

February 2022

Dear Loners

I would like to thank John for sharing his journey of self-discovery and the insights he has obtained along his way.

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My father could not get work in Scotland after the Second World War and we had to move to England away from any direct support from our large extended family. We lived in a third floor, rented apartment in a converted mansion sharing toilet and bathroom facilities with the second floor tenants. With three healthy children, and two that died during this time, I understand now that my parents were obviously feeling financial pressure. I did not know at the time that my father started working two jobs, lecturing at a local technical college in the evenings. I found him distant, uninvolved and not around a lot of the time. When he was around I remember him being quite controlling, doing for us, instead of teaching us to do for ourselves, and even putting us down and regularly comparing us to our cousins.

We emigrated to pre-Zimbabwe Rhodesia – even further from extended family – when I was ten. My mother decided to go to work as well, leaving my sisters and I totally unsupervised every afternoon and during school holidays. I really missed my mother subconsciously.

Then as a backdrop to this there was the Rhodesian way of life, certainly as my folks and their friendship circle understood it, sitting having sun-downers most if not every evening. This was my first awareness of alcohol introduced subtly as an acceptable way of interacting. With it though came the increased sense of distance. The adults were interacting with each other, not with me.

Over the years, particularly in high school, my schooling went downhill. In class, I was acting out a lot. I was the clown, but deep down I was feeling the emotional neglect and creeping depression. Again only in adulthood did I learn that this can be a typical behaviour in children; creating negative attention for themselves. I was developing a mask of guilt on the inside and a boisterous “I am an OK joking Jack!” attitude on the outside. The silent message from the adults was “just get on with it” and I was left to do just that, striving on my own to pull up my marks.

My mother smoked heavily and I realised only in adulthood as I came to understand her that she was smoking her anxieties away rather than sharing them. This was part of the distance I talk about. She did not share herself and missed the distress signals that were coming from me.

My parents drank regularly, but not heavily, sitting together having their sundowners and my mother smoking. I would hear them with their weekly gathering of friends discussing their favourite whisky or gin and tonic, and their favourite brand of cigarettes. This does not sound like it has anything to do with alcoholism or dysfunction; it was such a common way of life. For me though, it was the feeling of distance from adults and the initiation into alcohol and nicotine use as totally acceptable and healthy ways of living.

My schooling continued going downhill. I left school and home with poor qualifications, depressed and not having a clue about life, girls, relating, dating, looking for the right job, studying further or even that I needed to study further. I was a mixed-up kid who became a mixed-up adult, scratching around to find myself. But the difficulties emerged going into relationships when I grasped for the intimacy I had not found in my family. There was a subtle life skill which I did not have – being able to choose wisely when it came to friends and girlfriends.

The crucially central thing in my life has been meeting a really vibrant, sweet, loving, physically lovely girl, who could not have children. We married and we worked well on the childlessness. My wife had been working and asked me whether I minded if she did not work. I was happy with this at the time. Looking back now, I realise she was anxious about being in female environments and the topic of children coming up.

It was the childlessness thing that eventually ground us down, subtly. Both our families had followed the Rhodesian culture of sundowners. When visiting them both, alcohol was always in the conversation. With it there was that distance, that assumption that all was well, with no direct support or even query about how we were coping with the elephant in the room, the childlessness.

When I came home one day having forgotten something, I found my wife a good way through a bottle of wine. This became increasingly worse. We started with Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A); through them I discovered Al-Anon and then Al-Anon Adult Children (AAC). Going to that first meeting with my wife, I had a kind of exaggerated hope, expectation that everything would come right. I slowly accepted the programme and am increasingly experiencing its incredible value, including the concept of service.

During my working life, I became interested in psychiatry and psychology but in the background I did not know how to handle the deeper things of life, amongst them how to handle relationships. What I felt the whole time was a central need for people and for a strong, directed, supported self-parenting system. And I have that in the Al-Anon, A.A., AAC and Alateen programmes.

The vital principles I have learnt that “work if you work them” are: “Let It Begin With Me” and Step One and Step Two, admitting we are powerless over alcohol and effectively over life generally. And believing that a Power greater than myself can restore me to sanity.

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Thank you for sharing your journey with us John and for letting us know what aspects of the Al-Anon programme are working for you.

If you would like to send a share for possible publication in the Loners’ Letter, please forward your contribution to alanontvl@absamail.co.za with the subject “Loners’ Letter Submission”.

Tradition Seven: Every group ought to be self-supporting, declining outside contributions. If you would like to contribute towards our office expenses, our banking details are below. Thank you to everyone who contributes.

Best wishes

Clare

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