

Overcoming my inner emptiness

My first memory of drunken violence was when I was five years old. My mother's screams woke me up in the middle of the night.

There was a bad storm—lots of wind, rain, and lightening. I sat up in bed, frozen, unable to move as I listened to my mother screaming and furniture being overturned.

I wanted to protect her, but he was a very big man and I was a little girl. Long after I understood there was nothing I could have done, I still felt guilty that I sat in my bed with the covers pulled up around me and stayed frozen like a little statue until it quieted down.

The next morning my mother didn't go to work; she had two black eyes. Dad sat on the edge of the bed with her and held her hand.

Nothing was said about it, and I knew better than to ask any questions. There were several similar situations like that over the years.

My parents provided a good home, with plenty of food on the table. My father taught us the difference between right and wrong, perhaps not always by example but by removing his belt and snapping it to put fear in us.

What was absent in our home was a feeling that we were safe, protected, and loved. There was little or no emotional connection between parent and child. I felt invisible and insignificant to the parents I loved and trusted more than anyone else in the world.

That's why I believe I didn't marry an alcoholic by accident. I was pre-wired to do so. Most people I knew drank the way my husband did. It was "normal" to me.

Of course, I didn't realize that I knew nothing about what normal was. All I knew is that I felt like I had this big, empty hole inside of me. I thought it would go away if I got married—but it didn't.

Then I thought it would go away if I had a baby. But I still felt empty inside even after I had a beautiful, healthy baby girl.

After 13 years of marriage, my husband went to detox for five days and an outpatient program for six months. I thought everything would be just fine as long as he didn't drink again! We had another child, a beautiful baby boy.

I went to Al-Anon meetings every week because a counselor from my husband's outpatient program looked me square in the eye and said, "Go to Al-Anon." I did what I was told to do, but I did it with an enormous amount of resentment—because he had a problem, not me.

I avoided speaking and never made eye contact with anyone. I ran as soon as the dreaded meeting was over.

Many times I thought about taking my own life. I came close only once—I had a loaded .357 Magnum in my hand. I quietly put it down, went into the bathroom, and vomited. It's only by the grace of my Higher Power that I didn't pull the trigger.

I hated myself but I didn't know why. For most of my marriage, it seemed that liquor was far more important to my husband than I was.

After three years of sobriety, my husband relapsed. Every few months he would drink; although he hid it well, I always knew. I would confront him. He would deny it but he would stop. A few months later we would go through the same thing.

We did this "dance" for seven years. By that time, I had stopped loving him. I could no longer distinguish the man from the disease. They had become one.

I got much-needed support at meetings, but more important, something changed inside me. Finally, I became committed to my own recovery for the first time. I was giving up my self-will, and truly turning it over.

I learned what "gut-level" honesty is about. That helped me to see who I am, and who I wanted to be.

I have forgiven my children's father who perfectly re-created my childhood for me every day of our marriage. Even now I gravitate toward people who can't be there for me. What's different today is that I recognize this tendency, and I'm better able to protect myself.

Today I can acknowledge that I'm a damaged but lovable, decent human being. I take delight in being able to say that about myself. I believe I can have serenity not in spite of my wounds, but because of them.

My journey of recovery will not end until I'm called home. In the meantime, what a wonderful thing it is to be able to see, hear, think, feel, love, laugh, hurt, cry, and learn whatever lessons for which I'm ready.

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The Forum, February 2009

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