



## JUSTICE AND FORGIVENESS IN THE FAMILY

—JOHN R.

The presence of a committed alcoholic/addict in the midst of a family has a profound effect on the family's structure and dynamic. Over time in such an environment, a web of frustration, disappointment, shattered hope, bitter resentment, unmet expectations, and mutually debilitating codependency is woven, enmeshing equally the alcoholic and his loved ones. This pattern is nearly universal, and yet many if not most alcoholics proceed for years thinking that it does not apply to them. I was no different.

For fifteen years, from my first drink at age fifteen until my last at age thirty, my progressive alcoholism was a continuing source of chaos and discord not only for me but within the lives of all those who love me. My journey through recovery has been one of stages; from awareness of my problem, to acceptance of its stark reality, to dawning understanding of its huge scope, to powerful desire to get help, to full-blown metanoia catalyzed by a bona fide spiritual experience, to a sustained commitment to living according to the principles laid out in the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, pp. 59–60).

Along the way, there have been many opportunities to be a participant in the life-restoring process of both forgiving and being forgiven. In this essay, I will explore some of the damage caused by my alcoholism and addiction, followed by an examination of the restorative power wrought by the applied solution of the Twelve Steps, with a particular focus on the sponsorship relationship and the Step Nine amends-making process (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, pp. 76–84) and their resonance with the ideas of Robert Greenleaf. As a part of this examination, I will explore the forgiveness dialogue that took place with my father during the Ninth Step process as a representative example of the regenerative power forgiveness asking can bestow.



## THE PROBLEM

When viewed through the lens of its negative effects on the family dynamic, there are two primary facets of my addiction that leap to the fore. The first is the issue of integrity, and the second is the issue of health. An unpacking of these two broad concepts will show how pervasively and insidiously addiction affects each aspect of a family's relationship with its addict, and how harmful the addiction is to the overall family environment.

It is said that relationships are built on trust. Ultimately, this axiom is impossible to fulfill when one of the parties to the relationship is an alcoholic. The alcoholic is serving a higher master. My own integrity, my capacity to engender trust in others, was severely diminished during the last decade of my drinking and using. I was unreliable and known at times to be a liar, a dissembler, and if things were bad enough, even a thief. I could not be trusted to hold newborn nieces and nephews, and I was regretfully left off many party invitations. These realities, however, were a far cry from my perception of myself. I considered myself a bit down and out. Maybe. But for the most part I operated under the delusion that I was the same upstanding near-superhero I had always been.

The erosion of my physical, mental, and spiritual health was the other wedge that my alcoholism created within the family. Alcoholics often operate under the persistent delusion, much-quoted, that "I am only hurting myself!" The South African understanding of the universal truth that is *ubuntu* (Tutu, 1999, p. 31) reveals this to be a lie. The family is intimately interconnected, and that which sickens one sickens the whole. As my own alcoholism and drug abuse progressed, it took an ever-worsening toll on my body, mind, and spirit. Near the end, I gained forty pounds while ignoring myriad other signs of bodily breakdown, totally neglected my spiritual development, and consistently engaged in behavior that suggested the presence of a death wish. Watching me visibly destroy myself in this way was an incredible burden for my family to bear, and even today I shudder to think at the heartache I put them through during the worst of those times.

## THE SOLUTION

As the saying goes, eventually things get bad enough that you either get help or you die. Lots of people die. By the grace of God, when things finally got bad enough for me, that same family I had been turning my back on for



all of those years was right there to help me. They mustered the fortitude for an(other) intervention. They made the arrangements for the inpatient facility. They wrote me constantly while I was there, and they were there to pick me up the day I got out, hoping against hope that this time, things were going to be different. This time, things were.

M. Scott Peck, in his essay featured in Larry Spears's (1995) *Reflections on Leadership*, describes the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous as a world-class "technology for peacemaking" (p. 88). In the same collection, Ken Blanchard exhorts all managers to take to heart the principles of the Twelve Steps (p. 105). In his introduction to the later collection *Insights on Leadership*, Spears (1998) singles out Alcoholics Anonymous and the Twelve Step approach as exemplifying the principles of servant-leadership (p. 10). Greenleaf (2002) himself pointed to AA as an organization responsible for unparalleled healing (p. 50). I am heartened to hear of the respect that these eminent writers and thinkers hold for the Twelve Steps. It reinforces for me the understanding that servant-leadership is *real and practically viable*, since I know from direct personal experience that the Twelve Steps are.

Marietta Jaeger tells us that real justice is not punishment but restoration (Tutu, 1999, p. 155). Restoration is the purpose of the Twelve Steps. Restoration of relationship, restoration of health, restoration of integrity, restoration of hope, and the restoration of the capacity for joy. This restoration occurs through the application of twelve living principles, which constitute a spiritual program of action to be embodied for a lifetime. Lee & Zemke (Spears, 1995) give a concise encapsulation of the first three Steps' purpose: admit vulnerability, acknowledge there is a Higher Power, and get aligned with that power (p. 105). Step 4 begins the so-called action steps, where the alcoholic sets to work making a list of all people he has harmed. This list will be used during Step 9, when the actual amends-making process begins.

My own relationship to AA and to the Twelve Steps goes back to 1995, when as a senior in high school I was forced to attend meetings after getting in trouble with alcohol and drugs. Ten years later, I returned to meetings at the pointed request of a girlfriend who demanded I get sober. Even during those periods where my presence at AA's tables was not my idea, I had always respected the sincerity of the people in the meetings, and when my time finally came I knew right where to go. As prodigal sons perennially are, I was welcomed back into the AA fold immediately, with one difference: this time I got connected with a sponsor.



## THE SPONSORSHIP RELATIONSHIP IN AA

Nowhere in the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous does one find reference to formal sponsorship, but the importance of the sponsorship relationship within the Twelve Step methodology is primary and unquestioned. What is understood by those who know is that the practical wisdom inherent in the Steps *can only be properly transmitted from one alcoholic to another*. It cannot be learned from a book. In fact, it is the awareness of and focus on this very truth that represents AA's singular advantage over every other treatment modality before or after it, which Greenleaf (2002) was aware of (p. 50). Spurred by the realization of this truth's power, AA cofounders Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith in effect sponsored each other as AA was birthed in Akron, Ohio, in 1935. The understanding that talking with another alcoholic about their experience, strength, and hope was foundational to recovery eventually became codified in the Twelve Steps. This understanding was the root of the first AA meetings, which took place in the living rooms of the founders and other early adherents. At these meetings, the sponsorship tradition of one-to-one transmission of these hard-won but simple truths was established.

Echoing Jesus' own statements that sinners paradoxically find the way to redemption more easily than their righteous brethren, Greenleaf (2002) writes:

No one can judge, from where one now stands, how difficult the next step along the road of spiritual growth may be. Those of good works...may find the next step of staggering proportions. Their seeming opposites—the unsuccessful, the misfit, the unlovely, the rejected—may take the next step with ease. (p. 339)

Many who fit this description—unsuccessful, unlovely, rejected misfits—having finally suffered enough to be teachable, find themselves recipients of that greatest of gifts—*serenity*. The gift comes as a result of rigorous engagement with the spiritual program of action called the Twelve Steps, as mediated by a sponsor. And indeed, many of these former misfits, having had the spiritual awakening promised in Step 12 (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 60), *will* take the next step with ease: perpetuating the sponsorship chain of humble, grateful service by going on to sponsor other alcoholics in need.

The servant-leader acknowledges that his or her own healing is the motivation for the work that they do (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 50). So too does the alcoholic in recovery acknowledge explicitly that he helps other alcoholics





for the sake of his own sobriety and sanity. Here, we are again witness to the reality of *ubuntu*, whereby we know that through helping others to heal, we ourselves are healed, and vice versa. Of the innumerable pithy sayings, acronyms, and aphorisms that abound in the halls of AA, perhaps none better sums up the heart of the matter than that perfect paradox, “You’ve got to give it away to keep it.”

And so those who find themselves gifted by grace, in turn give the gift away, so that they might retain it. This process takes place most healthily and effectively in the form of the sponsor/sponsee relationship, an arrangement into which each newcomer is encouraged to enter. There are an infinite number of approaches to the transmission of AA wisdom, each as unique as the dynamic between the sponsor and the sponsee. It is here, in this relationship, that we most clearly see AA’s prototypical servant-leadership shining through. Though it is quoted often enough in the servant-leadership literature so as to be blunted of its impact, I nevertheless call attention to Greenleaf’s (2002) initial definition of servant-leadership, as I can think of no other relationship that embodies its tenets in such a verifiable fashion as that of the AA sponsor and sponsee:

The servant leader *is* servant first. It begins with the feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead....The best test...is this: do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely to themselves become servants? (p. 27)

Here, the sponsor is servant first because he has had an attitude of service instilled in him since he first began working the Steps. Service is a principal cornerstone of AA, along with Unity and Fellowship. A spirit of service pervades AA, and newcomers gradually internalize the service mentality as they see its tangible effects on those they wish to emulate, those who “have what they want.” As they mature in their recovery and deepen in their commitment to service, it is likely that opportunities to sponsor newcomers will present themselves. Now, as sponsors (servant-leaders) leading their sponsees through the Steps, they serve as catalysts for growth. Their sponsees, to whom they are pledged in service, often quickly and in dramatic fashion become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely to become servants. And as a part of the process, the sponsor’s own spiritual life is enriched and strengthened. The privilege of witnessing the mutually enriching transformation take place in a sponsee, servant-led by a sponsor from utter sickness to radiant health, stands today as one of life’s most sublime joys.



It happened like that for me. There is no rule that says you will get the sponsor you expect or think you deserve. In fact, there are no rules at all, and the allocation of newcomer to sponsor is something that happens differently everywhere, since each meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous is autonomous on such matters. My sponsor didn't fit any of my preconceived notions about who he should be. But why should he? He was, and is, in "a role...uniquely appropriate for him as an individual, that drew heavily on his strengths and demanded little that was unnatural for him" (Greenleaf, p. 49). A union crane operator with five years sobriety and a story that surpassed mine in nearly every level of severity, what mattered was that emotionally and spiritually we had both been bankrupt in the same way. We connected on a supra-rational level, and he offered to take me through the Steps. I gratefully accepted, and we set to work.

Here again, before ever hearing the term *servant-leadership*, I *experienced* it in its purest form. This man, a virtual stranger, agreed to take me through the Steps in the same way that his sponsor had done for him. What this meant was that he offered to me at least five hours of his time per week for nearly four months. He invited me into his home and we read through the Big Book out loud, stopping often to discuss and underline passages. We went to many meetings together, and he began easing me into service by taking me with him to his commitments. As we worked through the Steps, we became friends, though friendship per se is not at all a prerequisite of a healthy sponsorship relationship. We finished the Book and made our way through the first seven Steps, and throughout he would remind me of how much he was being transformed by the process even as I was, for he had worked with other newcomers before, but none had completed the Steps.

At this stage, I was on fire, and the people around me could see it. I was working the Steps, and I was an active participant in my *life*. Everything was changing for me, and it was a heady feeling not just for me but for my entire family. For the first time ever, I was taking *action* in my life on behalf of the Good. The pinnacle of this action was the restorative work I was doing as a component of the Steps, particularly the Eighth and Ninth, which tell us we need to, with the guidance of our sponsor:

8.) Make a list of all people we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.

9.) Make direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so may injure them or others. (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 59)



And so I began making Ninth Step amends to people; old friends, girlfriends, my mother, my brothers, former employers, and others. Some were difficult; all were redemptive.

For people who are working the Steps sincerely and in earnest, magic can start happening very quickly. A palpable sense of Spirit will begin to animate your life as you move through the process of cleaning up *your* side of the street and setting right old wrongs. There is great humility required, but with perseverance the rewards are many. Indeed, the so-called 9th Step Promises, each predicated on taking an active stance of forgiveness, resulting in a realization of faith, and often read aloud in AA meetings, are bold enough to quote in their entirety:

If we are painstaking about this phase of our development, we will be amazed before we are half way through. We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. **We will comprehend the word serenity** and we will know peace. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change. Fear of people and of economic insecurity will leave us. **We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us.** We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.

Are these extravagant promises? We think not. They are being fulfilled among us—sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize if we work for them. (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, pp. 83–84)

Greenleaf (2002) echoes the penultimate and cumulative 9th Step Promise in his own writings on the subject of foresight:

Living this way [simultaneously as a historian, contemporary analyst, and prophet] is partly a matter of faith. Stress is a condition of most modern life, and if one is a servant leader and carrying the burdens of other people—going out ahead to show the way, one takes the rough and tumble (and it really is rough and tumble in some leadership roles)—one takes this in the belief that, if one enters a situation prepared with the necessary experience and knowledge at the conscious level, ***in the situation the intuitive insight necessary for one's optimal performance will be forthcoming. Is there any other way, in the turbulent world of affairs (including the typical home), for one to maintain serenity in the face of uncertainty?*** (p. 39)



Greenleaf is saying the same thing that AA's founders are saying; a person moving through life animated by the principles of servant-leadership will be further guided by an inner and inerrant voice. This is the sort of permanent guidance I was seeking; access to and relationship with the Source of that inerrant voice. I still had work to do.

#### NINTH STEP IN THE MICROCOSM

Those first several Ninth Step dialogues I initiated, while certainly valid, necessary, and redeeming in their own right, also served as practice for the big one. My relationship with my father had been rocky since I could remember, and had worsened as my disease had progressed. A very successful and driven physician, my perceived lackadaisical approach toward life infuriated him to no end. For healing to happen, we first had decades of frustrated attempts at communication to contend with.

I was frightened because I knew that I still had hidden resentments against my father. I needed to be free of these, and to that end I waited for a while to initiate the conversation. I waited too because he had heard too many empty apologies from me in the past. Too many empty promises. There needed to be some small foundation credibility to stand upon for the dialogue to be meaningful.

An opportunity presented itself whereby I convinced my dad to join me on a five-day retreat in the woods with the Franciscan writer, teacher, jail chaplain, and mystic Richard Rohr, himself no small proponent of Twelve Step spirituality, which he refers to as "America's great gift to world spirituality" (Personal Anecdote). This was out of character for my dad and I felt the Spirit at work even with his acceptance. During the retreat, he and I were not often together, due to the gathering's format. This gave us each opportunities to reflect separately on the retreat's purpose and content, which was concerned primarily with grief and loss.

After the retreat, we were both in a pregnant liminal space. In a restaurant at O'Hare airport, I bought my father dinner, maybe for the first time. I had been sober for nine months. I poured my heart out, I poured my guilt out, I poured my shame out, I poured my confusion out, I poured my directionless dying hatred out. I told him that I had always loved him and that I knew that he loved me. I asked him for forgiveness for all of my transgressions, which I named. I shared aloud a representative litany of my sins against him, letting us both look the beast in the eye (Tutu, 1999, p. 28). I told him that I had



emptied my heart of all hatred and anger toward him, which was finally true. We talked for three hours, the most transparent, vivifying conversation I've ever had with him. It was transformational and transcendent for both of us, and that night we shared a hotel room at O'Hare and slept like babies.

Today my father and I have a wonderful relationship. We still disagree; we have very different approaches to life, different ways of prioritizing things in our worlds. But we respect each other and *love* each other. It is amazing how the newfound, or perhaps rediscovered, love between us has trickled down and expanded outward into the rest of the family. This didn't happen overnight, but rather followed something like John T. Pawlikowski's phased alchemical formula consisting of stages: repentance, contrition, acceptance of responsibility, healing, and finally reunion (Wiesenthal, 2008, 221). I know that a major part of the success of this healing operation was bound up in the willingness to ask forgiveness, the willingness to go first, and the willingness to embrace the humility that such a stance entails.

#### CONCLUSION

For fifteen years, my alcohol and drug addiction presented an impassable obstacle to a healthy family life. Alcoholism destroys relationships even as it destroys people, reducing alcoholics to shells of their former self physically, spiritually, and mentally. The effect that this degradation has on families is horrific, as the interconnected reality of the family unit is made manifest in the pain they visibly share and collectively bear.

My alcoholism, though a source of great pain for both myself and for my entire family, is also something for which I am paradoxically grateful. Through it, I have been guided, finally, to a place of humility, healing, and immense gratitude. Alcoholism has brought me into relationship with the Twelve Steps of AA, and with the Fellowship of men and women who practice its principles. Through these Steps, and this Fellowship, I have learned of a new way of living predicated on acceptance, willingness, gratitude, humility, and *forgiveness*. I have learned these things through actually experiencing them, which is a different category of learning altogether. This way of life has helped bring about a new era of love and connection in my family for which we are all eternally grateful.

As my relationship to the Twelve Steps has evolved into a deep awareness of their value as a lifelong spiritual program of action, I have become aware of the parallels between the Twelve Step approach and



servant-leadership. In fact, as Greenleaf and others have recognized, the Twelve Steps are a process through which servant-leaders are *created*, and then *nurtured* as they retransmit that which was freely given to them. This relationship between a sponsor and a sponsee is as close to the prototypical servant-leader/follower relationship as any I am aware of, and it is worthy of further study as a servant-leadership model.

The power of forgiveness, of *asking* for forgiveness, was made manifest in life-giving ways through the course of my Ninth Step work. The forgiveness-asking dialogue I shared with my father stands as the most perpetually life-giving communication channel I have ever opened with anyone. Its fruits continue to be born. My experiences with forgiveness asking (and receiving) over the past several years, exemplified by the ongoing relationship with my father, leave me with no doubt that Bishop Tutu (1999) is correct: there is no future without forgiveness. With it and through it, however, miracles are possible in our lives, families, and communities.

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#### EDITOR'S NOTE

In keeping with AA's 11th and 12th Traditions, this article has been published under the author's first name and the initial of his last name. The author is a graduate student in leadership with a strong focus in servant-leadership. He also maintains abiding commitments in the fields of interfaith community organizing, Spirit-led filmmaking, and the search for the perfect metaphor.

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