

EMPTY ON THE INSIDE

She grew up around A.A. and had all the answers—except when it came to her own life.

I SPENT MY LIFE “acting as if”—either acting as if I knew (I didn’t ask teachers questions in school; they might find out I didn’t know the answer) or acting as if I didn’t care. I always felt as though everyone else had been given the directions to life and I had been somewhere else when God was handing them out. To me, you either knew how to do something or you didn’t. You could play the piano, or you couldn’t. You were a good ballplayer, or you weren’t.

I don’t know where I learned the attitude that it wasn’t all right not to know, but it was a certainty in my life, and it almost killed me. The concept of set a goal, work for the goal, achieve the goal was foreign to me. You either “had it” or you didn’t, and if you didn’t, you couldn’t let on—you might look bad. I never once stopped to consider that others might really have to work hard for what they had. Gradually my attitude translated into contempt for those who did know—leave it to an alcoholic to look down on someone who is successful!

My father joined Alcoholics Anonymous when I was seven. Many of my childhood Friday nights were spent at open A.A. meetings because we couldn’t

afford a babysitter (I was the kid sitting over in the corner with a book). What effect did it have? I knew that being alcoholic meant you couldn't drink any more and that you had to go to A.A. As my drinking career began, I was always careful not to utter the "A" word in connection with my name. At my house I would have been handed a meeting schedule. Besides, I knew that A.A. was all old guys that drank coffee, smoked, and ate donuts—I had been there. (Looking back, I'm sure most of those "old guys" were barely thirty.) So no A.A. for me. That would mean not drinking. And when I drank, life changed.

I was fifteen the first time I got drunk. I can tell you where I was, who I was with, what I was wearing. It was an important day for me. Within a year I was a poster child for adolescent treatment of alcoholism. My grades plunged, my friends changed, I wrecked a car, my appearance went downhill, I was suspended from school. (When I first got sober, I wondered why my parents never checked me into treatment. Then I remembered they didn't have adolescent treatment centers when I was a teen. As a matter of fact, I still have ceramics Dad made me in the psychiatric ward, because when *he* was drinking, they didn't have treatment centers.) I was always ready with a promise to do better, to try harder, to apply myself, to live up to my potential. Potential—now there is the curse of every budding alcoholic.

I managed to graduate somehow and went on to college, where I promptly flunked out. I couldn't make it to class. Hindsight has shown me two reasons for this. First, if someone else had a free period, I tagged along with them. I thought that I had to be

with my friends all the time. I was afraid that if they spent any time without me, they might begin to wonder, Why do I hang out with her anyway? They might realize they had a better time without me. And then they might tell other people, who would tell other people, and I'd be alone.

Second, social conversation was a skill that I never acquired. When I met someone, I felt totally inadequate. To me, when I said "Hi, my name is _____," there followed a deafening silence, as if they were thinking, So? How did people have conversations anyway? How did they meet and then begin to talk as if they had known each other for years? For me it was one more thing that it wasn't all right not to know. So I kept drinking. When I drank, it didn't matter.

It's important to interject here that I loved to drink. Drinking put me into the middle of life. I was a social drinker—drinking made me extremely social. I didn't particularly like drinking with other women; I drank with the big boys. I always had a tremendous capacity for alcohol, and I learned to shoot an excellent game of pool, which made me quite popular in the local tavern scene. At one point I even had my own motorcycle. When I read "Bill's Story" in the Big Book and he said, "I had arrived," I knew what he meant.

For fourteen years my drinking took me places I never meant to go. First I moved south, since I knew the town I grew up in was my problem. (I once heard a guy remark in a meeting that there are three or four states that should just post signs on their borders: "This state doesn't work either!") I did the things women do. My first marriage was really a one-night

stand that lasted five years—I certainly couldn't admit that I had made a mistake. We had two children and I wanted out, but to leave would have meant taking responsibility. I just drank until he threw me out. Then it was his fault the marriage failed.

At one point before moving home, I lost a job that meant a lot to me, as the direct result of my drinking. For the first time, I went to a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous and said, "I am an alcoholic." When I had gone to meetings with my dad I always just said, "I'm with him." I called my father and told him I went to a meeting. Within a week he mailed me a box containing the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, a tape of his A.A. talk, a couple of meditation books, a copy of *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, and a few other odds and ends. I think he had been saving up for the day I was willing.

So, divorced, I moved back home. Within a year I was under arrest for child endangerment. I had left my sleeping children home alone and gone to drink. They were removed from my custody and placed with my mother. Then started my rounds of the treatment centers. I could talk a good game. After all, I had grown up with A.A. I was the one the counselors asked to talk to other women who were reluctant to leave their kids long enough to go into treatment. I could give the whole speech: "We can't be good mothers if we're not sober." The problem was, inside, I was relieved that my kids had to live with my mom. It was too hard to be a parent. But I couldn't tell people that—they might think I was a bad mom.

And I *was* a bad mom. I was a terrible mom. No, I didn't beat them, and of course I told them I loved

them. But the message my kids got from me was “Yes, I love you; now go away.” They had to be practically invisible in their own home. I had absolutely nothing to give them emotionally. All they wanted was my love and attention, and alcoholism robbed me of the ability to give it. I was empty on the inside.

While I was in treatment, my dad died and I inherited almost enough money to kill myself. I got to drink the way I wanted to for 2½ years. I’m sure I got here faster because of it.

Near the end, I was living in an attic apartment; the money was long gone. It was November, cold and gray. When I woke up at 5:30, it was gray outside. Was it 5:30 a.m. or 5:30 p.m.? I couldn’t tell. I looked out the window, watching people. Were they going to work? Or coming home? I went back to sleep. When I woke again, it would either be light or dark. Opening my eyes, after what seemed like hours, it was only 5:45. And gray. I was twenty-eight years old.

I finally got on my knees and asked God for help. I couldn’t go on the way I was living. I had been in the apartment since August and hadn’t bothered to unpack. I wasn’t bathing. I couldn’t answer my phone. I couldn’t show up on weekends to visit my kids. So I prayed. Something made me go dig through a box, and I found the Big Book my father had sent me years earlier (I always tell new people to buy the hardcover version—for some reason they are harder to throw away). I read “Bill’s Story” again. This time it made sense. This time I could identify. I slept, holding the book like a teddy bear. I woke up feeling rested for the first time in months. And I didn’t want to drink.

I would love to tell you that I have been sober ever

since, but that is not the case. I didn't want to drink that day, but I took no action to insure against it. You see, I believe that we get more than one "moment of grace" from God—but it is up to us to seize the moment by taking action. But I heeded the voice that said, "You may as well drink. You know you're going to."

For the next few days every time I went to my favorite watering hole, I was surrounded by people talking about sobering up. My bartender wanted to quit drinking. The guy I was shooting pool with talked about going back to A.A. Someone next to me at the bar was talking about being at the local clubhouse for A.A.'s. I did stop drinking (sort of) for a few months but eventually went on the bender that would end it all.

By the end of two weeks of drinking, nobody was speaking to me, so I headed south, where I was sure they all missed me. There was no homecoming parade. People barely remembered me, and by the end of a week, I was out of money. I couldn't even book a plane ticket home. I had less than one dollar, and I had one of *those* hangovers. I knew if I tried to sit in the airport bar long enough for someone to buy me a drink, it would be obvious that was my intent, and my pride couldn't bear the thought of being asked to leave. I briefly considered mugging a little old lady and stealing her purse, but I knew I would end up picking on the one who was still in shape.

If there had been one more dollar, I might not be sober today. Once I was drinking, I always had a plan, but that day, by the grace of God, I was out of plans. I didn't have one single better idea. I called Mom, told

her where I was, and asked her to fly me home. She later told me she almost didn't do it, but she was afraid they'd never see me again.

She deposited me at the local detox center, where she told me I could go in or not but that she was done with me. I was on my own. Detox gave me the same message. I thought they should send me on to a treatment center—thirty days of hot meals and rest was sounding pretty good to me—but they told me I already knew everything treatment was going to teach me, that I should go do it and save the bed for someone who needed it. I have been sober ever since. I was finally accountable for my own recovery. I was responsible for taking the action. One of my favorite games had always been making it someone else's job to see that I got my work done. That game was over.

I had never expected to live to see thirty. Suddenly I was 29½ and showing no signs of dying anytime soon. I knew in my heart that I would live whether I drank or not, and that no matter how bad it was, it could always get worse. Some people get sober because they're afraid to die. I knew I would live, and that was far more terrifying. I had surrendered.

The first night out of detox I went to a meeting, and the woman speaking commented that alcoholism had taken her to the point where she didn't want to work and didn't want to care for her daughter, she just wanted to drink. I couldn't believe it! That was me! She became my first sponsor, and I came back.

The second night I sat in what I now call the "new guy chair"—second row, against the wall (if you sit in back they know you're new, and if you sit in front you might have to talk to someone). When it came time to

hold hands and pray at the end of the meeting, I had no hand to hold on one side. I remember thinking “I will never fit in here” and hanging my head. I felt my hand being taken—someone in front of me had taken the time to be sure that the circle was complete. To this day I don’t know who it was, but that person is the reason I came back the next night—that person saved my life. And I kept coming back.

The local clubhouse had a noon Big Book meeting every day, and I went, every day. Not to get sober, mind you, and certainly not to learn about what was in the book. Here was my thinking: I knew you were supposed to read your Big Book every day, and they went around the room reading an entire chapter, so that should count, right? This also took up nearly thirty minutes, so it was less likely that I would get called on to talk. And the meeting was at noon, which left my nights free. I figured out all of that with my keen alcoholic mind!

Luckily, I forgot that God is in charge of results. I was finally taking action, and my motives didn’t matter. I thought I’d go through the Big Book once, then “graduate” to discussion meetings, but there was a lot of laughter in that room, so I kept going. I was not one of those people who walked into meetings and said, “Thank God, I’m home.” I did not particularly want what they had; I just didn’t want what I had anymore—that was the humble beginning I needed.

The convenience of the noon meeting meant that I went to two meetings every day; I had nothing else to do at night. I began to notice people there with several years of sobriety—my own laziness had thrown me in with some of the most active people in

Alcoholics Anonymous. What I found out was that people who attend Big Book meetings on a regular basis tend to read the book and do what it says.

When I was two weeks sober, a man's nine-year-old daughter was killed by a drunk driver, and three days later he was at a meeting saying he had to believe it wasn't for nothing. That maybe one alcoholic would get sober because of it. As I left that day, I found myself wondering what would have happened if that had been my kids, or me? What would they remember about me? A feeling came over me (I know now it was gratitude), and I realized that I could call my children right then and tell them I loved them. That I could show up when I said I would. That my word could be worth something to them. That even though I might always just be "mom who comes over on the weekends," I could be a good weekend mom. I had a chance to move forward with them, forging a relationship built on a foundation of God and Alcoholics Anonymous, rather than always trying to make up for the past. One year later I was able to share with that man that maybe it hadn't been for nothing, because my life changed that day.

By the time a month passed, my feet were firmly planted in Alcoholics Anonymous. And I kept coming back. I cannot begin to list all the wonderful things that have happened in my years here. My kids were four and six when I got sober, and they have "grown up" in A.A. I brought them to open meetings, and the people there gave them what I couldn't in the early days—love and attention. Gradually they became part of my life again, and today I have custody of my children.

I remarried in Alcoholics Anonymous, to a man who believes in A.A. the way I do. (I knew we were off to a good start when he didn't get angry that I stood him up to go on a Twelfth Step call.) We agreed to never be higher than third on each other's list, with God always first and Alcoholics Anonymous second. He is my partner and my best friend. We both sponsor several people, and our house is filled with love and laughter. Our telephone never stops ringing. We share the joy of a common solution.

We have had some tough times. Our son is the third generation of A.A.'s in my family. After a suicide attempt at age fourteen, we found out he too was an alcoholic. After his one year in A.A., it's hard to tell what will happen, but we trust Alcoholics Anonymous, even on the days we don't trust our son. Our daughter is a beautiful, confident teenager who has found her own path to God without having to drink. She is the product of the love and faith of Alcoholics Anonymous.

I still have a sponsor and a home group today. I am a member of Alcoholics Anonymous in good standing. I learned how to be a good A.A. member by watching good A.A. members and doing what they do. I learned how to have a good marriage by watching people with good marriages and doing what they do. I learned how to be a parent by watching good parents and doing what they do. And I finally have the freedom of believing that it is all right not to know.