

Lost and Found- A Story of Recovery in OA

Southeastern Arizona Intergroup Web Excerpt

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I lived most of my life within a few miles of where I was born, in the heartland of the Midwest. I am the oldest of 10 children. My mother was a very religious woman. Her God was a very stern, exacting taskmaster. Although we had very little money she saw to it that we all went to a private religious school. We went to church, we went to school, and we worked hard at home. We had a roof over our heads, food on the table and second hand clothes on our backs. We were considered a model family of high moral standards. But our home was a scary place. My mother was a very angry, bitter woman. She would fly off the handle easily and without warning. She would grab a broom, a mop, anything and start swinging, while out of her mouth would pour the cruelest words. My role in the family was second mother. I was to take care of my brothers and sisters and do housework. Although I tried very hard I felt I could never do anything well enough to please my mother. I did not believe I was good enough or capable enough to be loved. I have always felt like that little kid having to succeed in areas beyond my capabilities. I had no time to play, have friends or even do homework. I loved school but did not feel like I belonged. I saw myself as being so different from the other kids.

Eating did not become a problem for me until I was age 10. That was when my father began sexually abusing me. My mother found out when my father told her that I might be pregnant at age 12. She chose to believe him when he told her it would never happen again. Then she turned a cold shoulder and an even colder heart to me. Fortunately, I was not pregnant, but unfortunately, the abuse continued until I was 17 and dating the boy I married at 18.

My pattern of eating was to shovel in as much food as I could at family mealtimes. I stole food when I babysat. I would save out nickels, dimes and quarters from my earnings to buy myself treats at the corner store. I became obsessed with getting enough food. The obsession occupied my thoughts. Eating and dieting became ways I could have control over my own body. I shoved food in and shoved the feelings down. I let the obsession remove me from my life. Food helped me live in a fantasy world of the future. And the extra pounds protected me from the world which surely must be a terrible place. We were warned against strangers, outsiders were not to be trusted. We were very isolated. Family was all there was.

While I was dating, I lost interest in food. We went out almost every night and I was not home very much. I did not feel hungry and I lost about 50 pounds of the protection that I had plastered on my body. Ah-Ha... I had found the answer to my overeating....having someone to love me. I recently celebrated the 46th anniversary of marriage to that boy

who I had looked to for rescue from my family and from life in the cold, cruel world. I believed that with him it was possible to create a haven, a real home where our children would be cherished and no one would ever suffer or come to harm. And if we could do that then I could at last be safe and we would all live happily ever after.

By age 22 I had had 3 babies, a miscarriage, 3 major surgeries and I was helping my husband build a house for us. During this time I was suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder, was suicidal, and admitted myself to a psychiatric facility. Obviously my plan to live happily ever after was not working. Love being the answer to my weight and eating problem was not working either. I had packed on between 50 and 60 pounds. I was still trying to block the harshness of life out by stuffing food in.

Life began to change for me when my friend's husband started going to AA and I learned about addiction. I came to believe that my problem with food was like alcoholism. We talked for hours about the AA program. We met other recovering alcoholics and even went to open meetings. The more I learned the more I related and wished I could have what they had. My girlfriend heard that some Al Anon women were starting up a new program called Overeaters Anonymous. My prayers had been answered. I had a glimmer of hope that maybe I too could recover.

I walked into my first OA meeting in 1972. I was 30 years old, terrified, desperate, defeated by my own attempts to maintain a stable weight. I weighed 180. I had gained and lost hundreds of pounds over the years. But the weight loss never lasted. I felt too exposed and vulnerable. Eating put me into a semi-conscious state where I could walk through life but I was not really a part of it. Food suppressed my anger but let the sadness through; it quelled the fears but made fantasy preferable to reality. I lived in the past and the future but rarely in the present. My best thinking and all the self-help books I had read had not changed my life one little bit.

In those days, abstinence was defined as a very restrictive food plan. Eventually I surrendered myself to it and took my first 3 steps. Instead of food, I now devoured the Big Book and the program. OA in our town was 3 of us meeting in our homes. I worked the steps with the help of my two OA sisters. I stayed abstinent for almost 8 years, maintaining a 60-pound weight loss. During that time I grew emotionally and spiritually by leaps and bounds. Then I walked away. I can tell you all kinds of reasons why I left but none of them makes any sense in light of what I lost.

For several months I managed to hang on to my food plan. But without the support of other recovering compulsive overeaters and continued practice of the program I eventually returned to eating compulsively and the insanity came back. Of course the weight did too, almost one hundred pounds of it. I had put my superwoman disguise back on as quickly as I could. Over the years I tried several times to go back to OA but just going back wasn't enough and eventually I would leave again. Critical and dissatisfied that it just didn't offer what I needed anymore.

Shortly after I turned 50 a series of events completely altered my life. My husband's company started downsizing and he was let go. Within a few months he had a triple cardiac bypass. I was terrified. Thoughts of economic insecurity and fear of my husband dying overwhelmed me. Then he told me he wanted us to move 1700 miles away. We had lived in the same place forever. Most of our brothers and sisters lived there. And most importantly to me my children and grandchildren were nearby. This was the final blow. My heart just broke because I knew I would let go of what I treasured so dearly. As a people pleaser, I had no other choice. I was devastated.

In January 1995, 6 months after moving, I went looking for OA again. Not for help with my food problem but because it was the only place I could think of where I could talk and safely share my feelings. Those feelings were so overwhelming that I was afraid to talk to ordinary people for fear my insanity would jump right out. So I went to OA and I cried and I talked and I did everything except deal with my food problems. I really didn't want anyone to help with that. I was very angry at God and my husband for taking everything away from me and leaving me with only food, loneliness and insecurity. I used OA for a while but never really gave myself to it. For the next 12 years I tried to manage my unmanageable life and control my compulsive overeating. I succeeded at neither. I became increasingly aware of my powerlessness. I was obsessed daily with how to lose weight; what I ate or didn't eat; how much I had gained or lost; how awful I looked; what clothes I could or couldn't fit into; what I would look like on our next visit to the kids; and so many other crazy thoughts. I weighed myself in January 2007 and saw that I weighed exactly the same weight as I did in January 1995. 12 years of daily attention to this problem, 12 years of giving it my best thoughts and the best thoughts of lots of weight loss gurus, continuous daily struggle with food, hundreds of pounds lost and regained and what I had to show for those 12 years of effort... the same 205 pounds.

I finally surrendered to the truth and came back to OA ready to turn my life, my will and my food over to a Higher Power. I became willing to listen, learn and obey because I knew this was very likely my last opportunity for freedom. I ask Him each morning to give me the willingness and ability to abstain. With that simple act I unleash the control of my life from the power of addiction and entrust myself to the power and love of God. By His grace, I have remained abstinent since the day that I truly returned.

As a 65 year old woman, I cannot help but wonder, at times, what life for my family and for myself might have been if I hadn't walked out of these doors in 1980. But as the promises on page 83 and 84 in the Big Book say: Today I know a new freedom and a new happiness. I do not regret the past or wish to shut the door on it. I comprehend the word serenity and I know peace. No matter how far down the scale I have gone I see how my experience can benefit others. My old feeling of uselessness and self pity has disappeared. I have lost interest in selfish things and am now interested in others. Self seeking is slipping away. My whole attitude and outlook on life has changed. Fear of

people and economic insecurity has left me. I intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle me. I realize that God is doing for me what I cannot do for myself.

I can't begin to tell you how blessed I feel that God has brought me back after all these years to be with you today. My prayer for each of you is that you do not lose any more days or years of your life to this disease.