

Expressing Motherhood

As a recovering alcoholic, I'll never use the past tense and say I'm recovered – and that's ok. This disease isn't like having the flu or a broken leg. The treatment for me, embracing recovery, is an on-going process, it's a journey - it's a way of life.

Alcoholism runs on both sides of my family. My Grandfather spiked his morning orange juice with vodka, my Grandmother had strategically hidden scotch bottles throughout her home. On the surface everything else seemed normal - no one talked about it - and although I would sometimes see other family members in tears, or overhear muffled arguments, or witness vomiting in the downstairs bathroom, no one ever openly discussed what was going on.

Both my parents drank socially, but my father's drinking progressed, and he did things and hurt people in ways I believe he wouldn't have otherwise. Those actions brought a lot of pain to my family, and my parents divorced as a result. In the words of F. Scott Fitzgerald : “the man took a drink, the drink took a drink, the drink took the man.” He was confined to a wheel chair for the last 10 years of his life severely compromised from a series of strokes and water on the brain – he died from a cataclysmic stroke 6 years ago.

Growing up, I was convinced my drinking would never become a problem. I never fathomed becoming an alcoholic. I also vowed I would never marry anyone who was married to their drinking. I dated a few guys who drank too much and a lot of my friends in college actually drank more than me. My drinking compared to theirs reassured me that I was fine. My former husband didn't have any drinking issues – but after we divorced, I again dated men who had serious drinking problems; and it got ugly. I turned into Florence Nightingale convincing myself I was ok as I was going to save them and get them sober. I snuck into a few AA meetings to find out what made them tick and “audited” a few Alanon meetings hoping to learn how to crack the code and get them to stop drinking. Little did I know, I was blossoming into an alcoholic right alongside them.

As a single mom, I was living in a charming little house in Greenwich, ran my own company, volunteered, sat on various committees, attended Book Club, played in a tennis group and had a beautiful little boy. On the outside you would have never known there was a problem. But just under the surface was the undertow of this disease – a strong current with a relentless pull.

What wasn't noticeable was that I drank at home almost every night. I drank at dinner parties and social events and was hungover at least 3x a week. Having a glass of wine had become my companion, my friend, a habit and something to look forward to and depend on.

When did I pass through the looking glass? When did my social drinking evolve into problem drinking? It was when unacceptable behavior became acceptable. When I began to do things that only problem drinkers or alcoholics might do. I drank to get over a hangover and when that didn't do the trick – I popped a Percocet. I drank on Sundays, I drank before 5pm. I drove with a “roadie” in the car with my son sitting next to me. I started craving alcohol.

But it was when the ability to take care of my son began to falter – **that got my attention. In fact, that frightened me.** I would pack his lunch box and put him on the bus in the morning and then crawl back into bed calling into work sick. At night, I would read him a bed time story with a glass of wine on the night stand and intentionally skip some pages so I could get on with my night. At the time I was also in a volatile personal relationship and by staying in that relationship I was exposing my son to things I would have never exposed him to – arguing, late nights, my being too hungover to play with him outside, unexplained behavior – and it all came rushing back to me.

I was doing to him what had been done to me. I swore I would never, ever, let the disease of alcoholism in – and I was the one who opened the door. For many mothers, if they won't get help for themselves – it's their child who somehow gives them a purpose – a reason to live. Whether that's our mothering instinct or God's Grace – it gave me a higher calling – a higher purpose.

Being a single mom in recovery was tough. I was going to meetings and on many occasions had to bring Jack Hayden with me – we called them my “feelings meetings.” I didn't have a husband I could lean on, my family was not nearby, and I couldn't always get a sitter. I would pack up his back pack with gold fish, a juice box and his plastic action figures, and have him sit in a hallway while I sat in a chair and listened. Everyone who I first got sober with knew my son. A man who had done time at Sing Sing was a favorite playmate along with a man who had been living on the streets of Costa Rica. We all had something in common – we were trying to stay sober a day at a time - and I trusted this group of people with my son like they were family.

After a full day of work, sometimes I would leave Jack to go to a meeting or because I had a service commitment. I will never forget when he said, “Mom, why do you always have to go to those meetings? It gets in the way of us spending time together.” That slayed me. But I was told that I would be a better mother – sober. I had to have faith that being sober, being present, being responsible was what my son needed in the long run.

Jack is now 28 and I have been sober for 20 years. I identify now more with my recovery than I do with my disease. My recovery is woven into my relationships and conversations with family members, friends and colleagues. In fact, I have just recently become a certified Recovery Coach Professional – recovery is now my profession.

Recovery is a process and takes willingness, commitment, humility, but most of all **courage**. While I know I haven't been a perfect mother, I do know I haven't harmed my child as a result of my drunken actions or the bad behavior that goes hand in hand with this disease – but frankly, it was a close call. Instead, my child saw me going to meetings, talk on the phone at odd times of the day, read literature and openly pray. At the end of the day, I rather him be exposed to that than to watch me pour myself another glass of wine, hear me throwing up, see me passed out in my clothes, overhear a midnight argument or wonder why I wasn't home yet because I was MIA.

Eugene O'Neill wrote, "Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The Grace of God is the glue." Sobriety is a God send – it is a gift – an opportunity to change. It's a recovery in mind, body and spirit. As a result of my sobriety, I am free to discover and strive to be the best person and mother I can possibly be. I am a grateful recovering alcoholic – why? Because this is the only disease whose remedy enables you to become a better person.

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