

GROWING UP WITH AN ALCOHOLIC MOTHER

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This narrative describes the author's experience as an only child raised by an alcoholic mother. The narrative explores the experience of growing up feeling ignored and unimportant, and how her experiences led to the empathy, compassion, and understanding she now feels for the clients she works with as a student of social work.



I was born into sadness in 1950. My grandfather died while my mother was pregnant with me. My mother said that he had a stroke after learning he had lost a lot of money on a bet he placed on a horse race. He was a compulsive gambler. That left my grandmother alone and my mother feeling guilty that she had not kissed him during her last visit with him just before he died in the hospital. She was still angry with him for something he had said to her many years earlier and she had vowed never to kiss him again. I came into this world with the responsibility of making everyone feel better, a big job for a little baby.

My family lived in South Central Los Angeles. Most of our neighborhood was African American and we were one of the few white families. For the most part, it was quiet and there was little crime. Our houses were small and shabby and we were poor but had food to eat, and I wore clothes sewn by my grandmother (she worked in a sweat shop when I was very young). We lived in two houses on one lot. My aunt Clarice and her two sons, Richard and Jimmy, lived in the house in the front. Her husband, Dick, died of a stroke in 1955. I lived with my mother and grandmother in the house in the back, the only child in a house of two women.

My father did not live with us but he visited occasionally, and when he did, he didn't seem interested in me. He might bring me a

doll or toy but he spent most of his time with my mother. I usually felt like I was in the way, an annoying by-product of their relationship. During one visit my father made to our home when I was four or five years old, my mother and father began arguing; I have no idea what they were arguing about, but they were sitting on opposite sides of the living room and not speaking to each other. I was upset by their behavior and I wanted to help. I went to each one individually and asked if they loved the other. They each said yes and I took each of them by the hand and brought them together. I felt a great sense of accomplishment. I guess I began doing social work at a very young age.

Later, on another visit from my father when I was five or six, I asked him what his job was, and he said that he worked with electricity. When I asked what electricity was, he said, "I'll show you what electricity is," and started pulling me over to an electrical outlet. My mother was laughing. I was scared and kept pulling away from him. I wanted my mother to help me but she didn't. I finally got away from him and ran to her. She said, "He wouldn't have hurt you," but I didn't believe her. He didn't look at me with love in his eyes. I didn't trust him and I thought he was cruel. I felt betrayed by my mother. I thought she should protect me, but she didn't. I had to protect myself.

When I was older, my mother told me another story that exemplified my father's cruel and sadistic nature. She and my father were dancing at a nightclub one night, and the couple dancing next to them fell down on the dance floor. Instead of helping them up, my father started kicking them. My mother was baffled by his behavior and had no idea why he would do such a thing. I didn't understand why she would want to be with someone like that. She seemed to be in denial about what kind of a person he really was.

My mother later told me that my father had another family, his legal family. He was a bigamist. He married my mother when she became pregnant with me although he was already married to someone else with whom he had five children. My mother claimed that she didn't know he was already married, but it is hard to imagine that she was so unaware. Again, she may have needed to deny the situation.

October 12, Columbus Day, 1957, was the date that changed my life and the lives of my family forever. My world fell apart. Aunt Clarice's oldest son, Richard (my cousin), was twenty. He was in the Army and had just married a young woman named Irene. The Army transferred him to Fort Hood, Texas, and early in 1957 he and Irene had moved to Texas. Aunt Clarice missed Richard very much and arranged to take an automobile trip to visit him. My mother did not approve of my aunt driving to Texas because she thought it was too expensive, and she didn't think that Aunt Clarice should take so much time off from work. My mother was angry when my aunt decided to go anyway. During the trip it rained and the roads were slick. One evening a few days after Aunt Clarice left home, my cousin Richard called my grandmother. He said, "Grandma, you'd better sit down." He told her there had been a car accident and that my aunt had been killed. My family was consumed with sadness. I was lonely, confused, and frightened. I did not understand

what had happened and nobody explained it to me. I just knew that everyone was very unhappy.

When Aunt Clarice's belongings were shipped home, her gray flannel coat was caked with mud. I wondered if she was wearing it during the accident and tried to imagine what it must have been like when the accident happened. I conjured up horrible, frightening images of the car skidding in the rain, screams coming from the car, and bodies strewn on the wet pavement. I tried to ask questions but no one wanted to talk about the accident. For a long time after, I sensed that everyone close to me was in pain and did not want to hear from me or relate to me in any way. It seemed to me that I did not exist for them. From this I learned at an early age that my feelings did not count; instead I needed to respond to everyone else's feelings. I did not want to say anything that might cause pain for my family or upset anyone, and that the best thing was not to bring up anything about my aunt or the accident. Now there were two important things that I could not talk about: my father and my aunt.

Clarice's funeral was on a Tuesday. The church was overflowing with people; some were standing in the back of the church and some outside. My father was there; I sat between my mother and father. At the end of the service, we walked past the casket and looked at my aunt lying there. My mother was ahead of us and as she walked to the back of the church, she broke down and sat on a bench with her head in her hands sobbing. I tried to run to her to comfort her, but my father held onto my hand and wouldn't let go. Unable to get away from his grip, I remember being angry and looking up at him. My glare was met with his own angry look back at me. I will never forget the way he looked at me that day; it almost seemed that he hated me; there was no love there for me. I felt powerless to help my mother or anyone else in my family.

A feeling of helplessness stayed with me for many years.

After my aunt's death, my mother was absorbed in her own grief and didn't talk about what happened. My grandmother was heartbroken about losing her oldest daughter. My mother, for the second time in her life, felt tremendous guilt about not letting go of her anger and then losing someone she loved. She was angry and bitter and had again lost someone close to her. It was around this time that my mother started drinking.

In 1957, after my aunt's death, my parents divorced. After that, I never saw my father again. He didn't contact us and he didn't provide any support. I thought it was my fault that my parents weren't together because my father didn't like me. I thought that they might be together if it wasn't for me.



It was humiliating for me not to have a father. In the 1950's it was very uncommon for people to be divorced, and I think I might have been the only child in my class at school who did not live with both parents. There was a stigma attached to divorced women. They were viewed with disdain and contempt, not approved of like the stereotypical 1950's housewife that I desperately wanted my mother to be. When other children asked me about my father, I would simply say that I didn't have a father. That usually stopped any further conversation, but I felt a lot of shame about not having both parents.

My mother's drinking began this way. One night shortly after my aunt's death, we were eating dinner and my grandmother

noticed that my mother had been in the bathroom for a long time. She started calling out, but my mother didn't answer. My 17-year-old cousin Jimmy, Clarice's son, was living with us at the time. He started calling out to her and banging on the bathroom door, but there was still no answer. I was frightened and I couldn't imagine what could have happened to my mother. Jimmy began yelling that if she didn't open the door, he would break it down. When she finally opened the door, it was apparent that she had gotten drunk and vomited on the bathroom floor. She was embarrassed and didn't want anyone to see. I thought that she must be sick. This was the first time that my mother was drunk, as far as I knew.

My mother wasn't the kind of alcoholic who went to bars or who drank to the point of passing out. She went to work every day, maintained a home for my grandmother and me, and paid her bills on time. But she came home every evening after work and drank at least half a bottle of wine and slowly sank into the couch to become emotionally unavailable, distant, and invisible. It was as if she melted into the furniture. I couldn't interact with her and if I tried to talk to her, she often became irritable and made it clear that she wanted to be left alone. As a result, my impression is that I raised myself. Thankfully, my grandmother was there, at least sometimes. She also drank wine with my mother but it didn't seem to have the same effect on her. Her mood was not affected in the same way that my mother's was. For example, once in high school when I was not accepted into a girl's club, I came home devastated. I tried to hide how I felt but my grandmother knew something was wrong. When I told her what had happened, she comforted me and said that the same thing had happened to Clarice when she was in high school. I still remember how good it felt to be comforted.

I also found comfort in television shows like *The Donna Reed Show*, *Father Knows Best*, and *Ozzie and Harriet*. These families always got along with each other and resolved any problems that they had within a half-hour. I wished my family was like theirs and fantasized that things would be much better if I had a different family.

I tried to be a good, responsible daughter: helping with chores around the house like cleaning and laundry, being a good student, hoping that if I was good enough my mother would give me the love and attention that I wanted. Somehow, I hoped our family would become like those that I admired on television. Of course that didn't happen. It took a long time for me to realize that no one has a family like those on television. Having two parents didn't mean that everything was good. Years later, I learned that one of my closest friends had been molested by her father, and I began to think that maybe there were some benefits to my family.

As I got older and more independent, my mother's drinking increased. Her mood became more unpredictable and she became violent. I came home from a date once when I was nineteen and my mother was waiting up for me. She was angry that I had stayed out so late and she started hitting me. At first, I endured it, as I had endured everything. Then I realized that I had done nothing wrong and did not deserve this treatment. I took a stand to defend myself, raised my arms to block her from hitting me, held her hands so that she couldn't hit me. She eventually gave up and went off to bed. I remember being so hurt and disappointed that she behaved this way. I did not want my mother to be like this. I wanted a mother that I could talk to and who cared about me. I began to realize that she was not going to change and seemed to be getting worse. However, I didn't really see her as having a drinking problem. I thought she was upset because I was becoming older and more independent and she did not have

the same level of control over me that she had once had.

I finally made the connection between my mother's behavior and her drinking when I was twenty-one years old. My first boyfriend and I were lounging on the sofa watching television one Friday night. It was late and my mother came home from a work party where she had obviously been drinking. She went into a rage when she saw us and began accusing us of having sex. After a few minutes of ranting, she stumbled off to bed. I was baffled by her behavior and turned to my boyfriend and asked, "What just happened?" He simply said, "It's the alcohol." I was stunned by his assessment, but he had seen that behavior before and understood. He had grown up with an alcoholic father who regularly came home in a rage and abused his family. When he saw my mother's behavior, he understood. For me, it was an eye-opening experience.

Having a boyfriend was wonderful for me. He was the first person in my life who thought I was beautiful and wonderful. He made me feel so special. I was starved for this kind of positive attention. He was like a knight in shining armor that had come to rescue me from my evil mother.

Eventually, my boyfriend became my husband. Because I had not witnessed what a healthy relationship was, I had not learned how to choose an appropriate mate. He came from a background similar to mine and seemed to love me very much. It was time for me to get away from my mother, and getting married seemed like the perfect opportunity. My mother liked him but did not think he was good enough; she thought there must have been a better mate for out there for me. But he made me feel special and loved, and I didn't want to give that up. I felt that my mother was jealous and did not want me to be happy. Even though she did not approve, we married when I was twenty-one.



My pattern of trying to be good and responsible continued as I tried to be the perfect wife. I did things that my husband enjoyed even though he never reciprocated. My husband enjoyed fishing, bowling, golfing, and hunting, and I attempted to show interest in those things. We went fishing together a few times but I thought it was dull and boring. We purchased bowling balls and joined several bowling leagues, but I really did not like to bowl. We played golf together at courses that were short enough for me to hit the ball a reasonable distance and be within range of the green, but eventually that was not enough of a challenge for him. We did not go hunting together – I would not do that. My belief was that my husband would continue to love me if I did the things he enjoyed. Feigning interest in these activities eventually became a burden. We had different likes and interests; there was little we enjoyed together.

In addition, my husband also seemed to have a problem with alcohol. Like my mother, he went to work every day, earned a good salary, and appeared on the surface to be a good husband. Unlike my mother, he was a binge drinker. If we attended a party, he would drink so much that he would usually vomit and pass out. I never really witnessed him drinking that much but all of a sudden he would be sick and it would be time to leave the party. At the time, I wondered why he couldn't just have a few drinks like the other husbands, but it did not occur to me that he might be an alcoholic.

Things really changed for me one night about five years into our marriage. We had been out with friends during the day and on the way home we stopped for dinner, and my husband had a few drinks. When we got

home, we went into the back yard to check on the dog. The dog tried to jump up on me and I dodged her so that she would not get me dirty. She fell down and my husband became enraged and knocked me into a brick planter on our patio. My mother and a friend of ours were there and they both witnessed my husband's violence. My mother stepped up to him and said, "Don't you ever touch her again." Finally I had some support from my mother! Our friend was in shock and just stood there. I was hurt and angry and wanted to leave. My husband offered to leave instead. I didn't want him to come home but he was not gone for long. When I told him I wanted him to apologize, he defended himself by saying that I had caused the dog to fall. He obviously believed that he had done nothing wrong. For me, the marriage was over. In my mind I had divorced my husband that night; however, we continued to stay married for another seven years. I didn't want our marriage to end in divorce and I kept hoping that things would improve, but they didn't. His drinking continued and I learned to dodge him when he was violent. The greatest benefit of my marriage was giving birth to my beautiful daughter in 1982, who has been my joy and the light of my life. My husband and I divorced when she was a year old because I did not want him in her life every day. By the time our divorce was officially final, I felt no love for him and was glad it was over. I was tired of sacrificing myself.

It has been a slow process, learning to love and care for myself. I have had several relationships since divorcing, always looking for something outside of me to fill the emptiness inside. I have always been afraid of being alone. For the most part, my relationship choices were unwise. In some way my partners always had aspects that resembled my mother or grandmother, and it seems that I tried to resolve the issues from my childhood through my adult relationships. It was difficult to express my real feelings

fearing my partner would not love me and would abandon me. Relationships usually lasted much longer than they should have before I could summon the courage to end them. Fear was my motivation. In each relationship, there came a point when I could no longer endure the betrayal of my own needs.

After several failed relationships, I began to search for reasons why I made poor choices in relationships and for ways to make changes. I began to attend workshops and twelve step meetings for adult children of alcoholics. I became very interested in the effects of alcohol and drugs and attended classes on the subject at a local community college, saw a therapist for many years, and ultimately obtained a certificate in alcohol and drug counseling. After much self-examination, I started to see the effects of alcohol on my family and on my current life. I learned that I was not alone and that many people suffer the negative affects of alcohol on their families. I talked with other adult children from alcoholic families and found that we have many things in common. We have a difficult time trusting others; we do not talk easily to others about our lives; and it is difficult for us to have unpleasant feelings. We don't always follow the same path in life, but we usually are motivated by fear and carry a lot of guilt.

I am now able to see my family as human beings who did the best they could. My mother did not intentionally harm me; she was flawed and raised me based on what she thought was right. In her later years, she apologized for not being the best mother. I still struggle sometimes to forgive her. Forgiveness is a constant process of letting go. Sometimes I remember something about her that makes me angry or hurts me. However, holding onto old hurts and anger is only damaging to me. I try to remember that she loved me and did the best she could. I also strive to accept the effects of my upbringing and allow myself to be the best I can be without being perfect.

Despite her flaws, my mother was a strong and independent woman, and I learned to be strong and independent by the example she set. I am responsible, have held a good job with the same organization for over thirty years, and I own my own home. My daughter is beautiful, intelligent, and well adjusted. At twenty-four, she recently graduated from college and will soon attend graduate school. I am proud of her and proud of my ability to be a good parent.

I think I have always looked for mother and home, hoping that someone or something else could make me whole. I have come to realize that exterior things and people cannot fill the emptiness I feel inside. Loving and caring for me and becoming my own good parent are the only ways that I know to fill the empty place inside of me. I would like to help others discover their own loving parent inside of them. I am compassionate and understanding. I empathize with others' feelings and understand what they have been through because I have been through some of the same things. Because I have personal experience with alcohol in the family, as well as considerable knowledge about the subject, I believe that I can help other families.

Growing up in an alcoholic home was not my dream childhood, but I have learned to accept what I have been given. Sometimes I wish I had accepted it earlier in life. However, I realize that the journey of self-discovery is never ending and necessary for growth. I know that I would not be the person I am today if I had not endured the experiences that I had. Those experiences were necessary for me to see the positive and negative aspects of life and to become a truly self-aware individual.

I realized that I wanted to help others, which led to my enrollment in the Masters of Social Work (MSW) program at Cal State Long Beach, and I will soon earn my MSW. I chose social work because I have grown stronger as a result of my experiences and

believe that I can help others do the same. Learning about the disease of alcoholism and its effects on the family has helped me to realize that I have something valuable to contribute to others. People with problems need someone to listen and that is one of my strengths. There are those who still struggle and need an advocate. Some are victims of discrimination and abuse; others suffer with their own demons. Their problems might be similar to mine or they might be entirely different. Whatever their problems, they can be shown kindness, compassion, and hope. I can advocate for those unable to do that for themselves. My clients' lives may be difficult, but I can help by recognizing and encouraging their strengths and showing them that change is possible. They can be helped to discover their own self-reliance and self-acceptance and work toward self-advocacy. I can help empower them and encourage them that life can be better. I understand my clients' struggles. It does not matter whether I have been through the same experiences as my clients; I feel empathy for them and their struggles and offer support and encouragement. Perhaps accepting my own limitations will serve as an example that others can accept theirs. I believe that I can be an effective social worker.

My mother used to say to me, "You always root for the underdog." Yes Mom, I did then and I'm still doing it now.

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