

My Al-Anon journey: From survival to living a healthy life

By Paul J., Nova Scotia

I'm constantly looking back on where I've been and why. What appeared as liabilities often turned out to be advantages. Growing up in an alcoholic family was such an example; it was most certainly a liability, until my recovery in Al-Anon turned it into a gift.

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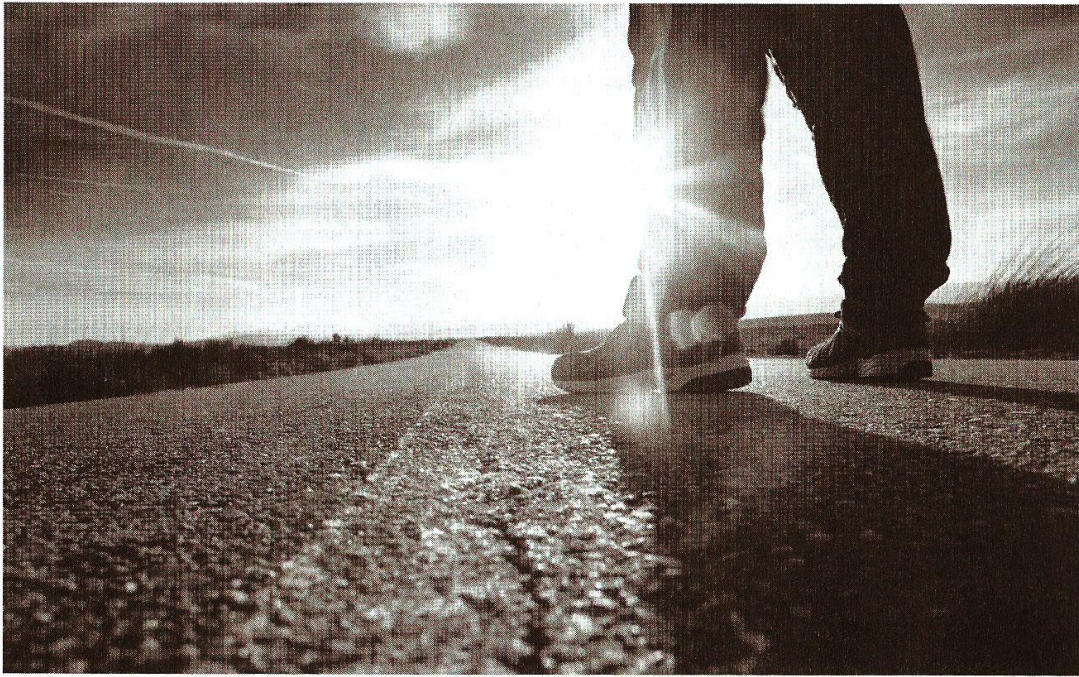
How well children learn is often spoken of in clichés, "They're like sponges," "blank slates," etc. In an alcoholic household, it's especially true. I grew up in the home of an unrecovered alcoholic father. He died from the disease. All of us in that family carried away knowledge of the disease, and in my case, I'm still learning from the experiences I had 50 years ago. Back then, I learned from my seven siblings and my mother (as well as my father) how to survive. My life in Al-Anon has been a journey of going past survival to living a healthy, rich life.

My childhood household was pleasant, until I reached high school. The life lessons I was taught were

those of a "war zone." We called my father "The General," and there was always confusion about which side he was on.

The first rule I learned, as a young child, was "don't get caught." My father's drunken tirades involved violence, the kind that no child should experience, so I learned about danger. I needed to hide and at times to run. With regard to the neighbors, (we lived in an urban setting), we were told that we didn't need to tell them anything, that it was "our family business." I later found out that the entire neighborhood knew almost every detail of the goings-on in our home, the visits by police, the bruises, etc., but it was a source of pity for me, which I learned to use. When someone would try to reach out beyond the pity, my family told me, "They don't understand what it's like in our home."

At the age of ten, I was a "master of espionage," being able to discover the alcoholic's hiding places for his bottles, or being the one who stood guard at the window to warn everyone of his arrival. I'm sure we kids made my father's craziness even more of a torment for him. No wonder I read so many *Hardy*



Boys books.... The antics around our house were the stuff of outrageous comedy and tragedy. I recall spying into neighbors' windows at mealtimes, to see how normal people ate. Even now, I can get a sore side laughing, or shed tears of sorrow, at the ridiculous scenes that unfolded in our home. I tried to keep my childhood idealism as long as I could, but didn't know what real maturity was until I was in my thirties. In any case, I was taught that all unfortunate things in my life flowed from my father's drinking.

So going into adolescence, I carried the lessons that I was to be pitied, that I could lie when I felt trapped, that I could escape anything that was scary or unpleasant by running away or hiding, that danger was something I could tolerate, and that sometimes you just have to be alone and scared. A few other things were taught as well,

things like it was okay not to eat a meal sometimes, if it was dangerous...same goes for sleeping, brushing teeth, bathing, even toilet necessities were relatively flexible, and could be put off in an emergency. Later, I learned just how flexible the word "emergency" could be. I learned nothing about how to live a healthy life or have normal relationships.

In my first years away from home, in my late teens, I associated with people, places, and things that were not good for me. My guard was up all the time, and no one was going to catch me. It didn't occur to me that people were afraid of *me*. I had little trouble landing jobs because I was so good at lying. If no job was at hand, I'd find other, less legal, ways of making money. In my head, the laws of society didn't apply to me, because "they don't understand what it was like in my home."



I knew little of trust or responsibility. I've come to believe that the only reason I didn't end up in prison at that time was that God had other things in mind for me.

The lessons I learned at that time involved how I was scaring others—even people that I didn't want to scare. I grew more and more isolated. One day, I met the pastor of the church in front of which I used to sell drugs. He was gracious and friendly with me. He suggested that I might have some other path in life besides my current one. In short,

he connected me with the Twelve Steps, and a program down the road. Because he was so friendly, I decided to give it a try. After all, there wasn't much I couldn't handle...

Within two years, I had a job that I was proud of, a relationship about which I cared, and friends who weren't criminals. It was the beginning of my new path. But the tremendous isolation of growing up in my alcoholic home left many things unlearned: how to respect my own feelings, how to respect my

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