**Growing Up In a 12-Step Home**

My childhood wasn’t bad. All things considered, it would be petty to complain. I have a sister a year and a half older than me, and my parents are still married. I am now married with 4 children, live in a modest home in a nice little town and have a decent job. My sister hasn’t done quite as well; she floats jobs, often serving drinks in skid-row bars, and lives in places and neighborhoods that are beyond comprehension. Her two teenage sons live mostly with their father, which isn’t much better.

My parents now struggle financially, but they used to make a lot of money. Their income came from the “Recovery Movement”, and this was particularly profitable during the 1980’s.

At the peak of their financial success, they maintained an office with a staff (all people known via 12 step groups) and had a cleaning lady come in to the house weekly (also known via “The Program”). They marketed, produced and sold audio and video “training materials” geared toward addiction counselors. When I was in high school, a friend and I would go to the office right after school and stuff flyers into envelopes, which were sent out on a mailing list advertising the newest available materials.

Eventually, they put on their own conference, where addiction counselors would come from far and wide to sit through seminars and speakers, having paid, or having had their employers pay, hefty registration fees. Additional revenue was earned by selling the recorded seminars. This conference was an annual event until just recently, when declining registration forced it to end. In the latter years, other matters related to mental health were covered.

That’s a little about my parents, so let me go back to my childhood and recount some of my experiences growing up. I will undoubtedly make many observations about others, especially my parents, along the way. Before reading further, may I make it clear that I love them and do not blame them for anything, and genuinely appreciate all that they’ve done for me; whether it was good or not. I do know that they always tried to do what was right. That said, I do think there is a very strong connection with the culture in which I was raised and how it would shape behaviors into my young adulthood with “self-fulfilling prophesy”.

I will try to limit this writing to my experiences growing up in a 12 step environment, but might stray now and then...

I was around the age of ten when we had a family meeting. I remember sitting down at the kitchen table with my sister and my parents. I don’t recall very well what all was said, just that dad was going to quit drinking, and would be attending meetings. Furthermore, there were meetings for kids that my sister and I should intend. Either I or my sister inquired why. I do have a vague recollection of us being told that dad had an illness, and as a result of this illness, the entire family had been affected; as if we were somehow “sick”, but these meetings would help. Mom would go to Alanon, my sister and I to Alateen.

It was very confusing, because I had no idea that my father had a problem with his drinking. I can only recall seeing him stumbling drunk a couple of times, after parties, and he would usually have a scotch and water after work, but I don’t recall him drinking all evening. He had a quick temper and was never one to show affection, but that hasn’t changed to this day.

The meetings themselves I found boring, I would zone out most of the time, but it was something I always looked forward to. They utilize the same 12 steps as A.A., and now I find it down right appalling that these principles are taught to vulnerable kids (You are powerless. You are insane. You need to confess everything to another person.) There were a couple of girls I liked, and after the meeting everyone would go to McDonald’s. The Alateens would hang out in their own area and it did have its social pleasures. This went on for a few years or more.

Before any of this began, my father started his own business traveling to various conferences and seminars (nothing specific yet), and record speakers. He would have labels pre-printed for audio cassettes, and would travel with machines that could duplicate multiple cassettes within minutes. He would sell cassettes of the speakers on the spot, available within minutes of the speaker completing his presentation.

After my father joined A.A., his business was directed solely into the addictions field. This proved to be lucrative very quickly. As an adolescent and teen, I saw much of the country as the family would travel during the summer, working at various conferences. For this I am grateful. San Antonio, New Orleans, and Fort Lauderdale are just a few examples.

I began to notice that my parents were becoming highly judgmental. It became impossible for them to see someone drinking without making a comment. My mother was especially bad about this, and I remember her distinctly making a comment along the lines of: “I wonder how people that aren’t in recovery cope with anything, and I don’t mean just alcoholics. What a shame not to have a support group to keep you living right.” This struck me as wrong. What she was saying was is that addicts in recovery are far better off than any non-addicted normal people. Even then I found it peculiar that they believed addicted people had a disease but looked down on anyone who drank as making poor choices. I began to notice this pattern of thinking around me with a lot of people, as though they were privy to some sort of “special knowledge”. I would later be guilty of this myself.

My mother is a book by herself. Never proclaiming herself an addict (except once, when a stepper that thought she was showed disappointment to learn otherwise), she developed a strong following of weak-minded people in the recovery community that fed her ego enormously, and viewed her as some sort of guru.

By the age of 13, I had begun my experiments with beer and pot. I would say the reasons were two-fold: peer pressure from school and neighborhood friends, and maybe even more so, curiosity based on all of the people I had been exposed to through my parents and what was now their entire world. Their seemed to be a certain GLORY in being a recovering addict or alcoholic and I had heard plenty of entertaining war stories. Looking back, there is little wonder why I would be very curious to see what it would be like to get wasted and act out. In this little world, it seemed as though 12-step programs were a life necessity; anyone without them was simply lost, addicted or not. Surely there was a 12-step program that suited everyone; and if you weren’t involved in one, you were lost and in denial about something. My mother attended ACOA, though she was raised in a simple, yet loving blue collar home. My grandfather drank beer, but was a sweet gentle man and I know of no obvious “dysfunction” there. I think that the eighties were an interesting period of history in the recovery group and treatment center industry, as the phenomenon surely grew into a sub-culture on its own. No longer was anyone wishing to be anonymous, many people proudly wore it on their sleeves, seeking to “save” others much like Fundamentalist Christians or Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Around this time, while traveling in Texas, I disclosed to my parents that I had tried alcohol and pot a few times and felt bad about it. They did not scold me; rather embraced me and told me how proud they were for sharing this with them, and were genuinely gleeful that I would now also label myself an addict and attend meetings.

Yes you read that correctly. Few times = addict. Here I will raise a very disturbing point that I always realized, deep down: My parents would prefer having an addicted son in recovery as opposed to a son that was non-addicted.

To any rational person, this would seem sick. I doubt my parents would ever say such a thing outright, but it’s pretty obvious.

As I progressed in my teens, my experimentations continued. By my freshman year in high school, I was regularly cutting classes and running with a crowd that loved to drink and smoke dope. Friday nights were for drinking beer, no questions asked, and smoking weed was pretty much whenever we could sniff it out. It was smelled on me on occasion, but nothing too serious came of it.

Until shortly after I turned fifteen. A police officer stopped into my parent’s office to purchase a tape. My mother said that upon seeing him, she was immediately struck with an ill-feeling that I had gotten into major trouble. Despite this visit having nothing to do with me, it was decided right there and then that I would go to a treatment center.

I spent 60 days in a new low-cost facility; just for adolescent boys (it would later treat girls also). Most of the staffed was pretty inexperienced, and I got close to some of them quickly. It wasn’t too bad, we had no responsibilities related to school; the food was pretty good; we only had one or two group sessions a day that were often fun and never to intense; and would venture out a few times a week for an AA or NA meeting (The insurance companies and taxpayers shell out thousands of dollars per “patient” for this type of “treatment”). I became friendly with many in the NA meetings, including multiple people that I later found out had prior sex offenses against minors, and attended these meetings to look for fresh meat. Wasn’t this a lovely environment for an emotionally vulnerable teenager? (I was never abused sexually, but I did later find out about some of these people. I can locate some of them now on the Sex Offender Registry. I also witnessed some abuse, just didn’t see it for what it was at the time. People in their 30’s, 40’s and even 50’s have no business screwing teenagers).

One person I got to know during and after treatment by attending NA meetings was Dave M. Dave M. was 25 at the time, and definitely favored hanging around teens that were around my age, 15 or 16. He lived in a half-double in a pretty run down part of town but his place was pretty nice and was a hangout for a pretty large group. The teens in this circle really seemed to look up to Dave, and I admit I thought he was pretty cool at first. Dave had one particular male teen move in with and they developed a sexual relationship while both of them continued to get under the skirts of teen girls that came into the program. Some years later, when I was 19, I shared a townhouse for a few months with Dave M. and four other NA members, Dave was now closer to 30 years of age and would frequently entertain teens as young as 13, male and female, pursuing sexual relationships. We once walked in on Dave having sex with a 14 year old girl on the living room floor. A few of us expressed concern with his behavior, which he rationalized as having a lack of prospective sexual partners his own age. What really troubled me was that during this time, Dave gained employment at the same treatment center I had gone through years before as a “Tech” (not a counselor, but one that monitors activity, maintains order and keeps notes on the residents’ behavior). The center now treated adolescent boys and girls. He was eventually terminated for questioning decisions of the Director and landed a similar role in a group home for mentally challenged teens. I don’t know if he ever sexually abused any kids while they were in the center during his employ, but it certainly wouldn’t surprise me if he had, and if I were the parent of one of these kids, I would certainly want to know who I was entrusting to guide and care for them. I lost touch with him of course, but years later, Dave M. made the news as the leader of a homosexual prostitution ring that got busted and allegedly had a very embarrassing and prolific list of clients. He also found himself on the Sex Offender Registry for “inappropriate sexual contact with a minor”.

Back to my treatment stint: It was actually very emotional when I left the facility just before Christmas in 1985. I had formed some strong bonds…reflecting on this, a dependence on some of these people to validate me, to make me feel special, and to tell me what was wrong with me. For a time afterward, I would visit the center (not far from home) and continued with my NA meetings. I stayed in touch with a few of the kids I was in with, but not regularly.

I would later connect with and smoke weed with one kid that was in there. His name was Jeff, and he truly was from a bad home. He moved in with an NA member for a while about a mile south of where I lived. This person he lived with is one of many now questionable people as previously mentioned (but I seem to recall he died from AIDS). When he was 17, Jeff took his own life in a stand-off with the police. He was in the back of a van full of stolen items. The police tried to coax him out; instead he put a .22 to his head and later died in the hospital. His father refused to pay for a funeral.

Prior to this, I had made it to 90 days clean, 60 of which were in the treatment center. I remember when I “relapsed”. I was sitting in my bedroom alone, and I had a sudden compulsion to call a guy in the neighborhood. There was no confusion as to my motives, our relationship at that time was all about getting high, and we had never communicated about anything else. A short time later, I was at his house getting high. I largely justified this with being taught that I was “diseased” and “powerless”. Now I think that being in an environment when you’re still talking about drinking and drugging constantly is still letting those things control you.

Ironically, this person, who seemed so hopelessly addicted and seemed to have flushed his life down the drain, would later quit drugs completely on his own. He began developing health problems, and that was all it took. In later years we would become very close friends, and still stay in touch though not as often anymore.

The next couple of years were like living in two separate worlds. Due to my family pressures, I had to maintain some level of involvement with meetings and people involved, and keep any drinking or drugging secret. I would periodically commit to sobriety/being clean, but couldn’t really bring myself to sever ties with my school and neighborhood friends. As I kept that life a secret from the recovery world, I also kept my recovery world a secret from them. In retrospect, I had much turmoil in leading this “double-life”.

As I approached 17, I decided the turmoil was too much and committed myself to recovery, yet again. I voluntarily transferred to an alternative high school, which was a “last chance” for troubled teens that had been expelled from the city’s other public high schools. I probably would have found even more trouble rather quickly, had it not been for meeting Eric. Eric was sober over a year in AA, I about 6 months in mostly N.A. We became very close and it wasn’t long before we were inseparable. After school we would go to my parent’s office to stuff envelopes for their mass marketing mailings to the treatment industry, the rest of the time we hung out at an AA club. We went to a lot of meetings and were friendly with a lot of people, many of them young too. This period of my life in the program is the fondest. We had a lot of fun. Cars, girls, occasional fights and other trouble but we were sober.

Eventually the call of my old buddies came back and I was back to the double life. As Eric and I developed other friendships and were no longer going to school (we had both dropped out. Many teenagers in recovery then felt like they could have no ambition due to developing an “ex-con”-like mentality, a peculiar discussion for another time). I worked full time and partied every chance I got. My strongest urges to drink and use were often immediately following an interrogation from my parents, which of course were frequent.

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Between the ages of 20 and 25 I had 3 DUI's and multiple public intoxication arrests, the whole period is a drunken haze once I was out on my own (with an occasional in-between places/roommates). With every legal dilemma came plenty of scolding from my parents, and I had plenty of exposure forced on me by the courts. By now I simply resented it. I had no respect for it. The counselors and addiction treatment services that the court would refer me to were clearly about the money. One place didn’t even bother to provide any treatment or counseling if you didn’t want it. I was free to show up, pay for it and leave. That’s exactly what I did. When the system is putting you through the grind, they own you. Of course if you had money, many lawyers claimed they could make it disappear. Otherwise, you go through the machine. It’s all about money; if you can’t shell it out up front, you will over time.

As far as AA meetings went, I was given the “court cards” to have signed at meetings, but after all of the years I had spent in them, I was well aware that nothing could be verified. All I needed to do was look up the names and dates of meetings on the schedule, and my drinking buddies would sign it. I remember one particular probation officer looking at it funny, but what could he do? How could he prove it was bogus?

I ended up in “treatment” again during this era. While on probation for my second DUI, I got locked inside a night club I frequented and worked at part-time over a summer. I tripped the alarm, and despite one of the owners showing up explaining it was an accident and no harm was done, I was hauled off to jail for Public Intoxication. When I was released after a weekend, I came home to my parents (I was staying there at the time, though spent a lot of time sleeping on the couches of friends) and one of my buddies, whom my parents coerced in attending an “intervention”. I was told by both my parents and my friend, whom I frequently stayed with, that I was being completely disowned and cut off from any help, including a place to sleep, unless I immediately checked into a treatment center. Feeling rather defeated from a weekend in jail, not having a place of my own and basically no other options, I relented and agreed to go.

It was decided that I would go to a facility a couple of hours away because it was not a facility where you had to pay money (unless you had it and chose to) or have insurance. This facility had a workshop where “residents” labored in the manufacturing and distribution of pallets, or if you prefer, “skids”. The leadership declared that in addition to funding one’s “treatment”, this was also beneficial in getting residents in the habit of putting in a day’s work. After the first couple of weeks, which was to be spent in a more intense indoctrination period, ongoing treatment involved working in the shop eight hours a day.

Because of the cost factor, and the fact that some prisoners were transferred to it, this facility had a long waiting list, but of course my parents knew people. They had a friend they knew for many years who worked as an addictions counselor in this facility and were able to get me in immediately. It turns out that this friend of theirs was secretly drinking at this time, while maintaining his job counseling others to stop.

One of the first things they did upon my getting out of Detox (which was completely unnecessary for me, I was not having any physical withdrawal issues beyond normal hangovers when I drank) was drive us new residents to the town’s government office to apply for food stamps, which I never even saw, they assumed complete control over them and said that is how we were allowed to eat. This facility was a far cry from the place I was in as a teen, it was incredibly dogmatic and the staff treated us like spoiled children and maintained strict control. We spent most of the time in group sessions, where we had no choice to speak but anything you had to say was almost certainly going to result in a verbal beat down by the staff, always being told that we were in denial and had defective thinking. Growth and progress was apparently measured by how often one was driven to tears, which I never was. Having been around the block and knowing how the game is played, I think the counselors resented my presence from the start. The rest of the time we were allowed to sit in a common area but were constantly reminded to remain quiet. I think I recall being shipped out once for an AA meeting but they had meetings there where outside AA members came in. They also allowed a group of Evangelical Christians in to visit with us. We were forced to participate in this visit whether we wanted to or not.

The facility had a strict contraband policy and conducted searches in our sleeping area frequently. We were not allowed coffee as they considered it a stimulant (though there was a soda machine with caffeinated drinks and smoking was allowed) so I smuggled in some instant coffee at the suggestion and urging of one of the prison-transfers. I was caught with it and thrown out, much to my pleasure and amusement. My counselor prophesized destruction and despair for me, with smug satisfaction.

Shortly after I got out I was relating my experience in an AA meeting, after which a guy named Tracy, approached me after the meeting and said he wanted to help me with my struggles. I had met Tracy as a teen when I was regularly running around with my friend Eric when he first came into the program via a court order, and watched him quickly evolve into a slogan-parroting true-believer. I agreed to meet him at his apartment a day or so later, where he lectured me and then asked: “Well, am I your sponsor?” I agreed reluctantly.

Tracy insisted I call him twice a day, no exceptions, and drive to his apartment at least a few times a week. Tracy was very condescending now that he was my sponsor and was especially so anytime I relayed a frustration about anything, program related or not. One day, he took a phone call from a young woman he met in the program and was sweet on. He said something condescending to me while on the phone with her, clearly with the intent of prompting her to ask who he was speaking to. He then bragged to her that he was speaking to a “guy he sponsors”, and that he sponsored lots of guys. Clearly seeing that Tracy’s motives were more about his ego and image then they were helping anyone, which he wasn’t, I simply stopped going there or calling him. He tried to call me a few times but I didn’t respond.

I stayed sober a while but resumed to problem drinking after about 9 months, ultimately leading to my 3rd DUI and another grind through the system, including 11 months on home detention and forced counseling. This is the facility allowed me to just pay and leave at times. Despite the high costs, I was doing well enough in my job to have my own apartment and because of the home detention, didn’t spend nearly as much time with my old drinking and drugging friends. Over time they stopped coming around as often and my drinking pretty much stopped. I began to realize that my urges to drink were largely instilled in me from outside influences, including AA, my parents and the treatment machine, and maybe I didn’t have a “disease” after all. I was simply growing out of it.

I decided to grow up around the age of 26. I reconnected with a gal that is now my wife that I dated off and on throughout my teens (we met at one of the AA dances when I was 17, she was in Alateen). When my parents saw that the relationship was serious, they made it a point to pull her aside and “educate” her on my drinking problem, as they have done with many of my closest friends over the years.

My parents were of course, thrilled when I started going to AA again a few years into my marriage. I hadn’t been drinking much at all, maybe a few times a year at first, but would drink to intoxication when I did. Once I started having some success in my job after a long struggle, I began drinking beer consistently on weekends to “reward myself”. With the growing concern of my wife, I started going to AA meetings.

I often felt strong cravings to drink during and after meetings. Even more concerning was that I could not escape the familiar sights and sounds. The same thought-stopping slogans and clichés were still in abundance, and I grew increasingly frustrated listening to people whine about their self-inflicted problems, from a woman complaining that she had to go back to jail for violating her probation by drinking (which she felt wasn’t fair since she has a “disease”), to a guy complaining about a water heater breaking that was under warranty. I couldn’t get past the self-appointed gurus telling others they weren’t working a strong enough program and trying to impose control over them. I could no longer look past the constant flow of people shuffling in and out of the rooms with or without court-orders and the old-timers repeating the same jargon and slogans meeting after meeting as if it were ancient wisdom. In 25 years, nothing had changed. I ran into a few people that I knew in my teens and they had accomplished nothing in their lives other than clout for being “Old-Timers”. This included Tracy, who looked very sickly and died shortly thereafter around the age of 46.

Aside from the numerous “gurus”, there was a young lady that had a serious impact on me. She was a young single mother, probably in her late teens that had crossed over to AA after involvement in Alanon for a number of years. I assumed she was one of the many that never had an addiction but wanted the higher clout of being a recovering alcoholic in the recovery community. She had attempted suicide and was absolutely miserable following a confession session (fourth & fifth step) with another AA member and I realized that over the course of many years, I had known and seen many people in her state and that practicing the 12-steps was not the answer to her problems; it was the cause.

I have found that after years of absence from the 12-Step philosophy and mental conditioning, I am in a much better place. I don’t miss intoxication from alcohol or drugs, nor give it much thought. I am even perfectly capable of enjoying beer in a social setting on occasion without feeling any need to drink until I’m intoxicated. My program is to pursue other interests, it’s pretty simple. I hope people will increasingly look for their individual paths and not automatically accept that they need A.A, and do some critical research beyond following what “everybody knows”. AA harms a lot of people by teaching a lot of very bad information destructive prophesy.