as the loving son and facilitator.

I worked hard, but I played hard too, something I learned from Mom. At Tim's Deli (yes, lacking in modesty then), I wanted out for the evening after opening at 7AM and seeing the store through the dinner rush for subs and prepared foods, so I left the store to employees until the 10PM closing. Unfortunately, that meant Mom was in the store too as she lived above the store in a two BR apartment with a den while I had the studio apartment in the rear. She was not supposed to be in the store at all, but how could employees keep her out? By the time I left the store in the evening, she was usually plastered, and she was not a fair or impartial drunk. The results were sandwiches for somebody she liked with a close to pound of meat or 1-2 slices if you didn't pleasantly respond to her inquisitive or by now sarcastic banter. Sometimes, she just charged different prices on an item depending on if you smiled at her or not.

There was no talking to her, and the judge and others tried to intercede to no avail. I didn't have that second mortgage for my protection like I did in High School. One day I had enough and left for the shore, leaving the business to her. She ran it down from such a great start, but still sold it for a handsome profit. I never saw my investment back, not one dime. She rented a large, lovely cottage on an estate, lived, and drank well until the money ran out two years later.

I didn't visit her that often for two years after I left. She hit bottom and was broke by the time I was 22, married and living in a large Victorian by the shore. My wife Nadine was understanding and supportive, and she moved in with us there. For many months we played "Hide the Bottle" from Mom and within six months to a year, she had quit completely. She began working and became totally self-sufficient. She never looked back; only drinking a glass of wine during a holiday or one Old Fashion when eating out with us in a nice place versus so pizza with her and my kids.

Starting when I was 13, during the eighteen months my father and I remodeled the house in High Bridge, he introduced me to drinking by sharing Rolling Rocks while we worked. At 14, I mentioned I didn't like beer as much as I did wine, so he started buying me Gallo wine by the gallon, and I drank it mixed with lemonade while he drank the Rolling Rocks as we worked, with his Whiskey and/or Martinis in the evening. I used to bring a half-gallon jug of my homemade Sangria in a glass orange juice container over to the school ground when I played basketball in

the summer for a couple of mid-teen years. When he left, Mom only occasionally got it for me so for a while I made my own wine using Welch's frozen grape juice as a base. It was ghastly but tolerable when it was mixed with lemonade.

So how did these experiences of my immediate family of alcoholics influence me? We tend to become what we grow up with or revolt against it, and in some cases, we bounce back and forth. In my last couple years of high school, I drank lots of Boone's Farm, beer, shots of tequila and smoked pot. The summer I turned eighteen, the drinking law changed from 21 to eighteen, fortunate or more likely unfortunate timing. My eighteenth year I worked six days a week, a 45–48-hour week, six to seven hours a day until 11:30 PM on four evenings, and 7AM to 5PM on weekends. I commuted to college four days a week, an hour plus round trip, took 15 credits and played intramural basketball after turning down all those scholarships to be there for Mom.

Despite the schedule, I faithfully met my friends at the bar those evenings after work, drank beer and tequila, ate awesome grilled cheese sandwiches, and played pool and foosball until 2AM. On weekends, it was longer nights and various other places with live music. On Sunday, after work ended at 5, Mom made a nice Sunday dinner and then I was asleep by 6 or 7. I took the Holy Day off from drinking by coincidence only to start anew the next day, repeating the weekly cycle. By nineteen, I was worn out, as my stomach and related internal equipment decided that the combination of liquor and diet was too much, and I spent five days in the hospital. My system had revolted, and I wasn't digesting food well, but it was not an ulcer. I didn't have a drink for nearly eighteen months. When I did, it was wine or sea breezes and rarely in excess. I got drunk and very sick at 27 and only got truly intoxicated once in my life after that.

In her later years, Mom would not discuss her heavy drinking years or my fathers for that matter, let alone the impact on me. She often saw me tired, worn or stressed, and accused me of drinking too much as an adult, but I was just stressed and/or overworked.

I tried to see if my father had changed and/or became sober four times in my adult life, and if the man my mother fell in love with had returned in some form. After colon cancer surgery caught early for him when I was in my 30's, he quit drinking. Perhaps ironically, even when he became sober, he was that over the line sarcastic, negative drunken persona and never returned to the person Mom fell in love with that I never knew.

The professionals define an alcoholic as once one, always one. Maybe that is true on average, and professionals must treat people under that assumption and based on averages, like the Twelve Steps. In the late eighties I was a director on a non-profit board of a substance abuse facility. I had many conversations then and after with professionals that understood and/or counsel for alcohol or substance abuse. Most will admit that there is not one answer that works for all. Twelve steps work for many and likely most cannot control partial use of whatever substance. Some can. However, time, knowledge, and the wisdom gained from experience can tell you that to enjoy life to the fullest, it is best to be sober.

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