

# **LOIS'S STORY**

**Al-Anon From the Beginning**

**Al-Anon  
Family  
Groups**



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There was a time, not too long ago, when there was no Al-Anon. Every mate of an alcoholic was alone with the problem—helpless, full of self-pity, angry at the spouse, altogether frustrated by a situation not understood and difficult to cope with.

That was before one wife, through her own desperate effort to solve her problem, found answers for many thousands of others. Alone she lived through the bewilderment we all experience when someone we love has become a compulsive drinker. Like us, she didn't know where to turn. But unlike us (for we now have Al-Anon to help us!) she had to work it all out for herself.

Having found her way to peace of mind, she went on, with a handful of dedicated pioneers, to the difficult task of bringing the message to others—to us.

Her name is Lois. She is the wife of the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. As her husband Bill found sobriety and offered it to alcoholics all over the world, so Al-Anon has been given to their families.

Al-Anon is for every man or woman whose mate has a drinking problem. It is for every woman whose husband has found sobriety in AA and who needs a revised point of view to help adjust to the new relationship. It is a way of life, built on personal development and improvement—and Al-Anon's world-wide acceptance proves how well it works.

This is Lois's story:

Bill started drinking shortly before we were married, and although I didn't realize it then, he was alcoholic from the very beginning. When he took one drink, he couldn't seem to stop until he was too drunk to lift another drink. I was greatly concerned, but I still had confidence that our life together would be so complete and rich that he would have no need for liquor. As time went on, his drinking grew worse. Since we had no children, my one purpose in life was to help him

get over this terrible habit. Aside from his drinking, we were very happy together. We liked the same things and were most companionable. Finally, when the drinking became practically constant, he too realized he must do something about it and together we tried everything we could think of. He set up all kinds of plans for control. He read books on psychology and religion; he went to sanitariums. During two successive summers I gave up my job and we escaped for three months to the country for renewal and rebuilding. Nothing worked. I had to assume all family responsibilities and make all decisions.

By now Bill did nothing but drink. He was afraid to leave the house for fear the police would pick him up. We lived entirely to ourselves. We had dropped all our friends or been dropped by them and we saw as little of our families as possible. Our whole life had simmered down to one terrific fight against alcohol. It was tragic indeed to watch such a fine man become completely beaten and hopeless.

An old friend whom we considered a confirmed drunkard came to see Bill to tell of his "release" from alcoholism by spiritual means. Bill, encouraged by the picture of his friend's bright eyes and hopeful story, went to the hospital to clear his own thinking. Here the miracle happened and Bill became a changed man, almost over night. We were awestruck by this amazing transformation. In our happiness and gratitude neither of us doubted that his sobriety would last. (As I bring this story up to date, it has lasted until his death in 1971. His friend's sobriety, unfortunately, was of shorter duration, but he was sober a number of years before his death in 1966.)

Bill figured that since a miracle had happened to him and his friend it could happen to others, so he worked endlessly and tirelessly to help alcoholics. We had the house full of drunks in all stages of sobriety. It seemed to me he was trying to dry up all the drunks in the world.

We gratefully went to meetings of the fellowship to which our helpful friend belonged, and Bill used their half dozen spiritual principles in his work with alcoholics. Later, when he wrote the AA book, he expanded the number to Twelve Steps so as to be sure there were no loopholes through which a drunk could escape.

After a while I began to wonder why I was not as happy as I ought to be since the one thing I had been yearning for all my married life had come to pass. Then one Sunday Bill asked me if I was ready to go to the meeting with him. To my own astonishment as well as his, I burst forth with "Damn your old meetings!" and threw a shoe as hard as I could.

This surprising display of temper over nothing pulled me up short and made me start to analyze my own attitudes. By degrees I saw that I had been wallowing in self-pity, that I resented the fact that Bill and I never spent any time together any more, and that I was left alone while he was off somewhere scouting up new drunks or working with old ones. I felt on the outside of a very tight little clique of alcoholics where no mere wife could enter. My pride was hurt by the fact that a friend, another alcoholic, had been able to do for Bill in a short time what I had tried and failed to do all our married years.

My life's purpose of sobering up Bill, which had made me feel desperately needed, had vanished. I sought something to fill the void. As I began to be honest with myself, I recognized how greatly Bill had developed spiritually and how necessary to his sobriety was his feverish activity with alcoholics. I decided to strive for my own spiritual growth. I used the same principles as he did to learn how to change my attitudes.

Several years later Bill and I became concerned to find that strained relations, such as ours had been, often developed in families after the first starry-eyed period of AA was over. We were heartsick and puzzled to discover that, though alcoholics were recovering through this

wonderful new program, their home lives were often difficult. We began to learn how many adjustments had to be made and how much the partner of the alcoholic needed to live by a spiritual program also.

Soon small groups, composed of the families of AA members sprang up all over the country. They had a three-fold purpose: to grow spiritually through living by the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous; to give encouragement and understanding to the alcoholic in the home; and to welcome and give comfort to the families of new or prospective AA members.

Today Al-Anon groups have spread over this country and Canada and into many foreign lands. Many other agencies too, recognize that alcoholism is a family problem and that recovery can be greatly hastened by family understanding.

AA and Al-Anon often speak of the Twelve Steps as tools. An extension of this idea came to me one day. There is a striking analogy between working on ourselves and cultivating a garden.

Our inheritance and early environment compose the soil out of which grow our thoughts and actions, both flowers and weeds. To raise flowers we must get rid of the weeds.

Our garden tools are these principles of AA and Al-Anon: knowledge of ourselves and our motives, honesty in facing ourselves as we really are, a desire to help others and awareness of God.

We must keep cultivating with these really effective implements lest our garden be over-run by weeds.

Soils vary, some are rocky, sandy or swampy, while others are very fertile. But whatever the soil, there are appropriate flowers that can be grown. Even the desert blooms.

One gardener may find it difficult to uproot the weeds because his tools are constantly being dulled against many large rocks. But by repeated

sharpening of his hoe and by careful selection of his plants, at last he may be able to grow a very charming rock garden.

Yet another, because he is too sure of the fertility of his plot and takes it for granted that he will have a beautiful garden because his soil is rich, does not bother to cultivate. This gardener may someday wake up to find his garden filled with insidious weeds, the weeds of smugness and self-righteousness that thrive in fertile ground.

In just this way the garden of many a martyred, self-pitying wife or husband of an alcoholic can become choked and unproductive.

The Al-Anon Family Groups point out the need to cultivate the gardens of our lives and show us how this can be done through the use of AA's Twelve Steps.

My work on the Steps, over a period of years, is the following:

*STEP 1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol . . . that our lives had become unmanageable.*

I was just as powerless over my husband's alcoholism as he was, since I had failed in every way I tried to control his drinking. My own life was indeed unmanageable as I was forced into doing and being that which I did not want to do or be. I tried to manage Bill's life, although not even able to manage my own. I wanted to get inside his brain and turn the screws in what I thought was the right direction. I, too, was powerless over alcohol. It took me a long time to see this.

*STEP 2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.*

Because my thinking was distorted and my nerves over-wrought, I held fears and attitudes that certainly were not sane. Finally I realized that I, too, had to be restored to sanity and that only by having faith in God, in AA, in my husband and myself, could this come about.

*STEP 3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.*

Self-sufficiency, caused by the habit of acting as mother, nurse, caretaker and breadwinner, as well as always thinking myself on the credit side of the ledger with my alcoholic husband on the debit side, resulted in my having a smug feeling of rightness. At the same time, illogically, I felt a failure at my life's job of helping Bill to sobriety. All this made me blind for a long time to the fact that I needed to turn my will and my life over to the care of God. Smugness is the very worst sin of all, I believe. A shaft of light pierces the armor of self-righteousness with great difficulty.

*STEP 4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.*

Here is where, when I tried to be really honest, I received a tremendous shock. Many of the things that I thought I did unselfishly were, when I tracked them down, pure rationalizations – rationalizations to get my own way about something. This disclosure doubled my urge to live by the 12 Steps as thoroughly as I could.

*STEP 5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.*

I found this was just as necessary for me to do as it was for an alcoholic, even more so perhaps, because of my former "mother-and-bad-boy" attitude toward Bill. Admitting my wrongs helped so much to balance our relationship, to bring it closer to the ideal of partnership in marriage.

At first I was deeply hurt because someone else had done in a few moments what I had tried my whole married life to do. Now I have learned that a wife can rarely, if ever, do this job. The sick alcoholic feels his wife's account has been written on the credit page of life's ledger; but he believes his own has been on the debit side.

Therefore she cannot possibly understand. Another alcoholic, with a similar debit entry, immediately identifies himself as no non-alcoholic can.

I found no peace of mind until I recognized this important fact.

*STEP 6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.*

There were selfish attitudes that I had felt justified in keeping because of what Bill or someone else had done to me. I had to try very hard to want God to remove these. There was, for instance, my self-pity at losing Bill's companionship, now that the house was full of alcoholics and we had little time to visit with each other alone. I didn't realize the importance of his working with others nor did I know how deep and consuming an absorption in AA it takes to banish the alcoholic obsession.

*STEP 7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.*

"Humbly" was a word I never fully understood. It used to seem servile to me. Today it means seeing myself in true relation to my fellow man and to God.

While striving for humility myself, it was inspiring to see my husband's growth in the same direction. From an inferiority-ridden person during his drinking days, after AA Bill at first bounced way up to superiority, but he levelled off little by little and gained a very real humility.

Slowly and with difficulty I realized I, too, had been beset by both inferiority and superiority, superiority over Bill in the old days while he was drinking and then inferiority to him as he made rapid progress in AA.

*STEP 8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.*

At first I couldn't think of anyone I had harmed. But when I broke through my own smugness even a little, I saw many relatives and

friends whom I had resented and to whom I had given short, irritable answers, imperiling long-standing friendships. In fact, I remember one friend at whom I threw a book when, after a nerve-racking day, he annoyed me. (Throwing seems to have been my pet temper outlet.)

I try to keep my list of persons harmed up to date, and I also try to shorten it.

*STEP 9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.*

This is just as important for me as for the alcoholic. I found that when I cleaned away the debris of the past by making amends for each harm done I had taken an important step towards building a bulwark against any hard knocks that might later come along, as well as gaining serenity and joy in living.

*STEP 10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.*

It is astounding how each time I take an inventory I find some new rationalization, some new way I have been pulling the wool over my own eyes. It is easy to fool oneself about motives, and admitting it is hard, but very beneficial.

*STEP 11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.*

I am just beginning to understand how to pray. Bargaining with God is not real prayer and asking Him for what I want, even good things, I've had to learn is not the highest form of prayer. I used to think I knew what was good for me. Therefore I, the captain, would give my instructions to my Lieutenant, God, to carry out. That is very different from praying only for the knowledge of God's will for me and the power to carry it out.

Today's living is so involved that much time for meditation is hard to find. But I've set aside a little while night and morning. I am so filled with thankfulness to God that gratitude is one of

my principal subjects for meditation; gratitude for all the love and beauty and friends around me; gratitude even for the hard days of long ago that taught me so much. Thus, I have made a start toward improving my conscious contact with God.

*STEP 12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.*

I am like many AAs whose spiritual awakening was a slow developing experience. But all of us, whether our awakening was sudden or gradual, need to continue our efforts toward growth. One either moves forward or slips backward. I sincerely hope there has been a change for the better between my old and new self, and that tomorrow, next month, next year there will continue to be a better new self.

Nothing has done more to urge me forward than the need to carry the AA message to the families of alcoholics who are seeking a way out of their dilemma. The helping of others over the same thorny path that one has already trod strengthens both travellers, the helper and the one being helped.