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WOMEN IN ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS:
A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH STUDY

A Dissertation
Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School
of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By
Ariel Larson

May 2015
WOMEN IN ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS:
A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH STUDY

By
Ariel Larson

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ABSTRACT

WOMEN IN ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS: 
A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH STUDY

By
Ariel Larson
August 2015

Dissertation supervised by Russ Walsh, PhD

This research looks at how women in particular navigate the complicated power dynamics of twelve-step programs, specifically AA, to achieve long-term sobriety. This study attempts to understand how women in AA are appropriating and shaping AA and its reliance on the twelve-steps in unique and resourceful ways to make recovery their own. The methodological approach of this study is empirical-phenomenological. Interviews with five female members of Alcoholics Anonymous were conducted, transcribed and analyzed in an attempt to identify and understand how women approach and adapt recovery strategies and technologies that evolved during the twentieth century to meet the needs of alcoholic men. Discussion of findings is structured as a comparison and dialogue with *Metaphors of Transformation: Feminine and Masculine* (White and
Chaney, 1993), which also looks at the experience and language of women in recovery, applying a meta-analysis of theory, science, practice and experience. White and Chaney’s approach is not grounded in a specific phenomenological analysis, but is perhaps the most definitive work to date examining the need for gender specific understanding in AA and recovery. Results of the current study suggest that themes of empowerment, resolution of shame, and connection with other women are particularly important for gender-specific treatment.
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Introduction

The following study will explore women’s experiences of Alcoholics Anonymous, and their ways of navigating through its predominantly male-oriented treatment paradigm. Consistent with a growing literature concerned with minority access to treatment services and mechanisms of recovery in a variety of cultural contexts this project will employ a phenomenological method to delineate the unique and common features of women who achieved sobriety through participation in AA.

Prevalence

Epidemiological data suggests substance use disorders and the accompanying difficulties are pervasive, touching the lives of most, if not all, Americans in some form. According to *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, rates of alcohol abuse and dependence are “highly prevalent and disabling” (Hasin, 2007, p. 830). JAMA reported a lifetime prevalence of alcohol abuse at 17.8%, and reported that 4.7% of individuals interviewed said they abused alcohol within twelve months of the survey. Alcohol dependence was reported at a lifetime rate of 12.5% with 3.8% reporting dependence within twelve months of the survey. Dependence rates were higher among men, whites, Native Americans and respondents who were middle-aged, younger, had lower incomes and were single adults. As a group, middle-aged Americans had the highest prevalence of lifetime dependence, which is associated with significant disability and a number of substance and alcohol use disorders. In addition to increased risks for automobile accidents and fetal alcohol effects, alcohol dependent individuals are more likely to have financial and legal difficulties, mood, anxiety and personality disorders,
neuropsychological impairment and problems taking medication as prescribed (Hasin, et al, 2007).

*The Origins of Alcoholics Anonymous*

Understanding of alcohol addiction as an illness has increased since the 1930’s, when the successful lobbying efforts of Alcoholics Anonymous made the disease model relatively common, whereas before it was almost universally considered a moral failing (Conrad and Schneider, 1992). The first notable proponent of the *alcoholism as disease* argument was Benjamin Rush, a prominent physician, signer of the Declaration of Independence and influential American colonist. But Rush was before his time. During the late 18th and the 19th centuries, temperance efforts and reform clubs came and went as “inebriates” (White, 1998) were housed in any institution that would take them, from charitable homes and jails to workhouses or even lunatic asylums. These alcoholics, almost exclusively male, were not treated for their alcoholism until professional treatment began to emerge in the late 1800’s. Early efforts were highly ineffective and alcoholics were usually considered hopeless cases until mutual aid groups began to take hold. It wasn’t until 1935 and the birth of AA, that alcoholics began to band together to find hope and fellowship (White, 1998) and to garner the attention and support that would carry their organization forward until it became the internationally represented, household name that it is today. Ultimately AA, with its emphasis on a modified disease or allergy model and addiction as a chronic, irreversible condition, would change the national and even international understanding of the chronic drunk, urging us toward the medicalization of a formerly moral condition.
After 75 years of growth, membership estimated at well over two million, meetings on every continent, four editions of the *Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous* available in 58 languages, and vigorous outreach programs aimed at physicians and other healthcare professionals ([aa.org](http://aa.org)), AA has helped to destigmatize alcoholism. For a number of reasons—ranging from social and economic forces colliding at the right time and place (aided by AA founder Bill Wilson’s vision and charisma) to the effectiveness of AA’s program for many alcoholics who previously had little hope—AA spread far and wide, followed by Al-anon/Al-Ateen for families of alcoholics, and Narcotics Anonymous. Later there was a veritable explosion of twelve-step groups styled after AA, including Sex Addicts Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous and many more. But just because twelve-step recovery dominates the field doesn’t mean it is a good fit for everyone.

*Women in Alcoholics Anonymous*

Women have had a presence in AA from the very beginning and as far back as 1945 AA literature acknowledged “attitudinal barriers” that women faced in the AA recovery community ([White, 1998](#), p. 158). While the wives of the founders, Lois Wilson and Anne Smith as well as others, deserve credit for their support of the early AA community, the women trying to get sober during that time deserve credit for fighting addiction along with the sexist stereotypes of the fifties and sixties. Some men didn’t believe women could be alcoholics and others didn’t believe women belonged in AA since they would be a “distraction,” but they struggled on and their stories are told alongside those of pioneering male AA’s. Florence R.’s story appeared in the first edition.
of the Big Book, though she eventually died of alcoholism, and Marty Mann was not only one of the pioneering women of AA, but achieved lasting sobriety and her story, “Women Suffer Too,” is still being reprinted in current editions of the Big Book (White, 1998, p. 158). Some of AA’s most cherished traditions, including free coffee and birthday tokens or chips given out for sober time, are credited to Sister Mary Ignatia, whose remarkable efforts on behalf of alcoholics at St. Thomas hospital in Akron laid the groundwork for a pathway to recovery that is still recognizable today (White, 1998, p. 166).

Many of the stereotypes highlighted by those early AA articles regarding women in AA and their ability (or lack thereof) to work alongside men to obtain lasting sobriety are still present today. The extent to which oppressive patriarchal forces have been tempered by feminist movements and liberation efforts continues to be debated, but the fact remains that some minority groups and some women have felt that AA does not effectively address their needs. Jean Kirkpatrick, a sociologist, formed one of the best-known alternatives to Alcoholics Anonymous after finding herself in a thirteen-year relapse following 3 years of sobriety in AA. Kirkpatrick emphasized that AA was not to blame, but also expressed her belief that women progress through addiction and recovery in a way that is fundamentally different from men (White, 1998, p. 279). Kirkpatrick’s story is important since the popularity of the mutual aid society she founded, Women for Sobriety (WFS), suggests that she struck a chord among women who also felt that they either required something else, or at least could benefit from something they were not getting at AA meetings. Also, Jean Kirkpatrick and WFS provide an important segue,
since the current study is not an attempt to discredit AA, but an effort to understand how women in AA are appropriating the twelve-steps in unique and resourceful ways to make recovery their own.

_For Whom Does AA Work?_

Before embarking on a critique of the effectiveness of AA, it should be mentioned that AA was not intended to be a treatment but evolved as a form of self-care and mutual aid. Some of the criticisms leveled at AA may appear less relevant when considered in light of the fact that AA is meant to be used in conjunction with treatment. Still, relapse and dropout during the first year of twelve-step recovery is a significant problem, and the best predictor of success seems to be facilitating a transition, during inpatient treatment, of the recovering person into a twelve-step community or other support group outside (Kelly and Moos, 2003). Twelve-step literature and mainstream approaches to research and treatment tend to explain attrition by means of self-reinforcing and/or generally inconclusive arguments. It is often observed that alcoholics who come to AA but do not stay sober have failed to adopt the principles and rituals which are the foundation of AA recovery. The basic text of Alcoholics Anonymous describes those who achieve lasting sobriety as “spiritually fit,” (2001, p. 100) which allows them to abstain from alcohol and be productive members of society. Medical and psychological literature has failed to provide a consistent explanation for addiction, emphasizing social and environmental factors and physiological mechanisms of abuse, but not offering a conclusive explanation of addiction or theory for treatment. Moreover, there is a tendency to ignore the intricate and constitutive relationship between addicts, AA and treatment, as well as the resulting
narratives of addiction and recovery that can become woven into social discourse until they are accepted as fact. For example, there is a phrase found in the Narcotics Anonymous Basic Text (2008) which is often repeated around twelve-step circles: “We are people in the grip of a continuing and progressive illness whose ends are always the same: jails, institutions and death” (p. 3). While this phrase certainly contains an element of powerful truth, it may also function to shape an individual’s relationship with substances, becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. The twelve-step emphasis on spirituality and surrender as the sole means by which this terrible fate might be avoided takes on epic proportions when fueled by the emotionally charged, seemingly miraculous stories of grateful, recovering alcoholics. It can be argued that treatment options and understandings of addiction are produced by the treatment industry and twelve-step influence rather than being born entirely of an experience innate to the addict (Klingemann, 2011). Treatment and AA might then be conceptualized as an initiation process rather than a natural evolution or ideal trajectory. This, in turn, might contribute to the alienation of some who have been through treatment and experienced a rift, or sense of profound alienation following their discharge.

Independent of the subjective experience of addicts who undergo treatment, studies show that more than half of addicts who complete treatment are using two years later (White 1993, p. 4). Whatever the reasons, AA does not work for everyone and other pathways to recovery have evolved. Support groups exist for medication assisted recovery as well as S.O.S. (Secular Organizations for Sobriety, also known as Save Ourselves), and some people find ways to abstain from substances on their own, i.e.,
natural recovery. Reasons for pursuing options other than twelve-step programs are as widely varied as the addicts who pursue those options. Some reasons might include an aversion to the spirituality implicit in twelve-step recovery, identification with a minority group that is not widely represented in meetings, inaccessibility of meetings or failure to connect emotionally with the Fellowship of AA or other twelve-step organizations, or simply an inability or unwillingness to quit using.

How Does AA Work When It Works?

Although it can be argued that the AA model sets up complicated power dynamics that are difficult for some people to navigate, many find success and achieve lasting sobriety by joining AA or a different twelve-step program. AA literature emphasizes the adoption of spiritual principles and regular prayer and meditation resulting in “a daily reprieve contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition” (2001, p. 85). But outside of AA there is no consensus about what mechanisms are actually at work when an alcoholic finds they are suddenly able to abstain from alcohol when they never could before, or when they—hopefully—manage to sustain that abstinence. Kelly, Magill and Stout (2009) provide a compelling argument, following their meta-analysis of thirteen studies, that contrary to what you will hear from many committed AA members, spirituality is not shown to be that directly effective, nor are the specific rituals and practices of the program. Instead, the common process mechanisms they identified were enhancing self-efficacy, coping skills, and motivation and the facilitation of adaptive social network changes. These findings can be seen as complementing the frequently promoted belief that one of AA’s main functions is to
promote the formation of a new, or non-drinking identity, largely through the act of storytelling (Cain, 1991; Jodlowski, et al, 2007; Swora, 2001; Humphreys, 2000; Strobbe & Kurtz, 2012). The continuity provided through attending meetings where members tell the story of their addiction and recovery according to classical literary conventions—what it was like, what happened, and what it is like now, or beginning, middle, end—may provide the newly recovering alcoholic with what Strobbe and Kurtz refer to as a subjective, evaluative function over time. In other words, the addict becomes aware of herself in time and in a social context, contributing to an experience of belonging and self-efficacy.

Limitations of Alcoholics Anonymous

Because of its emphasis on surrender of self-will and sponsorship, it is arguable that the twelve-step model might be particularly problematic for certain populations. It is also important to note AA is only one of many fellowships and mutual aid groups that offer guidance and support for recovery, and it is distinguished by its emphasis on the twelve steps. People from non-Western cultures, women and minorities, and especially those who have experienced subjugation and abuse of power, may be more likely to struggle with the idea that surrender and forgiveness are required for following the steps. AA newcomers are encouraged to seek out sponsors who have more sobriety or clean time than they do, and begin working the steps. This is an unregulated system, which is part of its genius, but it also leaves room for abuse of power and newcomers to sobriety can be very, very vulnerable. As Ning (2005), Tangenberg (2001) and Vigilant (2008) articulate so well, each addict is dealing with not one, but multiple narratives, multiple
identities, along with the stigma of addiction and recovery and, in some cases, the physical wreckage that addiction has wrought in the form of disease and poverty. Such individuals are likely to need more than a one-size-fits-all approach to support them in confronting their many challenges.

While an AA approach emphasizing surrender and felt deference to the authority of a sponsor may work for many it also runs the risk of allowing covert racism, sexism, prejudice, hostility and overt abuse of power, such as that manifested in thirteenth-stepping (where newcomers to twelve-step programs are preyed upon sexually by more experienced members). AA philosophy encourages taking responsibility and discourages identifying as a victim of one's alcoholism, which can be confusing when people have been abused, especially in early recovery.

*The AA Model for Women*

Awareness of the existence of problematic substance abuse and alcoholism among women has increased since the 1970’s. There is an argument to be made that substance abuse by women didn’t become a significant issue until women entered the workforce in great numbers and their lack of productivity became noteworthy. This chain of events resulted in the “Adam’s Rib” (White, 1993, p. 3) phenomenon in treatment approaches where women were expected to respond efficiently to the strategies designed for male addicts. The typical alcoholic of the twentieth century was a middle-class, white man and treatment modalities evolved to treat that typical alcoholic.

More recently literature began to emerge that implies a certain resourcefulness and adaptability on the part of female addicts and alcoholics and explicitly addresses the
ways that women take up and adapt twelve-step tools and strategies to fit their specific needs, as distinct and different from those of men. The recovery model outlined by Mohatt et al (2008) is one example of a study that emphasizes the importance of cultural context when dealing with addiction. Grant, (2007) Prussing, (2007) and Yeh (2008) also offer studies that examine recovery in unexpected contexts; Women in the rural Mountains of Appalachia, Native Women on North American Reservations and AA groups in Taiwan, respectively, each adopting a unique perspective and each finding different ways that people adapt and mold recovery processes that meet their individual challenges and needs. Given the diversity represented in recovery literature and the remarkable resourcefulness of each individual who crafts and sustains a successful program of abstinence, the interest in women’s particular challenges and needs is definitely justified. After all, women now comprise one third of AA membership (Kelly and Hoeppner, 2012). But considering the double-standard regarding substance abuse among women and the “veil of secrecy around women’s use of alcohol, opiates, chloral hydrate, chloroform, and other psychoactive substances,” it is fair to wonder if women are still “over-represented among the consumers” and still hiding their use (White, 1998, p. 42). By itself, secrecy regarding use among women represents a unique challenge and the manifestation of several cultural assumptions, along with at least one double standard—and secrecy is only one factor. Even were a woman confident, comfortable in her body and never having suffered abuse, one might wonder about the assumption that AA’s toolbox, designed by and for men, will have everything she needs.
It should be noted that the growing concern over the harmful effects of maternal drug and alcohol abuse on fetal development during the latter part of the twentieth century did lead to a dramatic increase in funding for gender-specific treatment. Particular attention was paid to fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) and the less severe fetal alcohol effect (FAE) before this gave way to media hysteria over “crack babies” of the 1980’s (White, 1998, p. 299). In the 1980’s and 1990’s women’s treatment centers tripled and these centers did seek to address some of the factors and obstacles to treatment that had previously been neglected. These factors included but were not limited to providing childcare, parent education and family resources and addressing physical safety and domestic violence issues as well as simple things like transportation (White, 1998, p. 299). These movements also set the stage for later researchers who were ready to delve more deeply into gender-specific mechanisms of recovery.

Before Kelly and Hoeppner concluded that women benefit slightly less from AA and benefit in different ways (2012), Baker (2000) studied the efficacy of gender-sensitive treatment programs and commented extensively on the ways that women who might be expected to reject institutionalization (as many women have in the past) responded favorably to a gender-sensitive program that encouraged them to directly address emotional well-being and prioritize issues of safety, parenting and trauma. Only a year later (2001), Paris and Bradley emphasized how often in research, and specifically addiction and recovery research, differences are de-emphasized in favor of aggregate data and generalized conclusions. Consistent with this argument, White and Chaney (1993) highlight a number of areas where they believe women adapt existing recovery structures
in resourceful and intuitive ways, to address their own needs. Because White and Chaney are sympathetic toward AA yet also acknowledge that women in AA have often had to forge their recovery using the language of men, they provide a model and an opportunity to continue a dialogue, and there is a sense in which the current study might be seen as a response to *Metaphors of Transformation* (1993). *Metaphors of Transformation* is a compilation of experiential constructs thoughtfully derived from a global analysis of AA literature, semantics, socialization and ritual. While the resulting themes or metaphors proposed by White and Chaney serve to highlight dissatisfaction and needs of women in recovery, the current study is a natural bridge from the work of White and Chaney which can ground and apply their observations in concrete experience.

Given the cultural double standard regarding women and self-control, it seems wise to approach the female addict thoughtfully. She was never *permitted* her drunken carousing the way her male counterpart was, even when substances were marketed specifically, even ingeniously to her. Take the edible, wine-filled grape-like skins, marketed to sophisticated ladies, so that they might surreptitiously enjoy wine at the opera (White and Kilbourne, 2006) without drawing attention to their consumption. The conflicting messages which permeated culture in the fifties regarding feminine beauty, desire/desirability and self-control are as pervasive and insidious as ever. Women are better at hiding their addiction because they have to be, because the stakes are higher: they are dealing with the triple stigmatization of female addicts who are often automatically assumed to be bad mothers and to be sexually promiscuous (White and Kilbourne, 2006).
Many of the women who seek out AA meetings for help with addiction are immediately aware, upon entering the room, that they are outnumbered. If they stick around long enough to read the literature, they will become cognizant of the fact that they have joined a converted boys club. Some may change overtly sexist language when they read out of the AA texts, some may not think about it much—as discussed at several prior points, each individual has her own experience. For example, many female AA members seem unperturbed by language referring to a male higher power, or chapters in the basic text of AA directly addressing “wives” and employers of the alcoholic with the assumption that the alcoholic is a man. But one thing has been shown repeatedly through a number of studies, that being the importance of storytelling, finding a voice and an identity in the AA fellowship. This has profound implications when we consider the words of an AA member in Cain’s 1991 study who commented on the importance of “learning to be an alcoholic in AA.” This suggests that there is a sense in which women must give up their own language and take up the language of Alcoholics Anonymous, a traditionally male, hierarchical, language that emphasizes surrender, humility and classical storytelling. Even the ubiquitous use of the arguably gendered word *fellowship* might give one pause in the context of a truly gender-sensitive exploration of recovery.

My longstanding interest in addiction and recovery was kindled by participation as a research assistant in a qualitative study of recovery from addiction (Flaherty et al, 2014). This study, during which I had the opportunity to work with Michael Flaherty, Ernie Kurtz and Bill White, allowed me to read the current literature in the field of addiction and recovery. I was particularly inspired by Bill White’s work in the area of gender
specific treatment and minority utilization of treatment and recovery resources. The current project evolved partially as a response to White and Chaney’s *Metaphors of Transformation* (1993), and the narrative provided by our sole female interviewee (five out of six were male). As I honed in on a research question and then began to make sense of data from this prior study (2014), I also found that themes emphasizing the impact of gendered language on experience were resonant with my own experience as a woman in academia, where hierarchy and linearity are prominent.

**Method**

Given the particular challenges women have faced and continue to face, both in recovery circles and elsewhere, I proposed a study which looks at how women in particular navigate the complicated power dynamics of twelve-step programs and the implicit sexism and gendering of language and experience which does not (historically) question or address male privilege. This study was intended to look at appropriation of recovery by women who achieve long term sobriety, and adaptations of the program that allow some women to remain in the program, or to remain sober during periods of abstinence from meetings when others with similar histories leave the program and resume drinking.

**Participants**

The data collection process for the current study included recruitment of participants and conducting of interviews. During the initial phase I made contact with local AA members by attending meetings, telling members I met about my study, providing them with fliers (see Appendix B) and exchanging contact information. Three participants
learned about the study through word of mouth (one participant who heard about the study through a colleague then referred a friend; the final participant was referred by an earlier participant). I then called interested individuals in order to follow up and find out if they wanted to move forward with scheduling an interview. All parties who expressed interest chose to move forward, and we scheduled a two-hour block of time during which I would conduct an interview.

Five women were interviewed for the current project. Participants were recruited through word of mouth, researcher attendance of AA meetings, and distribution of fliers. Participants were offered reimbursement for travel costs up to ten dollars. None requested reimbursement.

An attempt for diversity of sample was made. Four out of five participants were white, and one identified as being of Colombian descent. While this may appear to be somewhat homogenous, it is representative of the region where the study was done. Demographic information was not collected, but all five participants indicated that they identify as heterosexual. All five participants signed a release stating that they met the requirements of the study including at least three years of continuous sobriety (including abstinence from drugs and alcohol and also regular AA meeting attendance and involvement in the AA program), and the absence of co-occurring mental health disorders.

I am profoundly grateful to all five participants who so graciously shared their stories with me. I was moved by each narrative in different ways, and also felt resonances between narratives that would be likely to strike chords with most women. It has been a
struggle throughout the process of analysis, to decide how to share the beauty, strength 
and resourcefulness present in these stories and these lives without endangering each 
participant’s right to privacy.

Participant one reported nearly forty years of continuous sobriety and AA 
involvement. It should be noted that length of sobriety is not necessarily synonymous 
with quality of sobriety, but the breadth of experience and perspective gained during 
many years of AA involvement is very relevant to the current study. Participant one 
contacted me after hearing about my study through a mutual acquaintance and expressed 
interest in participating. Her experience in AA during the 1970’s and 1980’s provided 
valuable perspective on how things have changed in the fellowship and what it was like 
for a woman to be part of the fellowship when there were far fewer women involved.

Participant two reported more than twenty-five years of continuous sobriety. She 
was referred by participant one. Her lengthy career as a nurse was central to her story, 
and provided a unique perspective. She also provided perspective on regional differences 
in AA norms and traditions.

Participant three was newest to recovery out of the five, and said she recently 
celebrated her four-year anniversary. Her experience as a minority and an adoptee was a 
focus in her narrative, and provided valuable depth and insight. She was honest and 
generous in sharing her story, as were all five participants. She was recruited to the study 
by the researcher at an AA meeting.

Participant four reported more than twenty-five years of continuous sobriety. She 
shared her story with colorful detail, candor and a lot of humor. Her perspective on AA in
different states in the US was valuable. She was recruited by the researcher at an AA meeting.

Participant five reported more than thirty-five years of continuous sobriety. Her story included many elements that highlighted the intergenerational aspects of alcoholism, and the challenges of addiction and recovery for women and mothers, specifically. She was referred to the study by participant four.

*Procedures*

All participants were asked if they would like to meet at their home or would prefer that I schedule a different location. Three participants requested that the interview be conducted at my home and I obliged. Two participants invited me to interview them in their homes.

Participants signed consent forms (see Appendix A) allowing for audio-recording of the interview, and were offered a copy of the consent form. I started each interview by reading the following paragraph:

Please talk about your experience in Alcoholics Anonymous and your experience of working the twelve steps with your sponsor. Feel free to share anything that comes to mind that you think will help me understand what it has been like for you to get sober as a woman in AA.

Follow up questions were primarily limited to requests for clarification and my efforts to better understand the experiences shared by the participant.
Method of Analysis

The methodological approach of this study is empirical-phenomenological. Adapting procedures outlined by Giorgi (1985), Wertz (1984), and Walsh (1995), I carried out the following steps of qualitative analysis:

1. Each recorded interview was transcribed and all identifying information was removed.

2. Each interview was first read in its entirety so as to generate a sense of the whole.

3. After the initial read-through, I began breaking each narrative up into meaning units (Giorgi, 1985). Meaning units were distinguished by a forward slash at the cleavage between identified units. This process was undertaken with the understanding that increasing familiarity with the data and with subsequent readings of transcripts would lead to fine-tuning of meaning units. Highlighting was used to demarcate meaning units as greater clarity was achieved.

4. Meaning units were translated into psychologically resonant themes, which were listed and compiled to form five unique structures of recovery (one for each participant).

5. Each of the five structures and the themes and meanings therein were compared and analyzed for tensions and similarities in order to arrive at common and important themes.

The final list of themes thus reflects not a general or universal structure of recovery, but identifies aspects of recovery that are relevant or resonant to most women in recovery, or are particularly relevant to many women in recovery.
After reading each transcript in its entirety, I began breaking the interviews down into meaning units, inserting a forward slash between each identified meaning unit. After completing this process with each transcript, I went through and made notes corresponding with meaning units, in a preliminary effort to refine the meanings that were present, using the same word or phrase for repetitions of the same or similar meanings in order to arrive at relevant themes. After completing this process, I listed each identified theme. Through a process of reflection and analysis, I refined and distinguished themes, combining those that appeared redundant on further reflection and further articulating those that were too general (e.g., “keeping up a façade” got folded into “isolation” over the course of analysis, whereas “trust” emerged as distinct from “surrender” as analysis progressed).

After completing the process of identifying meaning units, refining meaning units into themes and examining identified themes for redundancy and relevance, and compiling themes from all five interviews, twenty-nine themes were identified. As understanding of the issues and familiarity with the transcripts grew, I refined the initial list of twenty-nine themes down to thirteen. Toward the end of the process, identified themes of keeping up a facade, and maintenance were removed. With careful analysis of the data, it became evident that while keeping up a façade, and feelings of being a fraud were mentioned in four out of five interviews, these references were better understood as a description of isolation than as a distinct theme. Maintenance was discarded because it turned out to be too broad. It connotes a stage of recovery that was referenced by all five participants, but was not supported as a distinct theme, since it is implied that any long-
term member of AA who attends meetings regularly, works the steps and remains sober is engaged in maintenance of her sobriety. Other discarded themes were also understood as being descriptive of, and/or part of larger themes.

**Results**

The following themes (Table 1) were identified through a process of qualitative analysis (see *Method of Analysis*, above). The goal of this study was not to provide a general structure of recovery, but to identify qualities, behaviors and characteristics that contribute to achieving long-term sobriety. Toward this end, prominent themes were included even if they were not present in all five narratives. However, in the interest of rigor, only themes that were present in at least four narratives are included here.
Table 1. Themes Identified in Current Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Emphasis on the maternal in personal history and interpretation of AA program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Assimilation of 12 steps in life leading to prioritization of meaningful work and big picture focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Connection of AA versus Isolation in addiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Intimacy between women, and replacing of adversarial relationships with friendship and mentorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Growth in relationship and the emergence of reciprocity and interdependence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Education, growth and improving oneself as a priority and life orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Distinction between theoretical versus experiential and valuing of the practical and pragmatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Sponsorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Emphasis on accountability and honesty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Acceptance, surrender and willingness to let go of control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Valuing of autonomy, manifesting in rejection of hierarchy and prioritization of independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Shared experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It came as a surprise to me that the analysis section of this project felt like the most challenging. After years of exposure to AA culture at a personal and professional level, interacting with friends and clients who were either dealing effectively with substance abuse problems, or who warranted referral to mutual aid support groups like AA, I felt quite familiar with AA principles and culture. I heard very little that surprised me in the moment, as an interviewer/researcher. I followed my dissertation proposal...
diligently, rereading each transcribed interview to gain a sense of the larger structure. I did my best to set aside assumptions, biases and personal reactions. I had to work especially hard to disregard the seemingly automatic structures, or narratives that I had built while conducting interviews and making associations with things I already felt that I knew about AA and recovery culture. It was particularly difficult to suspend my inclination to look for the distinctly feminine experiences and themes that I expected to find, and simply attend to the language and content of the each interview.

When considering the above list of themes, several additional ideas should be noted since they were present in all five narratives, but make better sense as categories or areas of experience that were shared. First, relationships with men were prominent in all five interviews. Each participant emphasized corrective male relationships that stood out as part of her narrative and self-understanding. Four out of five participants spoke extensively about abusive romantic partners and one participant spoke about the effect that her abusive father had on her development. Because of the nature of this project, exploring women’s experience, and my decision to make that goal explicit in the interview process, it is difficult to determine whether or to what extent participants focused on gender dynamics more than they might have without prompting. For this reason, gender was left out as a theme, in favor of a more rigorous, nuanced understanding of feminine experience in an active rather than reactive sense (for example, intimacy between women and disrupted relationship with mother were included as themes, whereas prioritization of relationships with men was dismissed as too broad).
Additionally, the presence of a violent, controlling background seemed significant as a characteristic. Each participant responded differently to the open-ended interview style. Two participants heard the prompt and seemed to interpret the invitation to talk about their recovery as meaning that they should focus on their time in sobriety and in AA, and not talk about their experience in active addiction. Two participants shared some details about their drinking and using as a background for their recovery narrative, and one participant said virtually nothing about her drinking and using experience but told the story of her life since getting sober and attending AA meetings. Given this context, it seems relevant that all five participants either described in detail or referred in passing but powerful language to controlling backgrounds, either in the nuclear family, or romantic relationships in adulthood. Participant two explicitly related her experience with substances to a sense of relief from trauma she suffered in an abusive relationship, and participant three described a romantic partner who was so abusive that her life was in danger, and alcohol provided her the courage she needed to “talk back,” and eventually to leave. Participant five emphasized her “narcissistic” mother and alcoholic father, and a lack of protective parenting that resulted in her being abused by neighborhood boys. Because of the open interview style, and the varied emphasis on the past as a factor in their relationship with substances and substance abuse, few conclusions can be drawn regarding the significance of abuse history in female addicts and alcoholics. Still, it is important to consider, especially in light of other literature that is bringing to light the significance of treating trauma early in recovering women (see discussion section).
The final thirteen themes will be described and discussed here, along with excerpts and quotes that support the findings.

Themes

1. Emphasis on the maternal in personal history and interpretation of AA program.

All five participants talked about parenting issues, difficulty with mother or mothering, and disrupted maternal relationships in one form or another. Participant one spoke at length about how her program of recovery is applied in her role as the mother of an alcoholic. Referring to her daughter, she said,

“The hospital has pages and pages on her. And it’s sad, and it’s tragic. It’s—I’m powerless. I’m powerless over that girl. I can only love her as a mother and do things that are motherly things. I cannot help her as a suffering alcoholic because she doesn’t want what I have. I hope someday she will.” (Line 642)

Participant five also talked about difficulties as an alcoholic mother, and her efforts to let go of trying to control outcomes in her son’s lives, and participant two shared similar ideas. Participant four told the story of having a child in early sobriety and putting that child up for adoption. She also spoke movingly about her sense that as a sponsor, much of what she does is parent young women who have no idea how to live and have no sense of self-worth or agency.

Participant three emphasized relationship throughout her narrative, and said that one of the most prominent relationships in her life has been with her adoptive mother, with whom she used to feel she had nothing in common, but who has become near and dear since she got sober. Comments about her biological mother and how that broken relationship was part of her drinking were compelling, and included the following:
“I remember feeling that whenever I would drink I would feel really close to my birth mom for some reason. It was really weird, like, I never really—I’ve never really had a conversation with her, obviously I’ve met her, but I’ve never really met her as an adult or anything. But I remember just feeling like, I don’t know, when I drank I felt like…this is what’s up, this is where I’m meant to be.” (Line 147)

As illustrated by the two quotes above, motherhood and the experience of being a daughter weave together many themes of addiction and recovery for all five women.

Participant five shared a pivotal time in her recovery when she was able to connect with other mothers in AA and have informal meetings in the park, removing obstacles of child care and allowing these busy women to access the fellowship and the program.

2. Assimilation of 12 steps in life leading to prioritization of meaningful work and big picture focus

One particularly interesting theme that emerged strongly in four out of five interviews, and was present in the remaining one, was the idea that in some sense, AA and recovery are not just about alcohol. Perhaps participant four put it most succinctly when she said, “Don’t apply the steps to your life, apply your life to the steps.” (Line 509) Other participants corroborated this sentiment when they shared about ways that the program of AA’s twelve steps had infiltrated how they see the world, how they choose jobs, parent their children, engage in romantic relationships, and make employment decisions. Participant one described several different jobs she has held in recovery, and her sense that recovery provided her with an orientation that allowed her to have success on unexpected levels. She began by saying, “And my big thing is, I never want to, I never want to make money out of my disease,” but acknowledged that her experience in the
program was central to her employment choices and successful career working in the field of recovery in various administrative roles.

“And I said, well I don’t want to make money off my disease and they said well, you’re not. You’re doing the paperwork…And so when they started to go downhill they dismissed me first, one because I was a higher paid employee, and two, because I trained all my staff to take over for me. Because to me, that’s the responsible thing to do. And so um, they really didn’t miss my presence that much. And then I applied for jobs at the hospital…And this guy called me and said, we need your help with the laws, we’ve got to have manuals in two weeks. So I went through and I did all their manuals…And um, uh, so I wasn’t really making money off my disease, it was off my skills.” (Line 362)

Ultimately, participant one summed it up by saying, “I’ve assimilated AA into my personality.” (Line 607)

Regarding the question of how AA becomes a part of ones daily experience and orientation toward life and career, participant five also spoke to the issue of what it means to have a great life. Regarding her career, she said, “It was a job I would have done for free. But my definition of a great life is, you find your passion and then find a way to get paid for it. And so, my school counseling career, here I am a former child abuser, working with kids.” (Line 440)

3. Connection of AA versus isolation in addiction

All five participants shared narratives that emphasized connection as a central aspect of recovery. The four participants who shared about their lives before recovery juxtaposed experiences of profound isolation in addiction, with a gradually dawning sense of being connected and being a part of something in AA. Three participants shared stories that conveyed a sense of connection as something new, and radical, previously unimagined and mysterious. Participant three in particular, emphasized a growing
consciousness of love in her life, which is as significant as the absence of alcohol.

Regarding her former ideas of love, she said,

“And I feel like, I had a lot of struggles too with the whole love thing, which is also another emotion. So, you know, I just, like I just, it sort of just clicked to me the other day listening to someone’s story that, when I was out, you know—I slept with a lot of married men, and was totally ok with it. I mean, I’d have some times where I’d be like, oh this is—I’m a horrible person. But then I’d be like, well, it takes two to tango. And I’m not the one who’s—you know. And I think that for me doing that was sort of like, nobody really loves anybody. Because if this person can just sleep with me, and they’re supposed to like be with their wife and love their family, and they’re willing to put all of that on the line just to be with me, then like, nobody—yeah, nobodies’ really in love with anybody.” (Line 316)

Although participant three spoke passionately about her newfound sense of love and connection in the program of AA (see intimacy theme, below) after four years sober, she still struggles with a habitual tendency to isolate and avoid contact, especially when things get difficult and life problems arise. She sees these tendencies as part of her alcoholism at a characterological level, and the treatment of her isolation as a crucial aspect of treating her addiction.

“Sometimes that’s scary, like I think sometimes with my alcoholism I still have those moments where it’s too much, like I just want to run away and not have anybody know me and not be like, present I guess. But it’s recognizing women like K- and other people that still show up in light of like, major shit going on in their life that show me that, yeah, you can’t just like, run away from it, even if you feel like running away, you know?” (Line 725)

All four of the other interviewees emphasized the importance of friendship, sponsorship and accountability as invaluable both in helping them adopt a lifestyle of abstinence from substances, and also in maintaining that lifestyle and growing as people. Participant four said, “The only people I had were the people in AA.” (Line 127) While participant two was married and still had family in her life when she got sober, she still
asserted the importance of AA in remedying her isolation, saying, “I didn’t have a good record of forming a true partnership with another human being.” (Line 390) One of participant five’s closing statements was the following:

“Well, right now the best friends I have in the world are in alcoholics anonymous. And they are the last things I was looking for. I came in here, I didn’t know you would find real fellowship of the heart. I wouldn’t ever have dreamed that the people that know me best and love me best are in these rooms.” (Line 560)

4. Intimacy between women, and replacing of adversarial relationships with friendship and mentorship

It is difficult to tease apart themes of connection from those of shared intimacy with other women, since all five participants spoke at length about the importance of their relationships with women in the program. There is something important though, about the emphasis on non-romantic relationships with other women, particularly in the context of disrupted relationships with men. Participant two put it simply when she said, “the most valuable part of my program is friendships with women.” (Line 735) Participant three compared her current relationships with women to her past relationships, saying, “They’re not related to anything bad. It’s like, something that’s, like one of the biggest accomplishments of my life. They’re not like a friend of my boyfriend’s, or a friend of my family. They’re not just like, some person that I met randomly. These are people that are on the same wavelength that I am.” (Line 500)

One element that stood out as characteristic of these relationships with women was a sense of mutual caring or mentorship, even in relationships that were not explicitly sponsorship relationships. Participant three said, “It’s just it’s amazing to um, just have
those experiences with the ladies that are in my life now, that teach me stuff. Like I never thought that I could be taught things by women.” (Line 611) Participant four strongly echoed this sentiment when she said,

“The inappropriate sexuality that I exhibited, I needed to be around women. I needed to learn that women are not a problem, women are not the enemy, women are not fucking all bitches. I hated women, I didn’t want to be around women because I couldn’t manipulate them. Because I couldn’t con them.” (Line 314)

She went on to say simply, connecting with women was “incredibly important.” (Line 321) This was not a revelation that came easily to her, as evidenced by the following statement,

“I was encouraged, when I got sober, to attend the women’s meeting because I had sexuality issues. I didn’t want to reach out to women, and it gave me an opportunity to reach past that—oh my god—homophobic—it was a level of homophobia as well. You know um, and I went, wow, these ladies are nice, and they walked me through this pregnancy that I had, and childbirth, and I got to realize that wow, women aren’t bad. Women were out for three things, your money, your dope or your old man. And um, wow, these [women] are ok.” (Line 292)

Participant five emphasized motherhood as a significant part of her life, and talked about being one of the only women in AA in her area for many years, and while she was adamant that the men in the program were accepting and non-judgmental she acknowledged the importance of connecting with other women, saying, “More and more women were coming in, and I was feeling more and more a part of.” (Line 417)

5. Growth in relationship and the emergence of reciprocity and interdependence

Another theme that was difficult to separate from connection and/or intimacy with women was the idea of growth in relationship, that relationships are not simply a means to an end, but an intricate and subtle end in themselves. In relationship, all five
participants found that they learned about reciprocity, generosity, and joy in friendship that took on a momentum of its own, and was not motivated by acquisitiveness, competition or a need for stability or caretaking. Participant three talked about the way that her learning in relationship with friends in the program has changed how she relates to other people in her life:

“These relationships with women have been so instrumental in, in even my relationship with my husband today. I am the woman that I am today because of women in recovery. You know, like, I wouldn’t know how to be. I don’t know about this whole being a lady thing, cause I still burp in public and I do very unladylike things, but you know, they taught me how to, how to receive love.” (Line 697)

Participant two explicitly related her interpersonal development to her struggles with jealousy and insecurity in romantic relationships, explaining that her experience in AA helped her gain a new perspective on love.

“I think really what most women want is to be cherished—and I think maybe men want that too! And it might look a little different or something, they might interpret some things a little differently, but really what they want is to be adored…And I do things in my relationship where like, S- job is to wash the floors and every time he does it he has to say, do you notice anything different? Whereas, when I scrub the toilet I don’t come in and go, hey, did you notice anything? And I could say, and I would say in the past, hey, you live here too! There’s no reason you shouldn’t do that, I don’t think you necessarily need any extra praise about that. But instead I’ll say, oh, honey! It looks like a white tornado came through here, I’m so pleased! I just make a big fuss about it, which makes him want to do it more! So maybe that’s manipulation, I guess? But it’s also like, you know, it’s the same thing you would do with your child, you really praise them for things.” (Line 589)

Participant five emphasized her experience having lost control as a parent, and the idea that AA gave her a life she couldn’t have imagined, as a mother and a professional (see Education/growth section below).
6. Education, growth and improving oneself as a priority and life orientation

Four out of five participants spoke explicitly about education, pursuing higher education and/or a career, and encouraging others to pursue these things. Participant four was adamant that school should be considered as an option, logically and methodically and is not necessarily a part of recovery, but shared that it was part of her recovery. She said, “I wasn’t that coherent—that cognizant of my mental health, but everybody said B-, you need to go to college, you’re dumb as a brick, you need to go to school.” (Line 125)

For participant one, education and growth were understood in a broader context of ongoing growth. She said she has encouraged most of her sponsees to further their education, and added,

“Yeah, I encourage growth, I encourage growth. Um, and I guess that’s my big thing in life, although I think I’m at appoint where I feel really serene—I mean, I’m seventy years old. How much more do you want out of life than what I have? You know? A sober daughter would be nice, because she’s better to travel with, but um, I really think I’ve got the best of all possible worlds. I can work the land when I need to work the land. I can work my spiritual self when I need to work that. I am obviously working on my physical self.” (Line 756)

Participant five’s narrative centered on a sense of helplessness and reactivity early in life when she feared abusive boyfriends, entered a destructive, loveless marriage for safety and convenience, and only found her own calling far later as an adult and a mother.

“So I get into this program, I went through it, and my second year I was in an internship at B- High School, and at the end of that internship I was hired. So, a couple of years ago I retired after 28 years of a counseling career. And um, it was a job beyond my wildest dreams. It was a job I would have done for free. But my definition of a great life is, you find your passion and then find a way to get paid for it. And so, my school counseling career, here I am a former child abuser, working with kids. Having a heart for them because I’ve been at the bottom, and I have a heart for kids who’ve been at the bottom.” (Line 437)
The narrative of participant two centered almost entirely around her passion for nursing, and her efforts to navigate and manage a career in nursing which allowed her access to drugs of all kinds, with the knowledge that she was an addict. She ended up being able to translate her own experience into mentoring and supporting other addicted nurses.

7. Distinction between theoretical versus experiential and valuing of the practical and pragmatic

A seventh theme that emerged had to do with a shared sense that there is a crucial distinction between treatment (education) and recovery (practice) that is often missed or misunderstood. This theme is difficult to parse out since it is possible that there is a regional or demographic factor regarding these opinions, but it was emphasized enough by four participants, and mentioned by the fifth, that it warrants comment. Significantly, none of the five participants interviewed credit treatment with their recovery, or even the initiation of their recovery. Participant two entered treatment at one point, but left and continued to drink and use. None of the other four participants made any reference to having been in treatment, and participant one expressed disdain for treatment centers, saying, “Luckily I didn’t go through a treatment center.” She went on to distinguish between treatment, as a form of education, and recovery as something very experiential and clearly distinct from education. “Because what the treatment centers—what they have, they have some of the education about what’s a chronic alcoholic, but for people who go through treatment centers to stay sober, they have to go to AA.” (Line 168)
Participant four used similarly disparaging language when referring to treatment and how she believes it has impacted AA culture, and also conveyed a sense that it is undiplomatic or unpopular to express these subversive opinions.

“It’s been whitewashed, it has been treatment-ized—I think treatment and the courts have screwed it up, they have screwed up the beautiful purity and unconditional love that is alcoholics anonymous, and we’ve created cliques, exclusivity and—ok now, I need to stop with my opinions because it will just piss me off.” (Line 272)

8. Sponsorship

In a certain sense, sponsorship is a problematic theme, since it is so pervasive in AA literature and culture that it would be unlikely for anyone in AA to share her story without making reference to sponsorship in some form. At the same time, all five women elaborated on aspects of sponsorship that help to flesh out the idea of a relationship that is not always captured or even implied when literature refers to sponsorship. All five participants spoke about their experience with sponsorship in terms that emphasized reciprocity, equality, accountability and humility. Sometimes participants seemed to be refuting an idealized, almost archetypal sponsorship relationship they had heard about, and other times they seemed only to be sharing a sense of relationship that is based on holding and accountability and was not juxtaposed with anything else. Participant two shared a characteristically skeptical opinion of expertise when she described a sponsor she valued by saying, “[she was] not one of those sponsors who would give you advice about stuff she didn’t really know about.” (Line 548) Participant three highlighted the relational growth and learning aspect of sponsorship in the following way:

“That’s also been another amazing difference of like, I’m going through something and I don’t know how to get through it and it’s frustrating, and the first
person I think of calling is my sponsor, a woman in the program who’s not gonna judge me for whatever it is, how silly it might be or whatever. And like, sharing that experience with me.” (Line 620)

Referring to a former sponsor early in sobriety, participant four said, “She was just an amazing woman. And she talked about things like, having to drink the men under the table. And that’s how I had to drink. Basically, she read my mail, she told my story. And… god puts the people I sponsor in front of me.” (Line 96)

Participant one told me that she didn’t even know if she qualified for the study because when she was new in AA, they didn’t approach sponsorship in the same way, and there was much more fluidity in how people addressed and worked through the steps. But she said that she has gone on to work the steps, and to sponsor other women, though she does it in a distinctly subversive, unique way that is designed to challenge the cookie cutter model of treatment and recovery she perceives as having emerged in recent years, in order to address the individual needs of each person. She explained that she usually turns people down when they ask her to sponsor them, and justified her approach in the following way:

“I would be doing a disservice to somebody who needed a sponsor who was gonna sit down and say, call me, I want you to call me at four o’clock every day, I want you to read this page in the big book, then I want you to read this page in the book—I would be doing a disservice to the person who needs that kind of guidance.” (Line 843)

9. Emphasis on accountability and honesty

All five participants emphasized accountability as a central aspect of the AA program. They gave multiple examples of how friendship, sponsorship, service positions in the AA fellowship and working the steps led them to evolve a lifestyle of honesty,
facilitated by holding relationships in which the expectation that they would show up and willingly take responsibility led to character development and self-insight. They also insisted that accountability and honesty are as crucial for a lasting program of recovery as water is to a fish. Participant one put it simply when she said, “If you’re not honest and you don’t have the desire, you’re not going to make it. You’re going to be out there drinking again.” (Line 685) Participant four expressed a resonant sentiment when she said, “I am very clear about, if you’re not honest you’ll get loaded and die.” (Line 368) Participant two made similar statements to these, and also added a dimension to the idea of accountability, by suggesting that her own mind cannot be trusted, and that AA provides a kind of backdrop against which she can more clearly observe her own intentions. Referring to her early days in AA, she said, “I didn’t really talk much. I mean, I was kind of—I think god struck me dumb, really, because I am a talker. And I also use that, those uh, verbal gymnastics and intellect and my great knowledge of literature to like, don’t look at the man behind the curtain!” (Line 347)

Participant two also displayed insight about practical ways that the structure of AA provides opportunities for self-reflection and accountability. Elaborating on her ideas about different meeting structures, specifically whether it is better to have a practice of calling on members or volunteering, she said,

“The trouble is, sometimes—[volunteering] just leads to too much thinking for me, ‘cause I sat there thinking, I think I know that I have something to say, but is it worthwhile? Should I just let them talk? It was just, thinking about me the whole time! And I couldn’t really listen! I got into too much thinking about self.” (Line 705)
She seemed to convey a sense that AA structure allows her to perceive her own feelings and motivations more clearly. Affirming that sentiment, participant four said simply, “We love you enough to tell you the flipping truth!” (Line 73)

**10. Acceptance, surrender, and willingness to let go of control**

In varied ways, each of the five participants pointed to surrender and letting go of control as pivotal in their recovery. Perhaps most poignant was participant one’s description of her sense of herself as being in her last years, in the final phase of her life. She spoke in poetic, glowing terms about her ability, now, with almost forty years of sobriety, to imagine a “beautiful death.” (Line 805) Participant two said, “I don’t live in fear and I don’t have to … control,” (Line 560) when elaborating on her history of abusive relationship and PTSD. She also described a particular moment when she felt she had reached the end of her rope and was willing to step out of the driver’s seat, so to speak, for the first time in her life. She shared the following experience about driving home from work at the hospital one night:

“I just got out of the car and I was like, screaming at the sky saying, if you’re so powerful, if you love me so much, why do you let me live like this? And uh, I don’t think that was really the right approach so I didn’t really get any help from that supposed prayer but um, in November of 1988 I was just at the end of my rope—and I don’t know why I didn’t just quit work, go to AA, those options didn’t really occur to me, I’ve never been able to stop myself, somebody always had to step in and stop me.” (Line 224)

Participant five shared a different sense of surrender. Referring to the neglect and abuse of her past, she shared an experience surrounding the death of her mother:

 “…I grieved the real mother that I never had. And I faced um, you know, you let go, you keep wishing for a better past. And then you grow to the point where you see that you never got one and you never will. And so what the program has taught me is how to make peace with my past. How not to shut the door on it, how
not to regret it. How to look at myself, as a young woman, with compassion instead of hatred.” (Line 507)

In the above quote, participant five elucidates an additional aspect of surrender that has to do with abandoning attempts at control and letting the past remain in the past. All five participants shared stories that were resonant with this idea.

11. Trust

There is a sense in which trust is present in most or all of the aforementioned themes. Yet, trust is still distinct, if only or significantly because it was so frequently named. Two out of five participants spoke explicitly to belonging to a disempowered population (racial/ethnic minority and impoverished), and their comments regarding trust and the challenges implicit in gaining trust were profound. Yet all five participants referred to trust often, whether directly or indirectly. Four out of five participants pointed to the sense of trust they felt on entering the rooms of AA, regardless of the gender of present members. The remaining participant spoke at length about her experience of gaining trust through relationship that was not sexual or romantic in nature. Referring to her minority status, she said, “You know, there’s a lot of trust issues, and there’s a lot of white people, and I’m like, riding in their cars to who-knows-where in the middle of the woods. And you know, nothing weird ever happened—I was sort of expecting the ball to drop, you know?” (Line 127)

Referring to her status as one of the only women in AA in her area, participant five shares a similar sense of wonder at her experience of safety, referring to a neighbor who took her to her first meeting,
“And…she takes me into this meeting and these men look at me and say, Al-Anon is in the next room, cause I’m young. And I looked at them and I thought, you have no idea who I am, I’m going to prove you wrong! Because that was my theory, I’m going to prove you wrong! I’m a coward but I’m a feisty coward.” (Line 394)

Later, she added, “those men were like father figures that I’d never had. They were loving and kind and tolerant and they didn’t judge me. And through all of my insanity, they kept saying, keep coming back.” (Line 402)

12. Valuing of autonomy, manifesting in rejection of hierarchy and prioritization of independence

As with several prior themes, this one is related and interwoven. There was a sense in which most participants were often speaking in opposition to a prevailing notion that they didn’t articulate. In certain cases, the prevailing, mainstream model of treatment was set up as a sort of straw man, but often there is a sense of striving and individuation that does not appear to be in opposition to anything. When asked to elaborate on her experience of being one of the only women in AA in her region, participant one had this to say:

“Well, I would guess until the beginning of the 80’s for at least five years. And the old guys used to really razz me. Because here I was, 31, I was short and I was cute, and [you] spilled more than [I] could drink, and I said well good, I’m glad you did! Because it got you here and I’m glad that you’re here. You know? And for years, as long as I was an area officer, when I got up to speak at the podium at the area, they would shout, stand up, stand up we can’t see you! And I would say, that’s ok you don’t have to see me, can you hear me?? Because they never had any problems hearing me, so, as long as you can hear me that’s ok, you don’t have to see me. As long as I was the area chair-person I had a foot stool I’d stand up on. And I had a barstool I’d sit up on so I was even with the mic, and when I went to stand up I had the foot stool I’d stand up on. Because as chairperson you really need control of the floor.” (Line 205)
Regarding her first mentor, an older man, participant one said, “If I hadn’t had that experience, if I hadn’t got that guy who was just so straight-laced, who let me grow at my own pace, he didn’t push me he didn’t prod me he didn’t make me uncomfortable, he just let me grow.” (Line 822) In a similar vein, participant four added, “Sponsorship was not ownership.” (Line 221)

All five women shared stories that highlighted their experience as people who were navigating newly found agency, and ability to maneuver in a world which had formerly felt mysterious and controlling. Regarding her newfound sense of self-awareness and self-control, and how alcohol impacted her self-expression, participant three shared,

“So, it’s just like, that process has been really hard for me, I think, the emotional—the emotional thing. Because sometimes I feel like I want to be emotional at some things and can’t, because I’m so used to just closing it in, and I feel really, uh, I feel like I never get that release. And alcohol did that for me. I would get really angry, or sad, or just frustrated or whatever, and then my thing was, I’d grab a drink! You know, and I’d get through it, I’d cry over it, I’d throw stuff or break things, or just do whatever, or get crazy, you know. Just let it all out.” (Line 238)

13. Shared experience

A valuing of shared experience was present in all five narratives. Each participant emphasized areas where the witnessing of her experience in the story or actions of another, lent valuable self-awareness and a profound sense of belonging where previously there had been none. Because belonging was so pivotal in leading to a sense of trust and accountability, all five participants seemed to suggest that some degree of recognizable, shared experience was in fact essential to embarking on a journey of recovery. Participant one stated, “We have to be a homogenous society.” (Line 937) Regarding women’s
meetings and their value, she went on to say, “I think sometimes you can get too specialized and you lose the bigger message. And so yeah, I wasn’t threatened by the old guys.” (Line 235) Participant two echoed this sentiment, but elaborated by saying, “this is what I tell sponsees, is you need to identify with us, but we need to identify with you too. And if you need to insist that you’re somehow unique then some of these old-timers, or maybe not old-timers, who are strictly alcoholic are going to think, well I can’t really help that person because I don’t have that experience. Then you miss out on something you might have been able to use.” (Line 303)

Participant four shared experience of this very ideal from the other direction when she referred to the older men who comprised the majority of AA members in the small town where she got sober,

“What they could have done was really ostracize me or isolate me as a young person, but they didn’t, they said, oh no honey, you’re no different than us, no-no honey you’re age doesn’t matter, no-no honey, what’s between your legs doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter—your race, your sex, your creed, your religion, native or non-native doesn’t matter. Race, sex doesn’t matter. It’s all about getting sober.” (Line 19)

While she said she understood the value of women’s meetings, participant four also had this to say: “That’s another thing they don’t do that they used to do. I [would] walk into a men’s meeting and I’m like, I’m sorry I didn’t realize this was a men’s meeting—I’m out of here, and they’re like, no no, no! If your ass is falling off, you’re welcome to stay.” (Line 881)
Discussion

Thirteen themes were identified through qualitative analysis of five participant interviews (see Table 1). Themes could be loosely interpreted as relating to intimacy, power and connection versus isolation. Shared experience and feeling understood were also prominent as a thread throughout themes and across participants.

Not all themes were prominent across participants, but all themes were present in at least four out of five stories. Because of the small sample size, and the subject matter, it made sense to explore the presented themes in context of and compared with themes identified in White and Chaney’s *Metaphors of Transformation* (1993) (See Table 2). This method of comparison contextualized the current study and allowed for a more in depth exploration of themes that appear to have a gender specific component, picking up the conversation where White and Chaney left off, and grounding their observations in the phenomenological, experiential language and methodology of the current study. As stated in the introduction, the current study can be seen as a response to *Metaphors of Transformation*, by White and Chaney (1993). *Metaphors of Transformation* was undertaken as a preliminary effort to identify and explore prominent themes and metaphors in mainstream recovery and treatment, with the assumption that in order to be successful, recovering women must adapt strategies and technologies that evolved to treat empowered, white men.

The following section will therefore be organized around White and Chaney’s structure of characteristically masculine and characteristically feminine metaphors for transformation and recovery. Quotes from and references to the current study will be
provided in the form of a dialogue with, and an effort will be made to support or
disconfirm and discuss themes raised in *Metaphors of Transformation* (Table 2).

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<th>Table 2. Themes From <em>Metaphors of Transformation</em> (1993)</th>
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While White and Chaney (1993) make an explicit distinction between masculine and feminine metaphors, experiences and language, this study sought to further emphasize the limitations of an explicitly gendered language around recovery and experience in general. Implicit in this approach is the idea that a spectrum of experience is available to people of all genders, but certain experiences are culturally conditioned in certain populations and impact how people are able to make use of resources that are available to them. Keeping this in mind, some places where distinctions between masculine and feminine metaphors seem not to hold up may be seen as still supporting differences between characteristically/traditionally masculine vs. feminine styles. Simply put, the current study hopes to extend and complicate the conversation begun by White and Chaney, holding the tension between respect for difference and the potential for a problematic essentializing of gendered experience. While all of White and Chaney’s identified metaphors (Table 2) proved to be relevant and resonant with themes identified in the current study, certain of White and Chaney’s themes were interpreted in ways that were inconsistent with the current findings (ie., Softening Judgment versus Learning to Judge). Other themes emerged so clearly and pervasively that they were relevant to all five participant narratives and most identified themes from the current study (eg., Dependency versus Autonomy, and Powerlessness versus Empowerment). Even themes that were overwhelmingly salient and complementary manifested in subtly different ways, and these tensions will be explored in the following sections.

White and Chaney suggest that there are “differences in the key ideas addicted men and women use to initiate, organize and sustain their recovery” (1993, p. 1). The
seventeen metaphors proposed by White and Chaney are designed to highlight important areas of thought, language and orientation where women may differ significantly from men in their experience of recovery. White and Chaney acknowledge the danger of simply replacing old stereotypes with current ones, but argue that it is worth the risk in order to arrive at a broader, more accurate picture of women’s recovery that isn’t adapted to or forced into a masculine structure of experience. They say,

“mainstream assessment, treatment and recovery technology in the addictions field was developed based on experience with men. Most of the basic paradigms, principles and practices of the field had been hardened and set before women arrived in great numbers as clients, volunteers or professional staff” (p. 3).

Central to White and Chaney’s argument is the suggestion that culturally empowered individuals respond differently to decreasing competence than those who are culturally disempowered. If metaphors make sense of and “provide a cognitive cornerstone” (p. 8) for moving through experience and moving forward in recovery, then it makes sense to explore and assess the validity of metaphors besides traditionally masculine ones that evolved in a context of relative agency. The following section will explore each of White and Chaney’s seventeen metaphors (in italics) and provide supporting and/or disconfirming quotes and references from the current study to elaborate and refine upon the proposed metaphors.

*Powerlessness vs. Empowerment: Acceptance vs. powerlessness.* White and Chaney suggest that a central difference between the experience of men and women in recovery might center around the historically empowered position of men and the relatively disempowered position held by women. They suggest that “Cultural empowerment bestows a mantle of superiority; cultural disempowerment creates an
unending succession of wounds to one’s legitimacy and value.” (p. 10) Women are not enculturated to believe in their own power or agency, so there is a sense in which surrender might be experienced as a further injury. For men, this leveling of ego is likely to be interpreted as a breakthrough, an experience of self outside of cultural paradigm, a “breakthrough in self-perception” (p. 10) In light of this distinction, it is easy to see how old school AA practices of tough love, confrontation technology and keeping things simple might help move men forward, but re-victimize women as well as members of other disenfranchised populations. Findings from the current study support this interpretation, and suggest that at least for some women, an approach that relies heavily on confrontational strategies and does not allow for individuality and nuanced experience is likely to either inspire rebelliousness or drive some female members away from the fellowship. Participant two shared her experience in a treatment center that relied on confrontation, and her sense that it was completely unhelpful, and potentially damaging to her and her children. As a woman with an abusive marriage in her past, she might be seen as having been particularly vulnerable and sensitive to abuses of power in a program dependent on obedience and confrontation. While participant two was able to find long-term sobriety and recovery in AA, much of her growth and healing seemed to center around experiences where she was able to advocate for herself. This supports White and Chaney’s assertion regarding surrender and loss of control. “For culturally empowered men, recovery begins with the experience of surrender to one’s powerlessness and loss of control. For culturally disempowered women, recovery begins with the experience of empowerment—recognizing and embracing the power to shape one’s own destiny.” (p.
11) Participant two provided a further example of this when she shared her experience of meeting with a representative from the nursing board.

“And somebody said to me...well, do you want a lawyer to go in there with you? Then I got scared and I said, what do I need a lawyer for? And she said, well I don’t know, I just am asking, you have the right to have one and I thought, no, I’m not going to have a lawyer. I don’t want this to be adversarial. I want to be...I want it all to be off of me.” (Line 279)

White and Chaney’s suggestion that empowerment may be as important, or more important than acknowledging powerlessness for recovering women relates to several themes that emerged from the current study, including rejection of hierarchy in AA; history of violent, controlling relationships; accountability and honesty and also, the importance of acceptance, surrender and letting go of control. While these may seem contradictory in a certain sense, the goal here is not to throw out characteristically male metaphors and replace them with characteristically female ones, but to complicate and flesh out the experience of women for whom metaphors that speak to an empowered societal role are inaccurate or don’t tell the whole story. All five participants shared experiences that emphasize the value of empowerment and achieving a sense of agency. But surrender, acceptance and letting go of control were prominent in all five narratives as well. Participant two shared a story that highlighted the complexity of her experience around surrender:

“I just got out of the car and I was like, screaming at the sky saying, if you’re so powerful, if you love me so much, why do you let me live like this? And uh, I don’t think that was really the right approach so I didn’t really get any help from that supposed prayer but um, in November of 1988 I was just at the end of my rope—and I don’t know why I didn’t just quit work, go to AA, those options didn’t really occur to me. I’ve never been able to stop myself, somebody always had to step in and stop me.” (Line 224)
This excerpt speaks to participant two’s lack of agency, and her awareness that a history of dependence on others was problematic, but also the idea that, paradoxically, surrender is part of how she might achieve greater agency.

_Hitting Bottom (pain) vs. Seeing the Top (hope); enabling vs. empowering._ White and Chaney point to hitting bottom as an effective motivational crisis for empowered white men, but question whether hitting bottom as a metaphor, might have little meaning for disempowered, disenfranchised people. One refrain commonly heard around AA circles is, _how bad does it have to get?_ This question makes sense in the context of compulsive substance use contributing to a downward spiral in which a previously successful individual finds that his addiction leads to loss of financial stability, productivity, meaningful relationships, mental health, confidence and self-respect. That metaphor might be far less meaningful to someone who never has rarely experienced stability, agency, self-respect, etcetera. Simply put, the question, _how bad does it have to get,_ doesn’t make sense if it was never good in the first place, and throws the whole concept of rehabilitation into question. This distinction was born out in the stories of all five participants, and was especially relevant to the themes around sponsorship as participants sorted out their feelings and expressed their opinions about what kinds of help are appropriate to provide to people at various stages of recovery. There is a sense in which all five participants were working to strike a balance between supporting other women in AA, and drawing them into the fellowship, and the other extreme of encouraging those women to gain their own balance and achieve a sense of accountability and independence. Participant three, the newest to recovery with four years of sustained
sobriety, talked about her efforts to balance helping behavior with her desire to encourage independence and agency in her sponsees. Referring to her sponsees, she said:

“I do a lot of checking in on them. Like, how are you doing, how did your dentist appointment go, what’s going on with this—I feel like, I am sort of trying to learn how to balance that out a little bit because they also need to learn to have some accountability for their program a little bit. I’ve reminded the one you know, hey, you need to reach out, you need to keep this alive because I want to get you through your steps and then you can pass it on to someone else and like, it’s so easy to let it go by the wayside.” (Line 809)

Regarding pain as a motivator, participant two spoke directly to her sense of alcohol as a relief when she said, “…I never got any help for what had just happened to me, you know, four years of being beaten and brutalized and other things too. So I just kind of, I thought that was over and stuffed it away. But I think that when I picked up a drink and started smoking pot that it meant more to me than maybe it might have, just because it was like, relief.” (Line 17) In a paradoxical way, participant two’s discovery of alcohol and drugs remedied emotional problems that stemmed from her past. It could be argued that her abusive marriage was an experiential bottom for her. At least, it is difficult to interpret her path as one in which there is a clear descent from functionality and agency to incompetence and failure. For people with stories like this, White and Chaney suggest that it may be more useful to consider a metaphor that emphasizes hope, rather than hitting bottom. Perhaps it is more important to consider how we might convince these people that things could be good, that there could be a top, since perhaps all they know is the bottom.

Participant three also talked about the sense in which alcohol could not be identified as unequivocally problematic, since it was a solution for and provided relief from
emotional distress and feelings of helplessness. Referring to her dangerously violent ex-boyfriend and how alcohol helped her survive, she said,

“[Alcohol] sort of molded, it helped mold me, I felt, into a person that I wanted to be. Like, I felt like I couldn’t be that person sober. I couldn’t be emotional, I couldn’t say what was on my mind, I couldn’t just not care…and it was just—like, when I drank was the only time I could ever talk back to my ex, and even then it was like, super dangerous. But, you know, it was just…and even then it was like, when I drank I felt like I could get the balls up enough to leave.” (Line 155)

Even for women who appear to have successfully adopted and assimilated the characteristically male metaphors and themes of AA, certain aspects of female experience must take into account differences in power in order to be accurate. While participant four promoted an approach to recovery that was largely consistent with an old-school, confrontational style, she was also adamant that recovering alcoholics in AA have an obligation to support each other in a way that is sometimes interpreted as enabling, or rescuing. Specifically, participant four was critical of AA members who don’t want to have contact with active alcoholics. As White and Chaney point out, some of these rescuing or enabling kinds of behaviors and activities might actually be pivotal in igniting a process of recovery in women (there is a parallel here with the idea of non-compliance in mental health care – historically, many providers wanted people to display a willingness and motivation to engage in treatment, and discharged them if they were unwilling to do so in an effort to prevent enabling or collusion – yet in the process, treatment may be denied to those who need it most). In order to appreciate fully and accurately the experience of women and minorities, we must take into consideration aspects of learned helplessness and learned hopelessness that may be a factor in determining what modalities and methods are likely to be successful in reaching certain
addicts. Rather than interpreting characteristically feminine helping behaviors as enabling, White and Chaney suggest these behaviors may be a means of infusing hope; “It is our energy, our caring, our hope, our belief in them—the existence of an empowering relationship—that must initiate the leap of faith into recovery. If we wait for them to hit bottom, they will die.” (p. 13)

While the idea that pain as a motivator is likely to be less meaningful for women and other disempowered populations, this is one of several areas where White and Chaney may overreach slightly in suggesting that this insight might be applied to women generally. Participant four, in particular, used characteristically masculine language throughout her interview, and espoused a confrontational style. At one point she made some interesting comments about pain as a motivator, suggesting that this is a reason to avoid antidepressants and other medications in early recovery, since medications may prevent a person from experiencing potent, productive pain.

“I don’t know how to say it because I don’t talk about it too much…I needed to—for me, I need to feel, and I needed to feel like that absolute piece of whale shit, bottom of the barrel, I needed every fucking feeling, every—all of that snot slinging emotion, fetal position on the couch for a year—which I did—I needed that…I needed that emotion, those feelings. I needed to be present for those feelings because that pain, that gut-wrenching hellfire fuck the world pain is what motivated me to get better.” (Line 811)

_We (connectedness) vs. I (individuation)._ These metaphors were prominent in all five interviews, and were also relevant to the first metaphors discussed, empowerment vs. powerlessness. As with many other distinctions and differences in feminine experience, this one showed up in a spectrum, where exploring feminine narratives can help to flesh out human experience and provide a richer, more accurate description of experience, but
should not be interpreted too literally as women having an alternative experience that differs fundamentally from that of men. In fact all five participants emphasized connection in the fellowship of AA as crucial to their recovery, but also shared stories that conveyed the importance of individuation, and the significance of events and relationships that contributed to a growing sense of agency and independence. White and Chaney suggest that in general, women tend to evolve recovery maps and benefit from narratives that emphasize independence, whereas men are likely to evolve and benefit from recovery maps that emphasize intimacy. This interpretation highlights aspects of recovery that provide corrective experiences. While it is a compelling theory, findings from the current study can be interpreted as challenging the association between the two ends of this spectrum - isolation versus connection - and male versus female experience, respectively. While the metaphorical spectrum proposed by White and Chaney is useful and certainly highlights an important aspect of experience that is relevant to recovery, the current research does not support the idea that female addicts are more connected than their male counterparts. In fact, all five participants were profoundly isolated in addiction, and described learning to connect as a central metaphor for their recovery. While White and Chaney’s suggestion that women are culturally programmed for connection is well taken, this does not necessarily mean that alcoholic women have a tendency toward fusion and enmeshment or are more successful than men at forging interpersonal bonds. In fact, cultural pressure toward connection for women may compound the effects of alcoholic isolation, leading alcoholic women to experience themselves as all the more deviant and deficient due to their inability to form lasting
connections. After all, White’s research suggests that women have a tendency to hide their addiction longer and go into treatment later (1993, p. 3).

Still, themes of isolation and connection were prominent and powerful throughout all five interviews and related to identified themes of connection vs. isolation; sponsorship; intimacy between women; autonomy. During her interview, participant three focused overwhelmingly on the evolution of her sobriety in terms of the relationships she has been able to form with women, and which were simply out of reach when she was isolated in her drinking. Regarding her former isolation and the initial strangeness of forming relationships with women, she said:

“And, so yeah, when all these ladies surrounded me after the meeting I was just like, this is weird. I don’t know. Because men are such a big part of my story, getting any kind of attention from women was like, foreign to me. I was the girl who always said, Oh, I get along with dudes better than girls. I never really gave girls a chance though, either.”

Participant four shared a similar sentiment when she said, “The inappropriate sexuality that I exhibited, I needed to be around women. I needed to learn that women are not a problem, women are not the enemy, women are not fucking all bitches. I hated women, I didn’t want to be around women because I couldn’t manipulate them. Because I couldn’t con them.”

Participant two expressed a similar opinion, saying, “I didn’t have a good record of forming a true partnership with another human being” (Line 405). She went on to say, “the most valuable part of my program is friendships with women” (Line 767)

*Power greater than (outside) the self vs. power with the self.* This distinction, suggested by White and Chaney, showed up in some very interesting ways in the
narratives of all five participants. It was associated with themes of connection, female intimacy and acceptance/surrender. In line with White And Chaney’s suggestion that tapping into previously unknown internal strengths may be as important for recovering women as finding a higher power outside the self, all five women emphasized fellowship, pointing to loving, supportive relationships with other women in AA as the truly miraculous reality of their recovery. All five women interviewed shared stories about a higher power, but the overwhelming content of their narratives, and the daily maintenance measures they described, emphasized ability to connect with others as the real saving grace. Describing a former sponsor, participant four said, “She was just an amazing woman. And she talked about things like, having to drink the men under the table. And that’s how I had to drink. Basically, she read my mail, she told my story. And uh, you know god puts in front of you—god puts the people I sponsor in front of me.”

(Line 96) This quote conveys a sentiment often repeated in AA, that god speaks through other people. In that regard, it is the openness of the individual that allows her to hear and make sense of the message. For participant three, the capacity to love and be loved seems to have the qualities of a higher power.

“These relationships with women have been so instrumental in, in even my relationship with my husband today. I am the woman that I am today because of women in recovery. You know, like, I wouldn’t know how to be. I don’t know about this whole being a lady thing, cause I still burp in public and I do very unladylike things, but you know, they taught me how to, how to receive love.” (Line 697)

Interestingly, these quotes convey a sense that participants moved from identifying with an outside source to accepting responsibility and having accountability. This orientation is reminiscent of White and Chaney’s suggestion that empowerment
might be as crucial for women as accepting powerlessness, and individuation may be as important as connection. The stories these women told to share their sense of a higher power suggest that letting go of control doesn’t have to become a reliance on something outside. Rather, the ability to let go of control and lean on each other allowed them greater independence and freedom. This idea supports White and Chaney’s suggestion that, “Where turning their will and their life over to something outside the self might be a new experience for men, it would be business as usual for many women.” (p. 16) This is also an area where overstating the distinction between a characteristically male and characteristically female version of the experience is likely to lead to inaccuracy. Instead, we might enrich and deepen the idea of reliance on a higher power by emphasizing the aspect of this experience that is internal, and relies on interconnection between AA members, whether male or female. After all, participants appeared comfortable with characteristically male imagery and metaphor quite often, particularly participant four: “…they said you better find something more powerful than yourself because you can’t keep you sober. Maybe it was because I made the group my higher power and while I worked through my resentment—I was raised catholic—and while I worked through that also found a god of my understanding.” (Line 202)

*Focused Attention vs. Divided Attention.* White and Chaney suggest that traditional AA has emphasized focused attention, while women may have a tendency toward divided attention (focusing on many things simultaneously, particularly evident in parenting and homemaking). It might be argued that men have excelled at prioritizing historically and it is a manifestation of the traditionally male orientation that has led
treatment counselors to frame secondary obligations as “distractions” (p. 16). Indeed, the post second-wave feminist assertion that women who work and have families actually have two jobs is relevant here, and highlights the now commonly accepted fact that women tend to bear more of the load of household chores. This is salient when it comes to an investigation of AA, and comes across explicitly in the chapter of AA’s Basic Text (2001), “To Wives,” where Bill W. (co-founder of AA) appealed to the wives of alcoholics to be patient with their husbands once they entered recovery. Although a footnote has been added acknowledging that women can be alcoholics too, this chapter intractably inserts an association between women and enabling, and women as caretakers, into the history and culture of AA. Yet, as women grew to be a significant portion of the AA population, they still were expected to adopt the singleness of purpose strategy used by men, with no acknowledgement that those men in early recovery often had women taking care of business, paying bills, taking care of children and generally holding down the fort while their husbands went to meetings and made twelve-step calls. White and Chaney make the welcome point that for women, sustained, divided attention is the only possible reality, even for women who are invested in recovery. These women, particularly mothers, are under pressure to attend meetings regularly, work the steps with a sponsor (until they begin taking other women through the steps), earn money through employment of some kind, and be there to provide adequate care for their children. This is an area where the adaptability and resourcefulness of women who get sober “in spite of” rather than “because of” the traditional, masculine model of recovery is especially clear. Participant five spoke about difficulties as a mother and wife, and her
struggles to connect with women and forge relationships in AA when men still far outnumbered women.

“And I started finding friends, my age with little kids. And so I started saying, let’s have lunch dates in the park. And we’d bring our kids and peanut butter sandwiches and we’d spread out a blanket and we’d have a meeting while they were on the swings. And that was my early experience of alcoholics anonymous. And more and more women were coming in, and I was feeling more and more a part of. But I never could go out after meetings with people for coffee because my husband was insanely jealous and worried about me and um. I felt duty-bound to get back home. And I felt duty-bound even when I’d go to Saturday noon meetings, to get back home. Because he wouldn’t think about making lunch for the kids, ever. They’d all be starving and I’d come in and I’d feel resentful and I’d slap on lunch. That way I’m pleasing them, pleasing everybody. So I get sober.” (Line 413)

This excerpt clearly illustrates the reality for many recovering women. While participant five was able to navigate the many demands in her life, an androcentric model of recovery pathologizes a woman’s attention to “distractions,” (other responsibilities like children) which may be seen as obstacles to treatment. Interpretations that don’t value a women’s attempt to balance all these aspects of her life will make her more likely to feel that she is failing, as she experiences herself as unable to meet the requirements of being a good AA member, or finds a sponsor’s suggestions impossible to follow. While alcoholics generally seem to show a propensity for rebelliousness and there are times when addressing resistance and stubbornness may be productive, there is a problem with automatically interpreting environmental and cultural factors as attitudinal, or as resistance. “To demand a singular focus on sobriety defies the reality that sobriety must be integrated in to the total fabric of women’s lives” (White and Chaney, p. 17).

This argument brings to mind another common refrain heard around AA, *Keep it Simple, Stupid*. While there is undoubtedly wisdom in this phrase which encourages
chronic intellectualizers to “give it a rest,” and discourages rationalization, there is also a sense in which women really may not be able to keep it simple. Particularly when we begin to consider the many factors in the life of an impoverished, single mother, for example. The mainstream model of AA encourages members to divide and conquer, to prioritize their recovery above all else, but many women may have a harder time doing this than men. It is worth noting that many meetings make a point to provide childcare so that mothers may attend without fear of disrupting the meeting. But it is also true that some meetings specify that children are not welcome, and other meetings are designated as “closed” (meaning only alcoholics are welcome) as a way to discourage members from bringing their children. “Men’s recovery is described in language that is hierarchical, linear and obsessively focused.” (White and Chaney, p. 18) Even the pathway metaphor, implying an orderly progression, from one step to the next, focusing on one thing at a time, seems to contrast with more traditionally feminine language in myth and literature, including metaphors that make use of circles, webs, mosaics nets, and patchwork imagery (p. 19).

White and Chaney’s suggestion that women may experience a less linear trajectory into and through recovery is supported by flexibility in sponsorship described by four participants of the current study. These women described relationships with sponsors that defied any hierarchical implications of AA, and emphasized reciprocity and mutual learning and growth, participant’s one and two went so far as to describe “co-sponsorship” relationships where the emphasis was on honesty and mutual accountability. Participant two, describing a former sponsor said she was “not one of
those sponsors who would give you advice about stuff she didn’t really know about.” (Line 548) She and participants three and four seemed to especially value responsiveness and respect for the sponsee’s individuality and dignity as qualities of a good sponsor. Participant four spent a lot of time articulating her sense that designating people as sponsees is offensive, and she espoused a mentorship model founded on dignity and accountability.

“I don’t call them sponsees, I find that very degrading. I know that when I came in here and they called me a young lady and a woman for the very first time in Alcoholics Anonymous, here we are, you know um, I know that our self esteem comes from within and our love comes from within, but it was somebody on the outside going, you are a young woman and a young lady, whether you think so or not, whether you believe it or not, you are a beautiful woman and a child of god. And I went, huh? Somebody else lifted me up and I was able to step up just a little bit more. Somebody opened that door and I was able to push it just a little bit more open. Wow, you mean I have some use here? Um, so I don’t call them sponsees, a lot of people around here call them sponsees, I had a lady ask me, well what do you call them then? I said, I call them by name, ladies, women.” (Line 349)

This rejection of mainstream AA hierarchy expressed by all five participants resonated with a general dismissal of structure more broadly, and a lack of emphasis on completing steps in order. Participant one described it in the following way, “the steps are our internal program of how we recover. And after we get those steps down, we should be able to grow more.” (Line 141) She went on to say, “Like, the personal inventories, uh, your first steps—we never had to do a drunk-a-logue as my first step. You know? The first three steps, if you came in and you stayed in, everybody assumed you had done the first three steps. But nobody, nobody talked particularly about what step they were on, or how to work the steps.” (Line 172) This opinion is consistent with White and Chaney’s suggestion that women’s recovery trajectories may emphasize “serendipitous events” (p.
19) and what might be called higher power events, that continue to be digested and meaningful in evolving ways over time as these women retell their stories, and form recovery narratives.

While acknowledging the necessity for divided attention in the recovery processes of many women, it should be pointed out that a certain orientation toward simplicity and concrete prioritization showed up in the narratives of all five participants as well, particularly participant four who was adamant that she does not think. She talked about her decision-making process as a process of taking a “group conscience,” meaning that she essentially polls her trusted friends and mentors in AA, then proceeds with the next indicated action. She stated and restated her sense that thinking is dangerous for her, and finally said,

“When you’re hungry, eat. When you’re sad, cry. When you’re horny, jack off or get laid. But for god sakes, when you’re an alcoholic don’t drink because you’ll die. If you’re lonely, reach out. If you’re scared, get on your knees and reach out. And remember, always that no matter what, it’s gonna be ok. God’s not gonna drop me on my head. But don’t drink or use. Just don’t drink or use and there’s hope.” (Line 617)

Guilt vs. shame is an important distinction in the experience of recovering alcoholics and the current study lends support for some gender specificity in this area. Particularly relevant to this metaphorical distinction were themes of autonomy; Education and growth; theoretical vs. experiential. White and Chaney point to AA’s emphasis on disclosure as an area that is potentially damaging or re-traumatizing for people who have been victims of abuse or oppression in the past. While this certainly makes sense, it implies a certain powerlessness on the part of women who have dealt with abuse, that may not always resonate with their experience. All five participants alluded to histories of
abuse, but rather than feeling re-victimized by people in AA, these women had a tendency to take greater responsibility and consider carefully in what contexts they shared personal details. Participant two, a nurse, described her internal process around sharing details of her substance abuse in a group for recovering nurses, as opposed to at AA meetings.

“I ended up in that group for three years which was helpful to me because, um, I could really talk about stuff that I didn’t want to talk about in a meeting. I didn’t want to scare somebody when they’re thinking, god, my grandma’s in the hospital! You know, so um, that’s what was good for me, was an opportunity to just talk about that stuff, and I ended up running that group then, some years later.” (Line 438)

There are several ways to interpret this woman’s discretion in opening up about her history of substance use. First, some AA members might interpret her hesitance to share in AA meetings as resistance or a lack of willingness, and they might suggest that her concern for others is a form of rationalization or avoidance. It might also be argued that her concern for others is problematic in that it is a caretaking behavior. However, her experience of preserving a certain sense of privacy in meetings was interpreted by her as empowering. And in fact, she did find an appropriate, safe place to share that experience with other people who might benefit from it, and then to support others with similar experiences. There are parallels here to White and Chaney’s suggestion that survivors groups can be seen as providing a template for recovery that allows for the customization of a recovery plan that takes into account the individuality of the recovering individual and their particular needs.

Other participants emphasized the importance of ignoring difference. Participant one said, “We’ve got to be homogenous. We have to be a homogenous society.” (Line
At the same time, participant one emphasized the value of giving AA members new to recovery space to grow at their own speed and seek out whatever resources best meet their needs at that time as they develop a sense of independence and autonomy. She acknowledged that women’s meetings can be very important and helpful in early recovery, but suggested that the goal is to become part of the larger AA community.

Referring to someone who took her to meetings when she was new in recovery she said, “If I hadn’t had that experience, if I hadn’t got that guy who was just so straight-laced, who let me grow at my own pace, he didn’t push me he didn’t prod me he didn’t make me uncomfortable, he just let me grow.” (Line 822) This quote seems to speak to valuing of dignity and autonomy over undifferentiated disclosure that is often encouraged in newcomers and speaks to the importance of empowerment and growing at one’s own pace that came across in all five narratives.

Another significant aspect of guilt and shame as metaphors for change in recovery centers around the idea of confession and amends as a technology through which esteem might be salvaged (p. 20). If, as White and Chaney suggest, “Where guilt is a self-indictment for doing; shame is an internalized indictment of being,” then it follows that confession and amends may be less of a solution for women who tend to suffer more from shame than guilt (p. 20). There is an emphasis in AA literature and in the AA community on paying back the money, making financial amends, which may not be so relevant for women who are more likely than men to live in poverty, whether they are alcoholic or not. This emphasis neglects the possibility that some of the most shameful experiences are not transgressions that can be corrected in concrete ways. Simply put,
antidotes for guilt are unlikely to be effective in resolving shame. For the women interviewed, relief from shame came slowly, through a process of gaining self-esteem, as participant two put it, “I don’t think we get self-esteem from other people, I think we get self-esteem from the things that we do, and uh, having a purpose to ones life.” (Line 966) For these women, self-esteem emerged as they gained trust in their own ability to be accountable, to show up as friends, mothers, wives, sisters employees, and members of AA.

Cultural factors that compound and contribute to shame, aside from gender, have the potential to further complicate the resolution of shame. Participant three talked about her initial difficulty connecting with the AA fellowship in the following way.

“We would go out to meetings in E- and M-, and you know, it was super weird to me. It was just the community aspect of AA, just, it was awesome yet scary, almost. You know, there’s a lot of trust issues, and there’s a lot of white people, and I’m like, riding in their cars to who-knows-where in the middle of the woods. And you know, nothing weird ever happened—I was sort of expecting the ball to drop, you know?” (Line 125)

Participant four also referenced cultural elements and obstacles that she found a way to weave into her narrative:

“My experience as a woman in AA—I got sober up in Kodiak Alaska, so as a woman it was way different there than it is here. Because the male to female ratio is different—is so much more vast. Way more men. Ten men to—at least ten men to every one woman. And then there’s the aspect of me coming in, I got sober when I was 19, so, it was me—little me, little young me, with all these old, old men—fishermen. And a lot of natives and so forth. And so today…Alcoholics Anonymous has become rather structured, and I got sober—it was real redneck. Service work was, hey come on down and help me bait these tubs. And while we’re baiting tubs or building fishing nets or whatever, these guys out here were talking, and they’re talking about steps and they’re talking about sober.” (Line 3)
According to White and Chaney, Women for Sobriety and survivor models emphasize self-valuing and assertion where AA might be seen as encouraging indiscriminate disclosure (p. 21), in the service of leveling the ego and freedom from oppressive secrets that breed shame. One common theme that seemed to allow all five participants interviewed to contextualize their discrimination in when and with whom they opened up, was an emphasis on the big picture. Although all five participants subscribe fully to AA as a program of recovery, focusing on the broader context of AA and the values of AA as applied to their lives allowed them to make sense of differences in their experience, without feeling oppressed by pressure to conform. This may be particularly relevant for women who suffered abuse as children, since there is a real tension between assuming blame or taking responsibility (encouraged in AA), and appropriately assigning blame. White and Chaney suggest, “Where men seek to make restitution to those they have injured; many women seek real or symbolic confrontations with those who have injured them.” (p. 21) To say it another way, a program of recovery must acknowledge some experiential difference between healing and resolving the effects of perpetration and healing and resolving the effects of victimization (p. 22). Without discarding the value of assuming responsibility and healing perpetration as a main focus of AA, we might consider that healing of victimization has been neglected in AA. This makes sense, given the evolution of AA as a means of treating white men (arguably more likely to be perpetrators than victims), but evolving treatment methods and technologies, in order to be accurate and effective, should include integration of victimization healing
technologies, in a non gender specific way – with the assumption that women can be perpetrators and men can be victims.

*Self-effacement (humility) vs. self-affirmation.* In a certain sense it is hard to tease this metaphorical distinction apart from the Powerlessness vs. Empowerment distinction also proposed in *Metaphors of Transformation* (see above). However, it is different enough to warrant attention, and showed up in the current study in resonant themes of assimilation of steps in life and work; humility; autonomy. “The language of AA (embedded in the twelve steps and twelve traditions) was designed to break the narcissistic bubble of the male alcoholic. It did this through a language of ego-confrontation and submission: words like powerless, unmanageable, wrongs, defects of character, and shortcomings” (White and Chaney, p. 22). White emphasizes the tendency for culturally empowered men to respond to decreasing competency with greater shows of aggression and grandiosity, which suggests that some ego-leveling is in order. Jean Kirkpatrick comments, “I’ve never met a single alcoholic woman who needed more humility. I believe that women need exactly the opposite—the self-confidence to stay sober” (White and Chaney, p. 22). These comments seem to suggest that working toward humility, like accepting powerlessness, may be detrimental for some women. However, this may be another area where overstating the distinction between male and female experience of recovery creates a false dichotomy. After all, each of the five participants interviewed emphasized the attaining of humility as a crucial aspect of her recovery. Referring to AA practices of encouraging those new to sobriety to stay quiet in meetings and listen, participant two had this to say: “And I didn’t really talk much. I mean, I was
kind of—I think god struck me dumb, really, because I am a talker. And I also use that, those uh, verbal gymnastics and intellect and my great knowledge of literature to like, don’t look at the man behind the curtain!” (Line 347)

Participant two’s comments are fascinating in light of the AA valuing of humility, and admonishments commonly heard, such as, *take the cotton out of your ears and put it in your mouth!* Much like her decision to share certain kinds of stories only with other nurses, participant two engaged in an internal process of evaluating and making decisions about how to be honest and humble, while maintaining a sense of dignity and autonomy. Referring to the spiritual practice of waiting to be called on, (rather than jumping in to share when the mood strikes), she said that she has occasionally felt moved to speak in open meetings where the chair doesn’t call on members, but went on to say,

“But the trouble is, sometimes—that just leads to too much thinking for me, ‘cause I sat there thinking, I think I know that I have something to say, but is it worthwhile? Should I just let them talk? It was just, thinking about me the whole time! And I couldn’t really listen! I got into too much thinking about self.” (Line 705)

While this could be interpreted as an instance where a woman with a history of abuse once more conformed to male expectations, it might be more accurately interpreted as a demonstration of agency and flexibility, in which she adapted and personalized available recovery metaphors and practices and made them her own. Her willingness to challenge and diverge from the instructions and suggestions she was taught in early recovery show an evolving sense of agency, and a willingness to hold opposing opinions rather than simply conforming or being obedient.

*Softening judgment versus learning to judge.* White refers again to characteristically male defenses of grandiosity, hyper-criticalness, black and white
thinking and resentfulness. He suggests that AA meditations such as “easy does it” and “let it go” can be seen as antidotes for this defensive posture. While these points are well-taken, this metaphorical distinction gets problematic with the introduction of projection of blame and intellectualization – the assumption being that male alcoholics think too much, whereas female addicts are more likely to adopt strategies of and habits of passivity and self-blame. “The shame-based indictment of the alcoholic woman creates an existential position within which she has no right to judge others, in which she is incapable of thinking and judging, in which she is not worthy of judging others.” (White and Chaney, p. 23) While this distinction looks good on paper and makes theoretical sense, it was not well supported in the current study. It is true that all five participants shared stories that called attention to the importance of gaining a sense of autonomy and agency, but most of them also demonstrated themselves to be prone to intellectualization and overthinking things. White and Chaney’s question about whether AA’s anti-intellectual orientation might be particularly damaging for women, and should be replaced with an emphasis on encouraging critical thinking skills and confidence in those skills (as well as asserting opinions verbally) is a good one, but did not come across as salient in this sample. In fact, all five participants demonstrated a propensity for intellectualization, and talked about ways that AA helped them manage what they interpreted as a problematic tendency effectively.

This is a case where the distinction between characteristically male versus characteristically female metaphors is less useful than the articulation of a spectrum. It seems clear that for some people in recovery, learning to judge and differentiate is at least
as important as softening judgment. There is also a further complicating factor, since
White and Chaney make an important point by articulating a valid perspective for
recovery that welcomes self-assertion and critical thinking. But they neglect another
aspect when they fail to acknowledge a potential double-bind for women who are critical
thinkers, but are silenced in AA by pressure to “keep it simple,” in the sense that their
silencing is not in the service of valuable ego-deflation, but repeats the cultural
disempowerment mentioned in earlier sections. For these women then, a balance of
adaptation and self-assertion must be achieved and repeatedly renegotiated in order for
appropriation of recovery to occur.

Achieving silence versus breaking silence. This distinction showed up in the
current study, and is closely related to the theme of autonomy. We live in a culture where
“women cultivate their capacities for listening while encouraging men to speak.” (White
and Chaney, p. 24) Participant five voiced a resonant, common experience for women
when she said, “So anyway, I grew up and um, was terrified of boys. Found this boy in
high school who liked me because I was a good list
ener. I figured out if you could listen
to people they wouldn’t ask you about yourself and I’m a good listener.” (Line 85)
Metaphors of silence are rich, and an accurate imagery of silence and it’s meanings must
take into account that silence has profoundly different meanings for men and women
historically and culturally. Historically, assertive, confident women have often been
shamed in media images, referred to by derogatory terms and deemed less attractive than
more characteristically feminine women who adopt a diminutive or retiring posture.
Cultural stereotypes that encourage shame about being a bitch, talking too much, or
demanding attention are certainly relevant to meetings and AA structure, yet it is important to note that three participants explicitly referenced a lack of shaming around speaking up in AA. Participant five, referring to her early years in AA when she was often the only woman at the meeting said,

“…she takes me into this meeting and these men look at me and say, Al-Anon is in the next room, cause I’m young. And I looked at them and I thought, you have no idea who I am, I’m going to prove you wrong! Because that was my theory, I’m going to prove you wrong! I’m a coward but I’m a feisty coward.” (413) Later she added, “those men were like father figures that I’d never had. They were loving and kind and tolerant and they didn’t judge me. And through all of my insanity, they kept saying, keep coming back.” (Line 394)

Participant one also dismissed any notion that she suffered undue hardship as one of the only women in her AA circle for many years:

“Well, I would guess until the beginning of the 80’s for at least five years [I was the only woman]. And the old guys used to really razz me. Because here I was, 31, I was short and I was cute, and they said I spilled more than you could drink, and I said well good, I’m glad you did! Because it got you here and I’m glad that you’re here. You know? And for years, as long as I was an area officer, when I got up to speak at the podium at the area, they would shout, stand up, stand up we can’t see you! And I would say, that’s ok you don’t have to see me, can you hear me? Because they never had any problems hearing me, so, as long as you can hear me that’s ok, you don’t have to see me. As long as I was the area chair person I had a foot stool I’d stand up on. And I had a barstool I’d sit up on so I was even with the mic, and when I went to stand up I had the foot stool I’d stand up on. Because as chairperson you really need control of the floor.” (Line 205)

It is noteworthy that, although both of these women share the experience of being teased, or targeted (in a non-malicious way) simply by virtue of their gender (and age and stature), they also display a tenacity that allows them to navigate that traditionally male sphere without being trampled or devalued by it. Certainly, some women and members of disenfranchised populations might find this more difficult. Also, to assume that the relatively outspoken women in the current study are representative of all or most women
would be faulty reasoning. There are socioeconomic factors, questions of intelligence, upbringing and education (to name just a few) that come into play when considering the ability or tendency an individual has to speak up for herself. Based on this study, White and Chaney’s suggestion that breaking silence may be more important for many women, particularly survivors of abuse, is an important one.

Another aspect of the issues of breaking silence as a beneficial activity also raises issues of alcohol as a solution. Participants two and three spoke about their alcoholism in terms that acknowledged what alcohol did for them, how it functioned to address a problem. It makes sense to wonder whether alcohol might serve different purposes for men and women who find a solution in it. For example, participant three said she found her emotional experience and her voice when she was drunk, and expressed her sense that developing an emotional life and emotional language without alcohol has been one of the most challenging parts of recovery for her.

“So, it’s just like, that process has been really hard for me, I think, the emotional—the emotional thing. Because sometimes I feel like I want to be emotional at some things and can’t, because I’m so used to just closing it in, and I feel really, uh, I feel like I never get that release. And alcohol did that for me. I would get really angry, or sad, or just frustrated or whatever, and then my thing was, I’d grab a drink! You know, and I’d get through it, I’d cry over it, I’d throw stuff or break things, or just do whatever, or get crazy, you know. Just let it all out.” (Line 238)

Where participant three sought release and expression, participant two sought relief from unresolved trauma. It makes sense to conclude that people must drink for any number of reasons, and indeed, there is some evidence that women are more likely to drink around an event, where men have a greater risk of genetic alcoholism (White and
Chaney, p. 6). It follows that effective treatment for women should address and attempt to resolve the event, reason, or organizing trauma around which a woman drinks.

In addition to cultural valuing of silence, double standards exist around breaking silence for addicted mothers. “Silence is the existential position from which most addicted women begin” (White and Chaney, p. 25). Again, the phrase, *take the cotton out of your ears and put it in your mouth*, comes to mind, along with the sense that it might have very different connotations for a man or a woman. Addicted women “break silence” with each other to achieve connection, which seems to literally save their lives. Participant three seemed as though she couldn’t say enough about the value of her female relationships which are built on trust and sharing:

“And so that’s also been another amazing difference of like, I’m going through something and I don’t know how to get through it and it’s frustrating, and the first person I think of calling is my sponsor, a woman in the program who’s not gonna judge me for whatever it is, how silly it might be or whatever. And like, sharing that experience with me.” (Line 620)

“Discovery of voice,” (White and Chaney, p. 25) shows up in all five narratives as a shift from obedience to autonomy and accountability. This might be seen as a tension between mainstream AA’s emphasis on honesty and accountability, and the idea that humility and silence are a primary goal, when that doesn’t always add up for women.

These findings support White and Chaney’s assertion that,

“When silence is first broken, the newly discovered voice—this reborn self—is very fragile and must be nurtured until it gains strength. It is often in the chemistry of mutual support between recovering women that this rebirth of self occurs. Discovering and externalizing these inner voices is generating women’s language, women’s metaphors and women’s stories. It is feminizing the culture of recovery throughout the United States.” (p. 25)
This also resonates with the overwhelming focus on connection and female intimacy that came across in all five narratives.

White and Chaney make an important point when they remind us that the goal is not to celebrate one metaphor and dismiss the other, but rather to complicate recovery imagery and provide metaphors that help unravel the threads of addiction.

“These distinctions suggest that the experiential pathways of recovery for addicted men and women can be quite divergent. Her silence and his grandiose and aggressive speech both anchor addiction. Where he must learn to walk softly on the earth without scarring it, she must learn to leave a footprint. Where he must discover silence, she must break silence.” (p. 25)

_Service to others versus acts of self-care_ is the tenth metaphorical distinction proposed in _Metaphors of Transformation_. White and Chaney contextualize these metaphors culturally, and suggest that service makes sense as a corrective or an antidote for the traditional cultural suppression of compassion and care in men (p. 13) and becomes a vehicle for connecting emotionally with others and resolving guilt. Cultural pressures for women, on the other hand, encourage service, domesticity, and accommodation. The same traits that are suppressed in men are encouraged to the extreme in women. Not only that, but women are criticized for embodying those traits of assertiveness and self-centeredness that have historically been adaptive for men. For men who have been enculturated in this traditional way, the experience of doing service work is likely to offer a new experience of self, promote self-reflection and revelation. Whereas, “Programs that emphasize service as an early stage recovery task reinforce the culturally programmed value of self-sacrifice for women” (p. 26). These arguments are supported in the current study, the findings of which suggest that in general, women’s
recovery might emphasize mutuality rather than service or self-sacrifice, especially in the interest of creating a different self-experience. Metaphors of service to others versus acts of self-care are especially resonant with themes of parenting; education; and sponsorship. Participant five spoke extensively about her struggles to find time for herself and for her program, while still trying to maintain a certain standard of involvement and care as a mother:

“And about five years into sobriety my baby goes to school and I’m devastated. Because by now, I’m baking all my bread from scratch, I’ve taught myself how to cook and can, and I can everything all the way from the beginning of apricot season all the way through tomatoes. I canned all summer. And stored up stuff. I was really becoming quite a good homemaker. And I was sponsoring women.” (Line 423)

While it is evident from her story that participant five enjoyed aspects of motherhood, it is also clear that her propensity for taking care of others and sacrificing her own needs has been a defining feature of her life. In fact, after her children were all in school, participant five returned to school and began a career counseling children. Self-sacrifice might be seen as a value and an organizing principle in her life. So while service in AA might be valuable for her, it is unlikely to be the radical experience that it would be for male AA members who have been encouraged to rely on the services of women like her. White and Chaney go further when they say, “For an alcohol and drug dependent woman to experience service as a sacrificial flight from self is not progress, but regression in the self-refutation of the legitimacy of her own needs, and ultimately her own existence” (p. 27). While this idea proposes a useful continuum from “narcissistic preoccupation with self” to “self-flight through sacrificial fusion with another”, it also colludes with a problematic pathologizing of caretaking behavior. It should be noted that White and
Chaney begin to address this point in the following section when they critique popular culture notions about codependency. Regardless, this is an area which calls for further investigation, since it seems possible that female experience has been reformed and remolded through male language.

*Dependency versus autonomy: Codependency – A cultural double-bind for women.* This distinction is interesting in the sense that it complicates the idea of dependency as a negative experience. It also resonates with themes from the current study including autonomy and female intimacy. White and Chaney propose three ways of viewing women’s propensity for connection: idealize it, balance it with valuing of achievement and independence, or pathologize it (p. 28). Within this framework, it is arguable that mainstream AA has a tendency to pathologize dependence, which like self-sacrifice and caretaking (as pointed out in the previous section) may not always be problematic. This metaphorical distinction draws attention to the problematic tendency to turn environmental problems into personal psychopathology and attempt to treat them with a one-size-fits-all approach. This showed up in the language of participants who pathologized and were critical of their own helping and care-taking behaviors. Participant five illustrates this conundrum with the following quote characterizing her caretaking behaviors.

“‘I was so afraid of hurting people and such a people-pleaser—I’m kind of a barometer, I walk in a room and I sponge up the feeling to this day, unfortunately, and I can sense who’s unhappy and my role from childhood is I want to help you, I want to make it better, I want to make you feel ok so I can breathe. That’s the part I’ve learned about me. If I help you, then I can take a deep breath because you’re ok. Part of my ism, my perceptions are wrong.’” (Line 194)
The significance of the above quote stands out when we take into consideration her history of abuse, her violent alcoholic father and the following way that she describes how she came to be married to her husband: “And we went out to coffee about five times and I could tell he liked me. And we would drink, and we had a great old time. But he was just a guy who was not going to put his hands around my throat.” (Line 179) In light of her history, the helping tendencies she pathologizes and critiques in herself appear adaptive and resourceful. One intention of the current study is to validate and flesh out the experience of women in recovery in their own language, but there are areas where it is very difficult to tell whether women are speaking directly to their own experience, or are using the language and imagery they are conditioned to use. This is one of those areas. Participant two also talked about caretaking as a strategy and a life orientation. She made broad generalizations about caretakers dominating the nursing industry, and there is a sense in which her attitude toward caretaking is less critical. She acknowledges a resourceful, compassionate aspect of helping behaviors. Referring to a conversation she had with a fellow nurse:

“I think [nurses] are trying to fix what we couldn’t fix back then. And I thought, you know nurses are definitely fixers. And then the next thought I had was, no wonder it’s so crazy to work with nurses because it’s a bunch of untreated Al-Anons is what’s going on. So everybody is a control freak, nobody will let go, everybody’s running on fear that it’s not gonna be ok so they have to be in control. And that caretaking comes out of fear, you know, it’s not so much out of the goodness of my heart that I want to give to you, which I think we feel—I mean, I definitely feel that, it’s why I went into nursing. But also I think it’s an attempt to try to fix something.” (Line 474)

Here we might consider the commonly accepted idea that a woman who exhibits caretaking behavior really needs others to be ok for her own sense of well-being, so she is
in actuality, being narcissistic and self-serving in her caretaking efforts. Based on the current study, women have a variety of reasons for taking care of others, some of them are highly adaptive, and some may be less so or benefit from modification. But these reasons and the accompanying implications for gender-specific treatment cannot be understood from a traditional, male-based framework which perceives caretaking behavior as essentially feminine.

_Blindness to safety versus sensitivity to physical/psychological safety._ White and Chaney suggest that issues of safety are neglected in male-based recovery models (p. 6). This is an important idea, and the significance of safety issues both showed up in themes of trust; violent background/abusive relationships; trust. As a starting point, it is relevant to note that all five participants either focused on, or at least mentioned having a violent, controlling background. One participant spoke extensively of her violent, alcoholic father. Two participants described abusive romantic partners. The two remaining participants focused primarily on their recovery, but alluded to violent and controlling past relationships. While issues around trust and vigilance were present, it is notable that issues of safety were also absent in important ways. Two participants spoke directly to the potential for victimization in AA. For example, participant three’s comments about a male AA member she connected with early on illustrate her sense of vigilance and danger: “And that’s sort of a pattern of mine, you know, to follow around the protector, you know, somebody that could like, protect me.” (Line 132) And yet, neither participant three or any of the other interviewees shared any negative experiences with men during their time in AA. Many of the excerpts shared in other sections of this paper illustrate an
overwhelming sense of safety and trust in male AA members. Even when sex was an issue, it appears not to have been re-traumatizing or stressful. Participant four had the following to say about her sexual experiences in early recovery as a very young woman in a small community:

“…it took time, and some of them did take advantage of that. You know, I will never knock the thirteenth stepping that went on, you’ll never hear me knock that because I firmly believe it was part of what kept me sober. Some of those men taking advantage—all though they were taking advantage, although they were sleeping with me, we were still talking about the big book. They were still modeling sober. We’re doing stuff sober, you know.” (Line 38)

While the five participants interviewed in this study reported no traumatizing experiences around sex or safety in AA, there are certainly women who have had less positive experiences (Flaherty et al, 2014). Addicted women are more likely than others to have been victimized, and women are generally more likely than men to be preoccupied with issues of safety, particularly when they are seriously outnumbered. The issue is complicated by toxic relationships with men who may have no understanding of sobriety or may be comfortable with the status quo, and resist their wives or partners efforts to get sober since it means change. This can be even more of an obstacle to the woman’s sobriety if she is financially reliant on the man, if he is overtly abusive and controlling, or if there are children involved (see section on divided attention above).

“Effective treatment of addicted women is also extremely sensitive to how women’s psychological safety has often been violated within traditional treatment models. When women fail to respond to treatment in the male-defined vision of progress, they are often defined as resistant and further shamed and stigmatized through labeling or intensified verbal confrontation (White and Chaney, p. 31)”

If women speak up about issues of safety, or select meetings in order to avoid men they feel targeted by, or question the suggestions of male AA members, they may be accused
of resistance. On the other hand, they can be accused of being people-pleasers if they are too accommodating. White and Chaney make the important point that traumas in the history of a woman are likely to be experiential processes, not isolated events, and must be treated as such, taking into account trust-building and psychological safety (p. 31), which is often neglected in a traditional AA approach that emphasizes linearity, logical progression and prioritizing of step work in a prescribed fashion (see breaking silence section, above).

While concerns regarding safety and sexual trauma and victimization are important and relevant to the current study, it would be inaccurate to overstate them since none of the five participants reported feeling victimized or unsafe at AA meetings. Based on this research then, sex per se is not damaging to women in recovery, even very early in recovery, when there is joint consent and safety and sobriety are prioritized.

*Blindness to image versus sensitivity to body image.* This is another area where AA has historically set aside issues that are central for women in favor of a linear, simple program. In fact, potential for self-esteem and body image issues to trigger profound emotional distress and subsequent relapse suggests that these issues be set aside while the primary addiction is addressed, very dangerous. It might be argued that issues of body image are becoming as important for some men as they have long been for women, but this still points to a necessity for flexible, individualized treatment that takes into consideration all the many aspects of addiction and relapse. Participant three spoke movingly about finding physical attractiveness as a solution for living:

“I still didn’t make friends, and was still like, the oddball, and you know, it was just very, um, like very introverted, actually. Spent a lot of lunches by myself just walking
the halls. And then high school came along and at that point I was just tired of not being seen, tired of not um, feeling like I was noticed at all. And like, over the summer I had sort of blossomed and, totally different person. And that’s when I figured out that, oh—when you wear makeup and do your hair and all that stuff, like, you get attention. You know? So that was sort of the beginning of realizing that you know, F the girls, they don’t want to be my friend, obviously. And dudes don’t care! They don’t care if my parents are white, they don’t care, you know, they just accept me for wanting to get in my pants, you know? So I was like, well, that’s better than nothing. At least I’ll have somebody to walk the halls with. You know, not just myself.” (Line 359)

As illustrated in the above quote, there are many women for whom experiences like these make it virtually impossible to separate issues of identity, intimacy and hope from issues of sobriety. Certainly neglecting these issues has the potential to derail efforts at sobriety. White and Chaney suggest that we need to attend to how the beauty myth is affecting women and treat eating disorders alongside addiction, rather than prioritizing one if they are both present (p. 33). It follows that more attention should also be given to the interaction between use of substances and self esteem, particularly as it relates to the interaction between sexual behaviors, sexual risk taking and substance abuse.

*The metaphors of time and timing.* White and Chaney suggest that being in the present is a cornerstone for recovery for men and women (p. 8), but encourage the reader to consider differences in sense of timing and duration of recovery activities and events. White outlines arguments suggesting that early recovery is too fragile to address family of origin issues or traumas, which is problematic and dangerous for women who were sexually abused as children (see *guilt vs. shame* and *breaking silence* sections, above. The importance of addressing and treating trauma has already been discussed, but this section highlights the importance of addressing it early in recovery, particularly with women for whom self-medication appears to be a prominent aspect of substance abuse. “Finding no
vehicle for drug-free catharsis, many such clients respond with flight from treatment and a return to self-medication” (White and Chaney, p. 35).

Regarding the duration of recovery activities, we might wonder whether this should be considered in context of the significant value of individuation for many women. In this light, and in certain cases, decreased involvement in AA, and/or diminishing need for meetings might be interpreted as a reflection of successful individuation rather than a precursor to relapse. This theory, however, was not reflected in the findings of the current study since all five participants remained active in AA at the time of interview.

*Recovery versus discovery.* This metaphorical distinction is reminiscent of the above discussion of hitting bottom vs. finding hope, and is relevant to the theme of autonomy that was prominent in all five interviews. The very concept of recovery or rehabilitation becomes problematic for people who have rarely experienced agency, empowerment, or success since one cannot retrieve something she never had. White and Chaney suggest that for women, recovery may be, “more self-creation than self-retrieval.” In a certain sense, this might be seen as a semantic argument, but language that emphasizes self-discovery may feel more empowering to women, and in fact Women For Sobriety emphasizes this type of language, apparently to good effect (White and Chaney, p. 36). Regardless of semantics, this theme was prominent in the current study, particularly in the narratives of participants three and four who conveyed a sense of coming to life in AA and discovering aspects of themselves and of life which had not been lost through alcoholism, but were radically new. Participant three spoke movingly
about learning that women could be friends, and coming to believe in love where before she never had. Participant four shared about being called a “lady” for the first time, learning how to grocery shop and take care of herself, and imagining that she had something to offer.

The dominator model versus the partnership model. This metaphorical distinction is very relevant to the current study, and relates particularly to themes of sponsorship, rejections of AA hierarchy, learning from women, and female intimacy. White points out that male relationships formed the foundation for modern addiction counseling relationships and sponsorship (White and Chaney, p. 26). These relationships tend to emphasize skillful confrontations with the male ego in an attempt to give the defensive male relief from his ego. “Success,” in this context, means giving up power struggle. Participants in the current study shared stories that illustrated a sense that for them, meaningful relationships with mentors, sponsors and friends, followed more of a partnership model. White and Chaney suggest that partnership values client/helppee strengths over counselor/helper expertise, and this was reflected in all five interviews. Participant three highlights the reciprocal quality of her relationships and a sense of mutual discovery (rather than simple transmission of information) with friends, mentors, sponsors and sponsees when she says, “So um, yeah, it’s just it’s amazing to um, just have those experiences with the ladies that are in my life now, that teach me stuff. Like I never thought that I could be taught things by women.” (Line 613)

It should be noted that four participants specifically addressed struggles with the structure of sponsorship, and ways they had emphasized accountability over authority

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(see power great than vs power within the self, section, above). But even participant four, who emphasized transmission of knowledge in the form of book work, directly challenged the concept of hierarchy and sponsorship, espousing a mentorship model and refusing to label the people she works with as sponsees.

_An escape from dualism._ In this final section, White and Chaney include a last metaphor that draws attention to the tension between the value and truth that may be revealed by using a male/female dichotomy as a pedagogical tool, and the potential for creating or reinforcing false dichotomies. They acknowledge that,

“The human potential of both women and men have been shacked through unidimensional enculturation. Such potential may be discovered by accessing those specific dimensions of character that have been suppressed. The reason men and women’s treatment needs to be different is that the parts of the self each must reclaim are fundamentally different. The goal of this reclamation is wholeness.” (p. 40).

This sentiment has been supported throughout the present discussion, which includes repeated references to areas where the metaphorical spectrum proposed has significant value independent of the validity of associating one or the other end of the spectrum with the experience of men or women, generally. White and Chaney’s suggestion that wholeness of experience and expression is the goal also parallels a sentiment emphasized by participants one, four, and two, that women’s meetings might have a time and a place, but that ideally one finds herself in the larger AA community. Participant one expresses it beautifully when she has the following to say about women’s meetings:

“That value is for women who think like, I don’t think of myself as a woman, I think of myself as a human being. But for women who think of themselves as women, and who have maybe, sexual abuse problems or something that makes them hesitate to go from a woman into being a human being, those meetings are
valuable for them. And I think eventually, the ones who are growing will fly out to the fellowship.” (Line 945)

To summarize, the current study has attempted to identify some ways in which women approach and experience recovery in AA distinctly from men. Findings from the current study agree with the basic premise of White and Chaney’s *Metaphors of Transformation*, yet further accentuate the problematic nature of speaking in gendered, dualistic terms about the experiences of female recovering alcoholics. Both White and Chaney, and the findings of the current study point to the value of broadening our expectations for recovering alcoholics and addicts of any gender, and supporting recovering individuals in finding language and customizing strategies and tools to meet their needs in ways that account for and address differences of gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status and culture. While it is important to challenge habitually dualistic assumptions and language, there is a circularity to these arguments, since it would not be accurate or effective to do away with gendered language all together. Instead, a goal might be to hold the tension and reconcile ourselves to the messiness of experience. Since if we deny the legitimacy of the experience of women who find that AA does not address their experience (Jean Kirkpatrick and others who gravitate toward Women for Sobriety, for example) then we are participating in the oppression of women for whom that experience resonates. At the same time, as expressed by the women in the current study, we cannot attribute the experience of oppression or silencing to all women in AA.

Specifically, the current study supports and fleshes out several key themes from *Metaphors of Transformation* which can be applied to gender-specific treatment methods. First, the current study supports a distinction between empowerment and
disempowerment and the careful application of strategies that are designed to promote a sense of humility, since women are disempowered relative to men before they become alcoholics, and are profoundly disempowered by the time they seek help for their addiction. Promoting empowerment in these women, fostering hope and encouraging them in gaining a sense of agency will be more effective than emphasizing powerlessness which can repeat cultural and social traumas, and result in hopelessness and giving up.

All five participants in the current study shared experiences when they began to perceive themselves as agents in their own lives, and these experiences were then interpreted as pivotal moments on their respective roads to recovery.

In light of the different meaning that powerlessness has for men and women, themes of acceptance and surrender also require thoughtful and individualized application. Where men in AA have long benefitted from adopting a stance of humility and acceptance, no longer fighting circumstances and authorities, the women in the current study shared stories which highlight the importance of accepting certain aspects of reality without surrendering to an outside force or power, since being at the mercy of external forces was a problematic part of their history. The difference between guilt and shame, and cultural factors which lead women to suffer from chronic shame are also relevant, and White and Chaney’s comments regarding twelve-step amends as an antidote for guilt but not shame, came through in the current study as well. Rather than focusing on ninth step amends (e.g., paying back the money) all five women emphasized new ways of living and interacting that contributed to an increasing sense of competence and self-esteem, and gradual relief of shame.
Finally, the centrality of relationship in all five narratives of the current study, and the profoundly healing quality of corrective attachment experiences must be noted. All five participants told stories of recovery that centered around new and unexpected experiences of intimacy, love and reciprocity. Based on the current study, addiction can be seen as a disease of isolation, where connection is the cure.

**Limitations**

Being a qualitative study, the current project focused on quality and nuance and deemphasized generalizable themes. While it might be argued that size of sample is a limitation in most if not all qualitative studies, it could also be said that qualitative analysis is at its best when applied to groundbreaking research, when the momentum of the mainstream has left certain voices without a platform. This is the case with the current study. Research into addicted and substance abusing women is an opportunity to observe many ingrained habitual, sexist attitudes and practices that have been sufficiently smoothed over or amended in mainstream society as to warrant little attention on a day to day basis (not that irregularities and prejudices are not present). At the same time, the small sample size inevitably creates a ‘population’ that is not representative of society or culture or any real moment in time. It might be suggested that the hetero, cisgender orientation of all five participants of the current study constitutes a weakness, yet by virtue of being a study of women’s issues in recovery, this study already situates itself as being an answer to, rather than in opposition of, those demands for equal representation. Essentially, the experience of women is the question at hand, and the various orientations of those women ought not be questioned. Further research into the recovery experience of
transgender, lesbian and gay populations, as well as other under or mis-identified populations who attempt to access twelve step programs and other mutual aid societies, is warranted. Additionally, literature suggests that many women in recovery have been subjected to abuse, harassment, and stalking in recovery. The overwhelmingly positive sentiment toward men and men in recovery conveyed by the five participants of the current study must be respected as legitimate, yet the experiences of those women who have had different, less favorable experiences within the fellowship of AA should also be examined and taken more seriously than they have at times in the past.

**Conclusion**

My research question is meant to add to a growing body of literature acknowledging the diverse experiences and challenges among recovering alcoholics, and calling for treatment modalities and philosophies that are appropriately adaptive. Toward this end, there is a trend toward complicating the identity and the experience of “the alcoholic,” and diversifying the concept of treatment. Consistent with this trend, it is only logical to ask women in recovery about their lived experience so as to identify those nuances unique to facilitating their recovery.

Results from the current study indicate that there is a recognizable, relatable structure of recovery, but also that cultural and philosophical differences color ones expectations of recovery as much as they color expectations for life. Questions about how women experience drug and alcohol treatment are as important (and as neglected) as questions about how women experience heart disease and subsequent treatment. Further
research can help to make connections and tie together themes identified in this study and others.
References


CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE: Women in Alcoholics Anonymous: A Qualitative Study

INVESTIGATOR: Ariel Larson, M.A.

ADVISOR: (if applicable:) Dr. Russell Walsh
Duquesne University
Psychology Clinic
900 Rockwell Hall

Advisor's Phone Number (412) 396-6562

SOURCE OF SUPPORT: This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in Clinical Psychology at Duquesne University.

PURPOSE: You are being asked to participate in a research project that seeks to investigate the lived experience of women in Alcoholics Anonymous. You will allow me to interview you one-on-one about your experiences. Individual interviews will take place face to face and will last approximately ninety minutes. By signing this consent you also agree to attend a follow-up focus group meeting including yourself and four other participants. This interview will take no longer than 90 minutes. All interviews will be audio taped and later transcribed for research purposes. Interviews will be conducted in a
private, reserved room at a local library, or you may request to have your individual interview at your home.

By signing this consent you are indicating that you meet the following criteria: you are at least eighteen years of age, you have been sober in Alcoholics Anonymous for at least three years during which time you have attended meetings regularly, and you are not currently being treated for a co-occurring disorder.

Transcribed data gathered from this study may be presented at professional conferences and/or published in academic journals. Audio recordings and transcripts will only be available to the researcher and advisor.

These are the only requests that will be made of you.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS:** Participants may feel some discomfort talking about their experience in recovery, but overall there are no risks greater than those encountered in everyday life. While measures will be taken to protect your anonymity there is a small possibility that your participation in the focus group with four other women will allow you to be identified. Your participation in the study will benefit women in recovery and the larger recovery community.

**COMPENSATION:** Participants will not be compensated. However, you may request reimbursement for the cost of traveling to the site of the interview/s.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** Your name will never appear on any survey or research instruments. No identity will be made in the data analysis. All written materials and consent forms will be stored in a locked file in the researcher’s home. All materials will be
destroyed within four years of completion of the research.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW: You are under no obligation to participate in this study. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate at any time.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT: I have read the above statements and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that should I have any further questions about my participation in this study, I may call Ariel Larson at (206) 850-0911 and Dr. Linda Goodfellow, Chair of the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board at (412) 396-6326.

______________________________  __________________________
Participant's Signature          Date

______________________________  __________________________
Researcher's Signature           Date
Research Study

This is a qualitative research study that will explore the experiences of women who have achieved sustained sobriety in Alcoholics Anonymous.

Who is Eligible?

Women with at least 3 years of continuous sobriety who:

- Attend AA meetings regularly
- Are at least 18 years of age
- Have worked the 12 steps with a sponsor

What will you be asked to do?

- Share your experience during an individual interview
- Attend a focus group with several other women in AA
- Time commitment of no more than 3 hours total

Please call Ariel at (206) 850-0911 for more information

Duquesne University, Pittsburgh Pennsylvania
Appendix C - Participant 1

R1: So, I don’t have a lot of questions. It's really straightforward. I want to hear about your experience getting sober as a woman in AA. Please talk about your experience in Alcoholics Anonymous and your experience of working the twelve steps with your sponsor. Feel free to share anything that comes to mind that you think will help me understand what it has been like for you to get sober as a woman in AA.

S1: OK, so you want me to start with my sobriety?

R2: If that—sure.

P2: I was 31 years old and I only drank for about 6 years. But I was a late stage chronic alcoholic. Which-they didn’t have all those titles when I sobered up. I had deadened all the nerves in my legs from my toes up to my knees. And um, I had no intention of sobering up. Um, but I had a spiritual experience. And it got my attention. And then somewhere along the way, somebody had given me a schedule. So I walked around with that schedule for three days, and I finally called AA for help. I lived in B-, W- at the time and there was a phone number for the B-group, and I called that number and there was a gentleman named E- who answered the phone. And what I found out later was, there’s no B- group. There had been a B- group, but in December somebody had gotten drunk, somebody had moved – there were only three of them – somebody had gotten drunk somebody had moved and E- took the coffee pot and went home. And it was his number that was in the directory. So it was just kinda like, um, like it was supposed to happen that way. So I called him, and I didn’t know anything about alcoholics anonymous, I called him and I said I needed help with alcohol and he read me the twelve steps and when we got done with it he said, you got anything to bitch about that? (laughter) I said no sir! Whatever he could have said I would have gone along with it because I knew that would be my only help because I was dying. And um, he said well, ok, stay sober until Saturday and I’ll take you to a meeting. So I had six days of sobriety, not drinking, I wouldn’t call them sober exactly at home. So I’m one of the few anymore who can tell you how terrible it is to detox without medical help. And it was a nightmare, but I didn’t drink, I stayed sober and Saturday night this guy showed up and he always wore blue jeans with big red suspender and a baseball hat and I knew this guy for fifty years and I only saw him once that he didn’t have that outfit on. And um, uh, he used to call himself
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a Pollock farmer. He was very proud of being a Pollock. He was the kind of guy you just
don’t mess around with. So, he took me to my first meeting and the only thing – there’s
two people in town here that are sober still that were at my first meeting. And so, that was
in January, 1975 and in April, they started meeting in F-, they’re no longer meeting, but
then I could go to two meetings a week. Then in June E- and I started the B- international
group. And that’s got about four or five meetings a week now and it’s a big meeting, but
we were there for about three weeks and this was my first real introduction to service.
Um, we didn’t have a name for the group, the third member that came in was G- from W-
, we figured if we called it an international group then maybe people would come over
from Canada! And um, so E- said to me, I could put out the literature, that was my job,
and I put it out and I organized in neat piles because I’m a past librarian, I had to organize
it some way, and he made the coffee. And then after a month he said, okay now it’s time
to rotate. And he showed me how to make the coffee and next week, you do the coffee
and I’ll do the literature. So the next week I made the coffee and he waited until I got
done with the coffee and he had the literature all in a big brown sack and he dumped the
sack and he went like this to spread it all around and he says, that’s the spiritual value of
rotation is you can’t tell someone else how to do the job. So I learned that within six
months of my sobriety. Um, the other thing I learned was, there were two other things in
my early sobriety, the first one was, he would take me to these meetings he’d tell me
what day he was gonna pick me up, it was Saturdays and Wednesdays and every once in
a while there’d be another day and he took me to these meetings and we came back
home, and he took me to these meetings and we came back home, and he never said
anything to me, I had to ask all the questions. He never told me anything about AA or
about himself unless I asked. And so one the way home from one of those meetings I
said, E-, you took me to two meetings tonight what was the first one where everybody
was yelling at each other? And he said, well that’s the district committee meeting. So I
learned about the district you know, when I had less than 90 days sober. And um, the lady
I call my service sponsor, she used to call me every day, she worked at the phone
company, and at that time she was the area secretary. And now, when I talk about he area
I’m talking about the old Washington area. It was the whole state of W- half of Idaho, it
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was 300 miles up above Spokane and we really traveled. I mean, these people now who
talk about the West Coast area, they think they have so much area so big, so many
people, they have no idea. Um, so she found out I could type, so she started giving me
things to type. Cause she was area secretary, but she didn’t know how to type. And they
also had me typing for Angus Lamont, who was in charge of the High and Dry down at
Seattle, and I used to say, what is GSR, what is DCM, you know cause they had all these
initials and I didn’t know what they were and I wanted to get it right. So um, uh I got
involved in that. I didn’t get asked to be involved in it, I just was encompassed in it. The
thing I like to tell about, is that when I sobered up I didn’t have any money and I lived in
a really, really controlling environment. So, after one or two meetings I asked E- what the
big book was because I thought it was the bible. And after I’d been sober for a while and
listened to him, I kind of knew it wasn’t the bible but I didn’t know what it was. And so
they talked to me about, there was this book called Alcoholics Anonymous. And because
I didn’t have enough money to buy it I made an arrangement with the treasurer to pay a
quarter a week. And when I got my 90th sobriety date, 90 days, they gave me my big
book. And it says in the front of it, To Mary M from the F- Unity group, March 20th,
1975. And I had ten years of sobriety before I realized, I hadn’t paid enough quarters to
buy the book. And they just acted like, you bought it now, here it is. But the thing that
was so potent about that was, I took it home and I read it all the way through that night. I
was so desperate for sobriety, and what were they doing, and how to put it together and—
R3: At ninety days, you knew there was something you wanted besides not drinking?
P3: When I walked into that first meeting I knew these folks—I knew these were spiritual
folks for me. Because they talked about alcohol like I thought about it. But I never would
have talked about it like that. See, right away I knew we were kinship, but I didn’t know
the path they were following until I got that big book. And um, I never thought that was
sad, until one time I told my story and my brother was there, and it just hit me how
pathetic that was that at 90 days, not knowing how much my quarters were worth, and I
so desperate I would read that book overnight. And I cried when I told my story, and my
brother and I got in the car afterwards and I said, I’ve never cried when I told my story
and that was the first time I cried. And he reached over and patted my knee and said,
that’s ok, I cried too. So, they got me involved and um, I was in service for quite a few
years. I was the first W- area archivist. And um, and I always tell people, be the first! If
you get a chance to be the first, be the first, because you can decide how the job’s done.
Because there’s nobody been out there doing it. And I was only archivist for a year
because I was appointed in a non-election year for group officers, and when elections
came around they elected me to be their GSR. So I thought it was really better for me to
go back and start from the beginning, rather than stay an area officer for another year. So
then I was a GSR and—
R4: And this was at, how long were you sober when you became the archivist?
P4: Uh…probably about a year, a year and a quarter.
R5: Still early…
P5: Really, really early. And Terry, my service sponsor is the one that pushed me into it.
And I think I got accepted because I was the only one who put my name in for it. Because
nobody knew what archives were. You know, and nobody wanted to take that
responsibility and I was just stupid enough—I had worked in Quaker archives in the
Midwest before I came out here. I had worked in Quaker archives and I’d worked at the
B- library for four or five years. And so um, I did the archives. And the main thing I did
with the archives was, I’d have pictures from GSO and I’d take them around and show
people. I took them into Monroe Reformatory and um, just inform people about the early
history and we can start an archives here in district eleven, and we’re gonna start with
these picture. And um, now the area archives is huge. Just huge. So I was archivist, I was
GSR, I was DCM, and then I was area treasurer. And I was area chairperson and then I
was area alternate delegate. So I guess that was about 14 years there, that was um, almost
a part time job doing all that kinds of service. And I loved it, I loved the travel, I loved
meeting the different people. I loved hearing different stories and it really through me
into the traditions and the concepts fairly early in sobriety, and most people don’t even
think about the concepts until they have a few years sober. I’ve met people who have 15
years sobriety that don’t know we have concepts. Um, and that’s kind of one of the things
I do in this area right now, is that last summer I led a group of women to read the
concepts. I participated in a year and two months study on the service manual from
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beginning to end, with A- and the Fairhaven group. And um, so I like to help people
enlarge their program of recovery. Because I really think, you know, if you don’t have
the service and the concepts and the traditions and the unity, and recovery and your
sobriety, you don’t have a balanced program. It takes the three sides of the triangle to
make that circle. And I’m not um, right now in my sobriety, if I had to give up something
I’d give up the steps and I’d make the traditions first. Um, and I’m hoping that eventually
I’ll feel like, I would keep the concepts. Uh, because I think they can be applied down to
the group and up to the international and I think it’s harder to apply the traditions that
way. And of course, the steps are our internal program of how we recover. And after we
get those steps down, we should be able to grow more. Uh, I worked 20 years at the
hospital in behavioral health and I think, I’ve seen all these people coming out, and we
used to have the full continuum of services. We had the social detox, we had inpatient,
we had outpatient, we had a recovery house. And I’ve seen all those things be stripped
away for lack of money. And about five years ago I started telling my sponsees, you
know, we’re going to have to go back to grass roots. Because there’s going to be more
people coming in off the streets than there are from treatment centers. And I think that
curve is starting to happen. Um, the year I sobered up, ’75, was the year the AMA
declared alcoholism a disease. And the oldtimers said, this is going to have an enormous
effect on us. And they were quite concerned about, with it now being a disease, with
insurance paying for treatment, how was that going to affect the fellowship of AA. And
uh, it did, it did. But again, I think we’re on the end of that bell curve going down. I don’t
know—

R6: What, what do you think the impact was?

P6: I’m gonna tell you. Part of the impact was you know, find a sponsor, do your steps
with a sponsor who’s done the steps with a sponsor—that all came out of treatment
centers. The chants that we say at the end of meetings: keep coming back, it works if you
work it—those chants, that all came out of treatment centers. Saying thank you when
somebody shares came out of treatment centers. We didn’t used to thank each other, you
were there to save your own ass! Why thank you, you know? I’m here to save my ass.
Pardon the language, but I’m there to save my ass, and I don’t thank people.
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151    R7: And this was—you’re saying that there was a sea change, really in how—what the 152    fellowship is and how people are introduced to the fellowship, was a product of practices 153    that were going on in treatment centers?  
154    P7: Because what the treatment centers—what they have, they have some of the 155    education about what’s a chronic alcoholic, but for people who go through treatment 156    centers to stay sober, they have to go to AA. And uh, a lot of the paperwork that they do 157    in treatment centers is centered around the things that AA does. Like, the personal 158    inventories, uh, your first steps—we never had to do a drunkalogue as my first step. You 159    know? The first three steps, if you came in and you stayed in, everybody assumed you 160    had done the first three steps. But nobody, nobody talked particularly about what step 161    they were on? Or how to work the steps? Because you had the Twelve and Twelve, you 162    can read the Twelve and Twelve, and you’ve got the Big Book. What more do you need? 163    Um, so there’s been a lot more handholding. One of the things I do, I do a couple things 164    cause I’m such a rebellious person, one of them is I don’t say thank you for people 165    sharing, um, at the end of meetings I say pass it on, cause that’s what Bill Wilson said to 166    do was to pass it on, and I’m staring this new thing now, because I’ve run into a lot of 167    people recently who don’t like the god aspect so much, so I am now, when I get a chance 168    when I chair, I open up with—we say the serenity prayer, I open up with the 169    responsibility statement, and I close with the unity statement. Cause that’s all straight 170    AA.  
171    R8: When did this shift take place? I mean, at what point in your sobriety did you become 172    aware of how this was changing—  
173    P8: You mean to notice the impact? I saw the impact starting about 1983. Um, we used to 174    have before the alcohol community center did so much here, we had um, uh, detox that 175    these two brothers, the B brothers, somehow or other I don’t know the mechanism but 176    they got four rooms at St. Luke’s Hospital on the south side of town. And they had a 177    curtain up and that was the detox. Just this little wing. And um, I lived about two blocks 178    from there and I became the detox coordinator. And that’s the first, yeah that’s the first 179    time I was aware of AA and institutions. And we took in a meeting every Saturday night 180    and I coordinated it because if the person wasn’t gonna show up that was supposed to
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chair, I could run down and chair. And I called them and—remember, you’re gonna chair
the meeting! But you couldn’t tell for sure if there was gonna be a meeting until that
night. Because some people were too sick, they only had four rooms, four beds, and so if
they had a woman then they could only have two men. Um,
R9: And did they have—were there a lot of women?
P9: No. There were very few women. When I sobered up in ’75, it was not unusual for
me to be the only woman in a meeting.
R10: For how long?
P10: Well, I would guess until the beginning of the 80’s for at least five years. And the
old guys used to really razz me. Because here I was, 31, I was short and I was cute, and I
spilled more than you could drink, and I said well good, I’m glad you did! Because it got
you here and I’m glad that you’re here. You know? And for years, as long as I was an
area officer, when I got up to speak at the podium at the area, they would shout, stand up,
stand up we can’t see you! And I would say, that’s ok you don’t have to see me, can you
hear me?? Because they never had any problems hearing me, so, as long as you can hear
me that’s ok, you don’t have to see me. As long as I was the area chair person I had a foot
stool I’d stand up on. And I had a barstool I’d sit up on so I was even with the mic, and
when I went to stand up I had the foot stool I’d stand up on. Because as chairperson you
really need control of the floor.
R11: Mm-hmm. Well it sounds like you had a pretty—I don’t know, some kind of
composure, sort of from the beginning, that you were sort of able to meet their razzing
and—
P11: Oh yeah, oh yeah, they didn’t bother me. They were funny. Yeah I don’t think they
rattled me and I knew they did it out of love, that that was the way they showed affection
to me. Uh, so I didn’t take it that seriously. I do remember E- and I, and that would have
had to have been probably when I was two years sober, had a discussion about there was
starting to be women only meetings—
R12: So this was the late 70’s?
P12: Yeah, and we talked about—I talked to him about it and he said, you know, he
thought there were two sexes on the earth so we’d have to learn to get along together at
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some point in time. That is wouldn’t be feasible for a woman to go into AA and never be in a group where there weren’t men. And I think that’s probably true today. I see more value in the women’s meetings than I used to, but I didn’t get on that bandwagon right away. Because that was one of the things treatment centers brought us was different kinds of groups; young people groups, men and women’s groups, gay lesbian groups, and I don’t—I’m just putting them in that category because I have friends that are gay and lesbians. I think sometimes you can get too specialized and you lose the bigger message. And so yeah, I wasn’t threatened by the old guys.

R13: There’s something, and I’m not sure—maybe this is just for me to work out later or maybe you can speak to it—there’s something about your experience with—if I got as sick as I did and I showed up and I was willing, I’ve done the first three steps. And we don’t have to sit down and go through all the gory details all the time. Sort of in a way it allowed you to focus on the bigger message? And it sounds like you’re saying that’s more how AA used to be.

P13: I think it was, I think it was. I know guys—I know somebody that came in in Akron when Sister Ignatia was still there. And the guys that took him to meetings made him wear a white shirt and tie and he couldn’t talk for a year. They said, you listen for a year, you don’t have anything to say. Maybe after a year you’ll have something to say. And so I think it was in many ways, more hardcore, what we call hardcore, but I think it was also done lovingly. Because up until that point where treatment centers came in, everybody came in either through the jails or the crazy houses or the street. Those were the access points to AA. And um, I was convinced for a long time that to be able to sober up in AA you had to see the face of death. You had to get right there and see the face of death. Now I’ve seen more people come in that weren’t that low, but I’ve also seen a lot of people slip. We didn’t have that many slippers. And if you did, everybody got concerned and everybody came around and if you slipped more than twice, nobody paid any attention to you.

R14: They just didn’t take you seriously.

P14: No. And um, so, we have people that come in every week, oh I’m back, I’m back, and they all clap, and so they’re getting attention for slipping. I heard a guy, I heard a guy
before I retired, from DASA, department of alcohol and substance abuse, came up to
review the laws with us, cause they passed new laws, uh, and he said alcoholism is a
disease of relapse. And I’m going like, this state guy shouldn’t be saying this. Nobody
should say that. Because if you call it a program of relapse people are going to feel like
they have permission to relapse. You know. The idea is that you come in and you stay
sober, not you come in and you go out, you come in you go out, you come in—that’s not
the idea of alcoholics anonymous. It’s, it’s for those that really are serious about their
soberity. So you know, I think that something treatment centers did, they gave
permission—because that was their feeding trough. Um, I remember one time a
discussion of the oldtimers at the B- group, uh, they were talking about modern medicine
has now found out how many brain cells you kill from alcoholism. And, and the
discussion was, do I want to know how many brain cells I lost or not? And the majority
of them said, I don’t care. I’m functioning, I have a job, I have my family I have my
home, I don’t care what I lost. I’m making due with what I’ve got. And I think if you just
carry that forward to treatment centers, they want to tell you how many brain cells you’re
gonna lose. You know.
R15: Medicalizing the whole problem—
P15: Yeah. And I know it’s a medical problem. You know, it took me six months to feel
anything with my legs. But at the same time, it’s a spiritual fellowship. You’re not
entering into a medical realm—when you come to AA you’re entering a spiritual
fellowship. As weird as that sounds and as big as we’ve gotten, you’re still entering a
spiritual fellowship. And the only reason all this is there is to help the suffering alcoholic.
No other reason. Not to make money, not to fulfill laws, you know. Just to help the
suffering alcoholic. And you can’t help them unless they want to be helped.
R16: Right. So, what led you, what kind of experiences led you to find the value in
women’s meetings, or to not value them before.
P16: Um, I’m going to be clear, I don’t go to women’s meetings. There is one women’s
meeting here in town that I’ve gone to, and I went to it—this is 2014, I went to it
probably 14 years ago when it was really a group—a meeting, they didn’t really want to
become a group and they’d gotten down to just a few members. And I went to try and
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encourage people to go, and I could see that it was helping these women. But the fact that
they were going to a meeting every Monday, was not helping them learn AA. It was
helping them to talk through their problems, and it was encouraging if people were there
because they knew maybe they could come next Monday and maybe stay sober Monday
to Monday. Or maybe they’d find another group to go to or another meeting. But they,
eventually they became fairly large, but they didn’t know the difference between a
meeting and a group. But they called me in, just this year to give them—I do a little
service talk with the Matrioska dolls, and I used to do this for ADATSA or indigent
outpatient people. I would go in every month and give this little talk, you know, the
nesting dolls? I’d start out with the big one and—first I’d make them write the circle and
the triangle, then I’d start with the big one, and I wouldn’t say what that was, and
eventually somebody wouldn’t come up with it and—when you come up with it, don’t
say it out loud. And then I’d go down smaller and smaller and smaller and the smallest
little baby doll is AA worldwide. And I’d show them how the committee system runs
through all that and uh, what the term of service is about the trustees, about the general
service conference, you know I could cover all that. And so that’s the service talk. I went
into a group one time and this guy comes up to me and says, you’re the doll lady! You’re
the doll lady! I thought wow, that would be nice to be known as the doll lady. And I don’t
remember him, but I’ve had a lot of people say—in fact, I sponsor a lady whose got 25,
26 years of sobriety who remembers me coming in and doing that lecture. But of course I
didn’t remember her, but…
R17: Right…and so the focus, the significance of that is that it helps people get the big
picture of the AA program?
P17: Well, it shows them that AA is more than just going to a meeting. That there are
other things you can do in AA besides just going to a meeting, and if you’re going to be a
responsible member of AA one, you need to belong to a group. Because treatment
doesn’t tell people to belong to groups. Treatment tells them to go to meetings and get a
sponsor.
R18: So that ties in with your emphasis on service.
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P18: Yeah, but they don’t—it doesn’t, treatment doesn’t a distinction between what a meeting is and what a group is. And what AA does and what AA does not do. They don’t discuss those things in treatment. You leave treatment, at least my impression is, you leave treatment and you feel like AA is going to be everything to you. You know, and it will be a lot to you if you work the program. But it’s not going to be everything. Um, I had uh, ten years of sobriety and I went back to get my degree. And I went back with 168 credits. So, you know, I had enough credits to get my degree I just hadn’t put anything together. And I wanted to be a teacher, well, in the meantime I had two kids, so after I had the kids I decided I didn’t want to be trapped in a room full of children. Two kids was enough of a teaching experience for me. So I went too—I went around and I looked at becoming, at doing something in the field of alcoholism. And my big thing is, I never want to, I never want to make money out of my disease. So, and they—the department was human services and they were like, oh, we’ll barter you with this we’ll barter you with that and, I thought oh, I don’t want to do that kind of stuff. So I went over to Fairhaven and I designed my own major and my minor. My minor is library science, I basically had all the courses, and my major is administration and oral history of our elderly community. Because at that time nobody was studying geriatrics and I wanted to study geriatrics. And I eventually did take another intensive course, it was a year and a half, for that. When they finally saw that there was a need. Um, and that’s one of the things I do with women, is I encourage them, no matter what their age, to get their degree. Because I don’t think I made more money because of my degree—if anything I made more money because of some of the things I was raised with and I learned in service. Like you know, how to control four microphones and a thousand people all at once is not something that you learn anywhere but by going through that experience. So, um, and my first job—I worked at a bank. Uh, when I had three years of sobriety I worked for this bank for ten years and I quit that job, but they wouldn’t let me quit. They kept me on the payroll because they didn’t—I don’t know why, they wanted to be able to call me if they needed help I guess. And so after I got my degree I went back and I worked in accounting. And I did a number of really nice things for them. But I did general ledgers for the bank, I read seven general ledgers in two hours. And they had
never had anybody read that fast and then, anybody that made a mistake I had to call them and tell them they made a mistake. So I had to use diplomacy too. And um, so it was a part time job, so economically it was pretty hard. And up in the county there was a band called Randy Bachman, Bachman Turner Overdrive? And his mansion is up off H street road in Whatcom County. And he sold his mansion to a group of people that made it into a treatment center. And it only lasted about six years. But it was um, and they asked me to come out and design the office. And I said, well I don’t want to make money off my disease and they said well, you’re not. You’re doing the paperwork. So that’s where I went out and designed the nurses files, the counselor’s files, the patient files, and even some stuff for the kitchen. And then I did all the admissions and discharges. And I had to learn the Washington administrative codes. And so when they started to go downhill they dismissed me first, one because I was a higher paid employee, and two, because I trained all my staff to take over for me. Because to me, that’s the responsible thing to do. And so um, they really didn’t miss my presence that much. And then I applied for jobs at the hospital. And the first one I applied for I didn’t get, but in the interview for that first one I told the guy, I know the Washington Administrative codes. Because, my director at Meridian had made me keep up to date on them. And about six months later the hospital had taken the community alcohol outreach center had bought it out, had bought recovery Northwest, so they were adding all the components to have the whole um, spectrum of treatment services and they had to have new manuals. And this guy called me and said, we need your help with the laws, we’ve got to have manuals in two weeks. So I went through and I did all their manuals, and the guys that came to do the review were friends of my manager up at Meridian, because he came from—the manager up there came from the state system, so I knew all these guys, you know. And they were the funky old guys that first came in when they were trying to build a welfare system for alcoholism. So I sat down with them and if they found something that wasn’t quite right they’d say well, this isn’t quite right it should be like this and I’d say ok, and I’d go and change it and bring it back. So that was the first time they had a review that they didn’t have any dings on it. And so they hired me, they knew they wanted me on their staff and I eventually wound up being the person that negotiated all the contracts, all
the public funding contracts. And um, uh, so I wasn’t really making money off my
disease, it was off my skills…
R19: Yeah, your experience and knowledge.
P19: Yeah. Uh, and that was fun. That was fun, that was really fun.
R20: But also, no doubt, you were still involved in service?
P20: Yeah, yeah. During that time um, I think right when I went to work for the hospital
was my last area service job. And then I had to deal with repercussions here, because I’d
been in area service for so long everybody knew me and when I went into a meeting
they’d have these expectations of me. Like, I went into the B- group one time and the guy
who was getting ready to chair the meeting and who I’d known for a while, said, is it time
to start the meeting? I said, I don’t know, D-, it’s your meeting! And he waited a while
and then he says, is it time to start the meeting? I said, D! I don’t know! It’s not my
meeting it’s your meeting, you start it when you’re supposed to start it! And I’d have
people looking at me like that, so for about four or five years I kept a really low profile. I
even tried to go into Dry dock disguised. I wore sunglasses and I had my hair down cause
they never see me with my hair down and I had a big hat on and I had really old grubby
clothes on and I went in late and I sat down on a bench, I sat down on the bench and guy
who was chairing it was Mike and I sat down and thought, oh I’m going to forget what
the topic is, the moment I sat down he said well, we haven’t heard from M- for a long
time, M-would you like to chair? And it just blew my cover. But I wanted to wait until
enough new people came in that people wouldn’t know me. Because I think the graves
thing you can do is become a guru. I just wanted to become a worker bee among worker
bees. I’d done these other things and they were fun and it was good and I improved the
area—they’re still using the financial system I set up..which was credit lines because
every body loves credit. They weren’t spending their money proportionately so with
credit lines the pressure was on to spend their money…so Um, one of the things I like to
talk about is I started a group. Um, in about 1986 and it was done by ’91, only last about
five years and it was at my house. It was called the four reflections. And the first Monday
we studied the big book, second Monday we studied the twelve by twelve, the third
Monday we did the service manual, the fourth Monday we did the concepts and if there
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was a fifth Monday we started the stories in the back of the big book. And I read through each of those books at least five times in that group. And it was maybe 8 to 10 people but we had repeaters come in so it was a real personal way to study the framework of AA. I still think that’s a good format.

R21: So, that makes me want to ask more about this distinction that you’re making between meetings and groups and how you know you’re getting what you need, how you know that a meeting is doing it’s job, how you know that it’s a good meeting—or a good group.

P21: One, you don’t go to sleep.

R22: Ok, so it’s interesting.

P22: Two, you don’t get bored, three, it talks about—somebody somewhere in the meeting talks about where you are in your sobriety.

R23: So you hear your own experience somewhere.

P23: You hear your own experiences and you see people have lived your experiences that may have a lot more sobriety that you do. Or you learn something new about AA that you didn’t know. Right now I go to F-group. And both Sunday night and Thursday night are study groups. I rarely go to a discussion group anymore because I find they don’t encourage my growth. I find that I hear a lot of people’s problems, I don’t hear much of the solution. And when you’re studying the literature you’re working on the solutions as you study the literature. We’re reading—on Sunday nights we’re reading Language of the Heart, which, a lot of people haven’t read it. And it gives you a quick—it’s Bill W.’s writings from the Grapevine and it gives you a quick historical outline of how the traditions came about and how the service structure came about and the next sections going to be how we interact with our friends, how we cooperate without affiliating. And there’s people in there with 40 days sobriety that love that meeting. Because it gets them out of themselves a little bit. I think a good meeting, a good group is one who takes you in—and I say to people don’t join a group until you’ve gone to the business meeting. And if you don’t like the business meeting go around and visit the groups business meeting and pick your group by how the group’s business meeting goes. Because if—when you sit in a business meeting you can tell, is this something I would consider a positive thing
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or a negative thing. Are people really yelling and screaming at each other? Wally W-
used to say, he was so glad the group grew up because they quit hitting each other with
chairs during the meeting. And I always wondered, did he really see somebody hit
somebody with a chair? But, the Fairhaven business meeting is fun. I mean, we laugh, we
have a good time. It’s not gnashing our teeth and pulling our hair out. And we take things
on to the district, but um, we do a lot of housekeeping and we have positions, right now
we have three alternate positions open which is the first we’ve had open in years.
Because when a new person comes in, we give them a position right away. You can be a
greeter, you know, you can be a setup person. And then you learn you have to have this
much sobriety before you can go on and be this, and be that. And that keeps people
hooked in. It really does, if you have a group that you know someone is expecting you to
be at that meeting for whatever reason, you’re more likely to go to that meeting than to
say, I don’t need a meeting today I don’t feel like going, and not going.
R24: You’re talking about something that—even your emphasis on the traditions instead
of the steps—there’s a thread through here that’s really about um, growth. Like, you want
your sponsees to go to school and you hook people into the progressive nature of the
steps—
P24: Yeah, well that’s what recovery is! And I often think recovery is going back and
being the person we were meant to be before we started drinking. And I think that’s
easier for some people, for some people it’s harder. But if you’re not growing what kind
of sobriety do you have? What you have is, you’re saying the same things over and over
again and eventually you’re going to come to the point where you’re white-knuckling
your sobriety. Where, conversely, you’re sobriety should be fun. You know, when I have
my birthdays—and I get really embarrassed when I have my birthdays because I’m the
senior sober person in my homegroup. And that embarrasses me because I don’t want
people thinking they should look up to me for any reason, I just want to be part of the
milieu. But then, I have this birthday and I know some of the people who’ve been in there
for a couple years, when they have new people come in they say, that’s the oldest sober
person. Somebody said to me last night—I said, thanks for chairing, and she said, I just
hated to cuss in front of you! And I don’t even know what she said that she was cussing,
but, why would she hate to cuss in front of me? You know? That’s not a big deal, honey!

So I think that, you have to—you know if you’re not going forward you’re stagnating.

And alcohol is going to be waiting for you. We’re the one fellowship out of all the self-help fellowships—that’s another little protest I’m doing, is this is not a twelve step program, this is not a self-help program. We have the traditions and we have the concepts. We have 36 facets, we don’t have twelve steps. We have twelve steps but we have more than twelve, we have 36. So if you’re just doing the twelve, you’re missing out on something. But if you’re not into the solution and growing, you’re stagnating.

We’re the only fellowship that if you don’t do it you’re gonna die. You know, you don’t die of gambler’s anonymous. You don’t die of eaters anonymous. You may die of diabetes or coronary disease, but you don’t die because you quit going to eaters anonymous. But if you quit going to AA the alcohol will catch up with you and you will die of alcoholism. So we always have that extra little push because we’re saving lives.

And some of those people that come in that haven’t hit the bottom yet, that’s still waiting for them. All they have to do is come in and be complacent. On my birthdays, one of the things I say to people is one of the reasons I keep coming back to AA is because it’s fun.

And there’s nothing more fun than watching people grow. Watching people come in that are totally obsessed with themselves and learning that there’s a world out there. And they’re not always number one in that world out there. But watching people grow, that’s a big priority in my life. And for me too!

R25: And you do that—you do sponsor people?

P25: Yes. I never raise my hand to sponsor people and if somebody comes up and asks me to sponsor them I say no. And then if they say why not I tell them and if they don’t care about that then maybe I’ll sponsor them. Because I would have hundreds of sponsees. I don’t want hundreds of sponsees.

R26: So how—when is the last time you had that conversation? How did it go?

P26: It went really well. I have a sponsee that has—most of my sponsees have—I have a sponsee with ten years and three of them have over 25 years. So we’ve been friends for a really long time. But I’m still their sponsor in fact, I had one of them say to me yesterday, do you realize you ordered me to do something? And I said no, I didn’t realize that. And
she said, well I did it because you told me to do it and she says, I’m really glad I did it!
And I said, well good. But my new sponsee is on um, she’s got not quite 60 days
sobriety. And uh, she asked me to be her sponsor and I said no. And she didn’t ask why
not. And she went away and she came back and she said, well can I meet with you and
ask you some questions and I said, yeah. And so that’s how that started.
R27: And so is there now—or was there a point where she
said, well you kind of are
being my sponsor…
P27: Well, we agreed that I would be her sponsor. She’s working on her fourth step.
She’s doing 90 meetings in 90 days! She was doing that before I sponsored her. That’s
one of the reasons I sponsored her. If on her own she decided to do that and is going
through with that, it’s a woman who really wants sobriety.
R28: So that’s sort of your criteria? You sort of decide if it’s worth it, if this person is
really invested, if they really want it.
P28: Yeah.
R29: Do you sponsor men at all?
P29: I have some service sponsors that are men, of sponsoring their service, telling them
about some fine points of their jobs or give them some suggestions of the finer points
when they’re committee chair or that kind of thing. I always talk to them when elections
are coming up. I have one guy I don’t sponsor in any way but whenever the area elections
are coming up he always comes to me and asks if he can make himself available for this
or for that. I don’t know why he thinks I have to give him permission. I think he thinks
that if I thought there was another position he should apply for I would tell him and tell
him why. Maybe. One time I asked him, I said A--–, why are you asking me? And he says,
well I just want to make sure you think it’s the right thing, you know? Of course it’s the
right thing. You always have to make yourself available! If you don’t—you know, cause
they used to poll. That’s one thing they didn’t do this past year in the elections because
they used to go around and poll each GSR. Because if you call on a GSR and say are you
available for this position and you go around and poll them for each position, some of
them are going to cave in and take positions that they would have never taken any other
way. And that keeps people from duplicating jobs. See, I don’t believe, if you’ve done
one job I don’t believe in doing it again. Because you’re taking up space for somebody
that needs to learn. I still chair meetings, and I do my little meeting of having a meeting
without doing the serenity prayer. And my home group is pretty loving with me about
that. They know all my little foibles you know. And last night for the first time,
somebody closed the group—when it was time to do a prayer of his choice, he closed
with the, I am responsible. So slowly I’m making some inroads, and it doesn’t have to be
a god prayer, it just has to be the fellowship. And here’s things you can do in the
fellowship that are not god-labeled. And I don’t think anything about doing the serenity
prayer or the lords prayer, but I have noticed there are people who are uncomfortable
with that. And we should be available to everybody. We shouldn’t make people
uncomfortable because we’re so god-oriented. And that’s what this newcomer was asking
me was, what kind of higher power do I have to have? And we talked our way through
that because she had an answer, she just didn’t know it was her higher power, and it was
nature. And she said, can I use that? And I said, sure you can use that. Because if that’s
what you think is bigger than you are and you feel close to it and you feel one when
you’re with it, that’s your higher power. Because I don’t think you get very far unless you
have a higher power. The other thing I want to say is, having sponsees and having a
service position is like taking a vacation. You’re taking a vacation from thinking about
yourself when you’re thinking about your sponsees. Or you’re trying to work them into
seeing another viewpoint or you’re trying to get them to come to their own wisdom. And
when you’re doing a service job you’re not thinking about yourself. You’re thinking
about what that job is and how it fulfills a function for your group or your district or your
area. So when I see people who are really myopic I say to them, get a sponsee. Get a
service position. Get something that’s going to make you think outside yourself.
R30: Widen the lens.
P30: Because you won’t be successful in your life if you think the world revolves around
you. When I worked at the hospital I had a staff of fifteen. And I ran my staff according
to the concepts. And they were all happy. And I’d have other managers ask me why my
staff was so happy. One, they set their own schedule. They knew the front desk had to be
covered from this to this, but they also knew I didn’t care who was there. As long as they

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gave me a list at the beginning of the month saying who was going to be there so I
didn’t go out looking like an idiot thinking somebody was going to be there. But they
could negotiate with each other what days they wanted off. If somebody had to go to a
doctor’s appointment, you know, they accepted the responsibility for the authority I gave
them. And that was really responsible for managers in other departments to figure out.
And whenever we had a meeting I always heard the minority report before we voted on
anything. Because it doesn’t do—because if you hear it afterwards then you might have
to revote, so save the time and hear the minority report before you vote. So, they didn’t
know that’s what it was, and but they all knew that their vote was equal to my vote,
unless I had a mandate from my boss that said something had to be done. I’ll tell you, I
was an equal with them. And they were all very sad when that part of the services shut
down. They just hated to lose that job because they loved their jobs, they were invested in
their jobs.

R31: So you’re talking about your life and your goal of never making money off your
disease, but there is a sense that—you did keep it separate, so AA is not a vocation. But
AA informs your entire life.
P31: Well yeah, how can it not? How can it not? For me that’s what it is, that that’s the
way I live my entire life. I don’t always share with people what it is, you know. Um, but I
think that’s an avenue of growth for everyone. And you know, my primary purpose on
my job was to service the customers of behavioral health and that included contract stats
that we had to take and things like that that were really very involved, and very detailed
kinds of work. So, why not use that method for them? I didn’t have to say, this is what we
do in AA, it was just, this is what I do as a manager. So there’s a lot of times I’m using
AA that people don’t have any idea that’s what I’m using. Um, I think I’ve assimilated
AA into my personality. And into everything I do. And um, I think it gives a measure of
serenity to my life. I have some really sticky things in my life, I have a daughter who is
37 years old and has been drunk since she was twelve. Right now she’s—I keep expecting
her to come out. She’s sleeping off a drunk. She came out of treatment two weeks ago
and drank on the second day out. She’s trying to get into a clean and sober house now.
She’s also trying for the first time to get a payee. Because when she’s on the streets
113
people rob her. And so, if she had a payee that was just giving her a little bit at a time, it wouldn’t be—all the money for the rest of the month is gone. And she’d be able to pay her bills. She finally got in trouble this year to where she got a felony. And so, if she doesn’t stay sober she’s gonna end up in jail.

R31: How do you contextualize that? I mean, I don’t want to put words in your mouth so, it’s not exactly service…how do you contextualize helping your daughter?

P31: I have to work my program of recovery and not work hers. I can encourage her with recovery, but she’s my sobriety baby. She grew up in AA. She knows the steps, she knows the traditions. I would not be a bit surprised even if she knows the concepts! Because she’s heard all that all her life, and because it’s mine she doesn’t want to come into the fellowship. You know, I try to get her to go to meetings I don’t go to, go to women’s meetings, you know, but she’s still rebelling. Not as much as she was before because she’s been beaten down quite a bit. See, not only is she a drunk, she has cerebral palsy. And she has mental health problems. So you know, she’s fighting a battle on three bases whereas I only had to fight a battle on one base. So I have a lot of compassions for her, I have a lot of admiration for her. Because she can be a drunk this long, this hard and not totally crumble speaks a lot to her character. You know, I don’t let her live with me, she just came by this morning, I’m letting her sleep but she’s not staying here over night. I’m keeping closer tabs on her right now because Wednesday she has a really important medical appointment. So I’m keeping tabs on her. I said she could come tomorrow night so she could clean up before she goes to that appointment. It’s really hard to drop a kid off downtown, you know. And now she’s lost her cane. So it’s going to be really hard on her the rest of the month because when she’s drinking she depends on that cane. And there’s been times when the police, the ambulance has been called because she’s fallen face down. The hospital has pages and pages on her. And it’s sad, and it’s tragic. It’s—I’m powerless. I’m powerless over that girl. I can only love her as a mother and do things that are motherly things. I cannot help her as a suffering alcoholic because she doesn’t want what I have. I hope someday she will.

R32: Mm, OK. Do you believe that AA can be the solution for her?
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599   P32: uh-huh. I believe it can be part of the solution. She has to do medical things, she has
600    to keep her meds going and she has to work on um, getting her body healthy. But I think
601    AA would be a start, because if she can stay sober she can reason her way through those
602    other things. Where if she’s toxic it’s very hard for her to do her meds, do that
603    consistency, get to treatment on time, get to the doctors on time. Everything goes out the
604    window when she’s really toxic.
605   R33: What do you mean—I know what the word means, but what do you mean when you
606    say that she has a strong character? Or she has a lot of character?
607   P33: One, she hasn’t killed herself. She hasn’t become so totally without hope. Um, that
608    she’s able to survive in a world downtown that’s like sharks swimming. That she has
609    enough to be able to stay in that environment and not totally get eaten up. Cause as a
610    disabled addict, she’s prey for people. And she hasn’t, you know she hasn’t let that
611    dampen her sense of humor. I love traveling with her. In the last five years I’ve sobered
612    her up on the road the old-fashioned way, just wean them off. And when she’s traveling
613    she sobers up real nicely because the scenery is changing. And then as my copilot she has
614    a little responsibility for keeping us on the right road and so that gives her something to
615    do.
616   R34: Mm-hmm. What does character have to do with getting sober?
617   P34: I think character…I think character traits have to—there’s certain character traits
618    you have to have to be sober. One is, you have to be stubborn. I mean, and these are
619    things all alcoholics have. You have to be stubborn, you have to concede that there might
620    be something other than you. You have to have an ability to think of others. Because
621    some people don’t have that ability, they just don’t have it. You have to be tenacious in
622    what you want. And I think you have to be tenacious in wanting sobriety, no matter
623    where you come in on the faces of alcoholism. You really have to want it to stay and
624    work the program and get it. And I think those are all character traits. You know,
625    alcoholics are really stubborn people but they’re very gifted people at the same time,
626    because they do ingenious things. Um, I locked myself out of my car one time when I
627    was DCM. I was on the way to the area meeting, I had my car all packed I had a GSR
628    meeting to go to, I took my notebook for the GSR meeting and shut the trunk, and my
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keys were there. And those guys broke into my car, took the backseat out, and gave me
my keys!

R35: (laughing) I believe it!

P35: Yeah! And that’s that ingenious part, you know. They’re very pragmatic. I’ve seen
alcoholics work out situations that would have baffled anyone except a group of
alcoholics. And they get together and they want to go to point B and they’re going to
figure out how to get to point B! You know? And so I think there are certain character
traits that help you, but at the same time, you have to have the honesty side. If you’re not
honest and you don’t have the desire, you’re not going to make it. You know, you’ll be
out there drinking again. And that’s what C- doesn’t have, is the utmost desire. Part of it
is because she doesn’t like AA because she thinks of AA as having taken her mother
away. She doesn’t realize, AA gave her her mother. So, and you know, I told her not to
talk about me because she talks about me a lot. I told her, go to the AA meetings I don’t
go to and don’t talk about me, nobody’s gonna know who you are! Cause she thinks of
herself as a marked kid. Well, at 38 years old you’re not a kid anymore, and she’s not
marked. She just hasn’t realized that because that’s her hangup. It breaks my heart
sometimes. And I have to do that fine line of not enabling but doing the motherly things
like the medical help.

R36: Mm. So, how do you take care of yourself when your heart is broken?

P36: I take care of myself really well. Uh, in the last five years I have adopted a –I have a
recumbent elliptical. And I do really good speeds when I want to work off stuff about her.
Normally I do 35 minutes four times a week. And I go 11.2 miles and hour and I can do
up to six and a half miles. And I could do better except my lungs are kind of shot from
smoking so much. Um, and I do weights and I do floor exercises. But when my heart’s
really broken is when I’ll read a good novel. Most of the time I read nonfiction. I’ll read
two to three books a week. So that’s always a great escapism.

R37: So there’s a balance. Exercise, entertainment, and then you talked about sponsees
are a break from yourself—are you able to work with sponsees when you’re in a low
place?
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P37: I am. And my work with them might be even better. But you know, I have six sponsees and only one of them is in the recovery phase. The rest are all in, how am I going to live my life?

R38: Is that recovered then, for you?

P38: Well, they’re not in um, I would say they are recovered, that doesn’t mean that they don’t need AA. But they’re thinking beyond the 12 steps most of the time. They’ve assimilated the 12 steps and they live their life in bigger way. But every once in a while they’ll get stuck on something. And that’s when I get that phone call, I think I know what I need to do but I’m just not sure what I need to do? And we work the problem out.

R39: And it’s likely to be a life problem, not a—

P39: It could be an AA problem. I had one girl that uh, got into the routine of going to a meeting and there was always one guy at the meeting and she felt like he was always picking on her, but she saw that he was picking on everyone because he was not happy at the meeting. But she goes to the meeting and says if I talk before he does then he picks apart everything I say. And I said, well, don’t go to that meeting. And she says well, it’s a handy meeting, I really like going to that meeting, and I said well, then don’t let him get through to you. Don’t talk until after he talks. Sit behind him so you can watch what he’s doing and you don’t have to get involved with him. And eventually, she became comfortable and accepted him and he was no longer a thorn in her side. But it took a couple months. Several months. So that’s an AA problem and from somebody whose got a lot of sobriety. But sometimes, a lot of things get to us. And then you’ve got to drop back and you know which step you need to work on.

R40: Have you reworked the steps? I mean, I know you didn’t work the steps they way that people do now, but do you go back, do you write? What does your maintenance look like?

P40: I don’t journal on a regular basis. But I do do some journalizing. My maintenance is touching base with my sponsees on a regular basis. Either they touch base with me or I’ touching base with them. Cause if I don’t hear from somebody for a couple weeks I’ll give them a call and say hey, what’s going on. So, doing my sponsees, going to meetings, doing service work. You know, where I dabble. Um, continuing to grow. Continuing to
find things that make people comfortable in AA. Like this thing about having a meeting
without saying a prayer to go. It took me a long time to figure out that solution. You
know, and now I have to model it. And I’ll probably model it for—well one guys already
got the idea because he used it. But I’ll model it for all during my summer stuff, and
probably sometime next winter somebody will chair a meeting and do that. I quit talking
about this is not a twelve step program because people in my homegroup say that now.
They don’t know where they heard it, but they say it.

R41: You’re planting seeds!
P41: I am. Just like I you know, I haven’t even covered this part of my life, this is a big
part of my life [gestures to yard] is I make salves and oils and tinctures and teas, and so
growing these—almost everything that you’re looking at has some medical value. And
you walked past a lot of medicine coming in here. So I’m harvesting, I’m drawing, I’m
canting and decanting. So that’s just sort of another whole side of my life.

R42: And, it’s growth! All the time, all kinds of growth.
P42: Yeah, I encourage growth, I encourage growth. Um, and I guess that’s my big thing
in life, although I think I’m at appoint where I feel really serene—I mean, I’m seventy
years old. How much more do you want out of life than what I have? You know? A sober
daughter would be nice, because she’s better to travel with, but um, I really think I’ve got
the best of all possible worlds. I can work the land when I need to work the land. I can
work my spiritual self when I need to work that. I am obviously working on my physical
self. Um, scary story to tell you is um, I had 31 years of sobriety and I went in for an
ultrasound and they saw a shadow. And you know how they always tell you you’re not
supposed to talk to your doctor at meetings? Well my doctor came to a meeting to talk to
me! I couldn’t believe it! He corralled me, he said I came here because I needed to tell
you something. I said, well what do you need to tell me? He says, they found a spot on
your ultrasound and you need to come in my office because we’re going to need to do a
cat scan. And what they found was uh, the size of a golf ball, a tumor on the end of my
pancreas. And it is caused by vomiting. In women. It’s a thing that only women get and
it’s caused by ferocious vomiting. And now, I always thought to be a good alcoholic you
had to learn to vomit. Because you know, you vomit a lot to keep that first drink down.
Maybe you don’t know, but I know. In my day, I did a lot of vomiting. And uh, they kept saying, do you have an eating disorder? Have you been really, really ill? And the answer is no. So, it had to be caused by my drinking. So, it was there 31 years, and at year 36, it started to grow. And it didn’t change much, but it changed a little bit. And they said, we would advise you to have this taken out. So three years ago I had it taken out and they took out my spleen, and they took out about a third of my pancreas. And um, I just had the three year cat scan that, the tumor didn’t come back. My pancreas is totally normal, smaller. And my uh, levels, like for being diabetic, are back to what they were before this surgery. So, I’m doing something right. And what my doctor said was, he had me go down to Virginia Mason for the surgery and I have not received any bills. I don’t know what happened to them, maybe they’ll still come, I hope not, but I had my—I retired, and the day after I retired I had my operation. And I was on like a six month thing from the hospital so I had my, my healthcare was still good. And everybody along the way knew that and talked to me about my retirement and what are you gonna do, you know. And I don’t know how the bills got paid—I got one bill from Virginia Mason, and I sent it to them and they sent it back to me.

R43: Wow! A miracle somehow…a gift?

P43: It was a gift. A heavenly gift. And my doctor says to me, we caught it just before the catch it in time, time. So you know, when they say they caught something just in time? We caught it right before that. And he says, you can’t ask for anything better than that. So, you know, I don’t like to brag. But I think I’m living ok. I think I’m going to be ok. When I sobered up the old timers would talk about this at every single meeting—I just want to die sober. I do not want to die a drunk. And I don’t hear people talking about that very much anymore. And I think that’s one of the things that made those guys stronger about their sobriety because they didn’t slip. They were in there for the long haul and they knew they were in there for the long haul. And so last night we were reading…what was it. Something, and they, I shared that, whatever it was the topic was, I think it was…it was service but it was something about service after the convention in ’55. And I said you know, if I hadn’t gotten sober I would have died a drunk and it would not be a pretty death. So now, I can have a beautiful death. And everybody laughed at me because
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they thought that was funny—my group laughs at me a lot, and that’s ok! I like them to laugh at me! But that’s really true. I feel like I can have a good death. My funeral is already paid for, my house a little big of mortgage but when they sell it after I die they’ll still get a little bit of money. Uh, I just feel like, I’m in my end years. Maybe even my golden years. And um, uh, however I die it’s going to be ok, it’s going to be ok. I don’t worry about dying drunk. And if I have cancer I want palliative care and I want to be pain free and I will not worry about becoming an addict. If I get to that point where I have to have that that’s what I’ll do. I won’t feel guilty about it. Because, but it will be narcotics, it won’t be alcoholic. I doubt that they’ll give me a fifth and say go ahead and die, I can’t imagine that. But it won’t be of my choosing—I want to stay off meds as long as I can. My family has always been a family that talks about death. And we don’t hide it from our children. My parents didn’t hide it from me. And so, I feel like I’m getting there you know, and it’s ok.

R44: Mm. What a gift.
P44: I’ve had 39 years given to me. In January it’ll be 40 years. That were just a gift. There’s no other way to describe those last decades of my life. If I hadn’t had that experience, if I hadn’t got that guy who was just so straight-laced, who let me grow at my own pace, he didn’t push me he didn’t prod me he didn’t make me uncomfortable, he just let me grow. I’m so lucky I didn’t go through a treatment center. If I’d gone through a treatment center I would have been saying fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, and probably wouldn’t have lasted 29 days. But I wouldn’t have gotten sober from them talking to me.

R45: You needed…space in some significant way. You were allowed to work through things that get forced down people’s throats these days.
P45: Yes. Yes. And I think that is the only way you’re gonna be secure in your sobriety. Because if somebody forces you to do something eventually you’re going to rebel against that. You know, alcoholics are rebellious, and if there’s anything to grab onto to rebel, we’ll do that. We’re giving them and out when we force them to do stuff. First time I heard they were doing fourth steps in treatment, I about fell over. Because somebody that’s got 28 days of sobriety has no idea how to do a fourth step. They don’t even know how to stay sober yet, you know? They’re on the first step!
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R46: So there’s something there too about that way that you—you won’t just sponsor anybody, there has to be something there, and maybe even a little bit of the right kind of chemistry between you and the woman who’s asking for your help. It’s almost like, I’m wondering if there’s something in there that, um…

P46: I would be doing a disservice to somebody who needed a sponsor who was gonna sit down and say call me, I want you to call me at four o’clock every day, I want you to read this page in the big book, then I want you to read this page in the book—I would be doing a disservice to the person who needs that kind of guidance.

(daughter came out of the house, we paused for several minutes)

R47: Well, we have talked for about an hour and 20 minutes and I promised to keep it to 90, so—

P47: So you ask me anything you want.

R48: So I want to know, before we finish up, if there is anything else that you think I should know that I didn’t allude to. And I also realized that we got away from the meeting versus group distinction and I want to make sure I understand how you’re defining those.

P48: OK. Um, meeting versus group. A group is tied to the service structure. A meeting is not.

R49: So, any alcoholics getting together is—

P49: Is a meeting. A meeting can be any two or more alcoholics together to have a discussion. There’s various formats you could use and it doesn’t—whereas a group is aligned, a group has service positions—a meeting might have service positions but they don’t have the committee structure service positions that a group does that ties them in with the district, that ties them in with the area, that ties it in with the general service office.

R50: So is that why the Bellingham meeting list includes meetings on the bottom, and—

P50: Those are meetings, and the other ones, the groups, are tied to the general service structure.
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R51: OK. And so, when people take a meeting to someone in the hospital or something, that’s legitimate and you can do that and you can use the format, but that’s different from a group.

P51: Well, and it’s different in another way. If you carry a meeting into detox or to a hospital or to a persons home or to a penal institution, those meetings, you don’t ask people to sign in, you don’t pass a hat because there’s no expenses, and you could adopt any format you wanted to adopt. Whereas with a group you adopt, you use the format that the group has decided.

R51: So it’s formalized in that way. I had a feeling it was along those lines but I wanted to make sure I knew how you were using them. So, you’re summer event is a group?

P51: It’s a meeting—

R52: Oh right, sorry that’s what I meant.

P52: We usually call it the Fireside meeting. I never read the pamphlets too closely. Although this year he said he didn’t change anything but the date, but he did put the pamphlets we’re reading, but he did say there’s going to be hot water for coffee and there’s not going to be any coffee. I’m making almost two gallons of tea, that’s my part.

R53: And it’s medicine.

P53: That’s right, but they don’t know that.

R54: Some of them might (laughter).

P54: It doesn’t make any difference. And it’s fun, we discuss and we have all this food and we have fellowship afterward. So it’s a just a meeting. It’s something that happens in the summer.

R55: So you probably—I’ve heard people say the program is not the fellowship and it sounds like you might agree with that but you would mean something different from what they mean.

P55: I would, I would. Because what I think AA is is a spiritual fellowship. That, spiritual fellowship defines all those facets that we’ve talked about. What I consider this is, it’s an informal meeting of my homegroup. And I just try to have something every year that we can learn about the fellowship that we haven’t discussed in our study groups.
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R56: And the learning—the learning is, I’m trying to sort of, encapsulate some of this…so the learning is your, part of your principle of growth, and the program’s principle of growth—you believe it is implicit in the program. But it’s also a means by which you foster connection. It’s how people get closer to each other.

P56: I don’t say this to anybody, but having this meeting is part of my service work.

R57: Right. Ok. So connection is a product of working a real program?

P57: I think so, I think so. I do see that in the people I sponsor, how connected they are. And I take great joy in that. Um, I’m sure they take joy or at least laugh about some of the things I do. Like the girl who said I ordered her to do something. I’ve been her sponsor for almost fifteen years, and there’s only been two times I’ve ordered her to do anything. And the first time I knew I was ordering her to do it—she was a little resistant. And then, she finally did it and she saw why. And this one I was not aware I was ordering her to do it, so she picked up an order where one was not meant to be. So, cause I don’t think you get anywhere by ordering people. It was just a matter of her own safety.

[long pause]

R58: Any closing words before I take us off the record?

P58: I don’t, you know, I feel pretty cleaned out. I’ll probably think of something else later, but that’s ok. One of the things I do think we need to work on is being inclusive. And I think that there is a danger that we might not be. And I also see a danger in having so many things that involve gambling. Because gambling can be an addiction. And why should we have a gathering that’s supported by gambling. So why would we want to encourage addictions or possible addictions. So that’s become a thing now I’m concerned about. I won’t do anything about it because I’m not active in any of those things where it’s going on, and I won’t participate in them, out of my own choice. But I think as a fellowship we need to be careful about that. Because that is putting another source of addiction right in front of somebody whom we know has addiction problems. But that inclusiveness of not being so god-oriented, and I believe in god and I have my own religious program, but we can’t make people feel funny because we’re talking about god. We have to talk about spirituality.
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R59: mm-hmm. That—your focus on inclusiveness reminds me that I don’t know if I got a sense of what changed in your opinion regarding women’s meetings. Because again, if we start splitting everybody up and there’s gotta be men’s meetings and women’s meetings and gay and lesbian meetings then—

P59: We’ve got to be homogenous. We have to be a homogenous society—

R60: The emphasis is on being alcoholic.

P60: The emphasis is on being alcoholic, and also, on being well-rounded within the fellowship. And I think if you stick to one kind of meeting all the time you’re not being well-rounded.

R61: So what changed for you—you said that you do see some value in women’s meetings now, what is that value?

P61: That value is for women who think like, I don’t think of myself as a woman, I think of myself as a human being. But for women who think of themselves as women, and who have maybe, sexual abuse problems or something that makes them hesitate to go from a woman into being a human being, those meetings are valuable for them. And I think eventually, the ones who are growing will fly out to the fellowship.

R62: Well, because what you just mentioned was a sexual trauma history that they might feel more comfortable and achieve growth in that safer environment, an environment that feels safer to them? And then they would—your hope would be that once they feel safe they could go elsewhere.

P62: Be homogenous, yeah. Because I think the true lessons we learn are lessons that pertain to all human beings. Not just women, not just people who’ve been sexually abused, but it’s everyone no matter what their problems are. That’s where we end up. That’s a good distinction. I have been working with a women’s group to give them a service structure. I’ve met with them twice and from what I’ve heard I’ll probably be meeting with them again, buck them up—you know, if you’re gonna be a really good group this is what you have to do.
Appendix C - Participant 2

R1: Please talk about your experience in Alcoholics Anonymous and your experience working the steps with a sponsor. Feel free to share anything that you think will help me understand what it was like for you to get sober as a woman in AA.

P1: So, basically just my story of getting sober? OK. Um, I didn’t start drinking or using any drugs as a kid. I was 22 years old, but by that time I was divorced and I had two babies. I had two babies by the time I was 20, and um, uh, and I had probably finished about, at that time about a year and half, maybe two years of college and a bunch of different colleges because my husband taught at colleges. And um, it was 1967 like, the summer of love and everybody my age was—you know, we didn’t say partying in those days, but you know, smoking weed basically and drinking beer and so I did those things. There was something about it though that—I had been in a really violent marriage and I never talked to anybody about that. And there were no like, battered women’s shelters in those days. And so I finally escaped from that basically, but I never—I’m sure even if I look back on it now although I don’t think those words were even being used yet—the acronym PTSD wasn’t even coined at that time because it was just the beginning of the buildup in Vietnam. So um, but I was like, really happy and politically involved and all those things that we did about that stuff. But I never got any help for what had just happened to me, you know, four years of being beaten and brutalized and other things too. So I just kind of, I thought that was over and stuffed it away. But I think that when I picked up a drink and started smoking pot that it meant more to me than maybe it might have, just because it was like relief. So you know, I really loved it and looked forward to it, I was already really fixated on it even though I don’t think it was a problem yet. So, I got a little minimum wage job and I was supporting my kids and I got an opportunity to go back to school, to nursing school which is what I had started in, and finish that degree. And I had been just dying to go back to school and so I had the chance to do that. And uh, I’d gotten married again and uh, so eventually I finished—I always say, after nine years and two kids and two husbands, I got my nursing degree. And uh, it was what I had
worked for so hard and I loved it and I wanted to do it. And so I started working at a hospital. And for whatever reason, it was like some leftover Demerol, which you’re supposed to waste with another nurse as a witness and I took it home. And I loved that. And I injected myself with it. So, that started a really insane, insane progression with opiates. And it was only probably a couple years before I just crashed and burned, and I did it at work. You know, this is the thing about addiction like, it caused me to lose things I loved and had worked really hard for for years. So I was at work, and I was in a blackout apparently, and I wrote some crazy stuff in the nurses notes in a patient’s chart and I don’t remember what I wrote, they showed it to me the next day and I was like, what’s this? But what I wrote was, righteous hope to die junkie, help me grandfather. I don’t know how that happened. Somebody asked me, do you think that was a cry for help? And I thought you know, I don’t think so, because I really didn’t want to get caught because I knew I was going to be in huge trouble. So, um, long story short, the nursing board ended up taking my license away from me.

R3: Wow. For a first offense.

P3: Yeah, they didn’t have the program they have now, the WHPS program. And I was seeing a psychiatrist because the hospital—actually different hospital because I was changing hospitals trying to stop, trying to stop and I thought, well I’ll get myself another fresh start and this psychiatrist had me go into group therapy and it was, I don’t know, it was what I like to call the worried well. I mean, it wasn’t to the extreme depths of what I was going through and I couldn’t tell anybody what I was up to because it was so awful and I was so ashamed of myself and I knew that I was putting everything at risk and I just couldn’t stop. And um, he’s the one who suggested that I go to this treatment center in Seattle. It was called Family House and it was up on top of Queen Anne Hill. And it was—it wasn’t 12 step based and the people that started it came out of Daytop Lodge in New York, I don’t know if you know about Daytop Lodge and Daytop Village, but it’s basically like a peer-run thing, and it’s highly confrontational. It’s like Synanon. And I was supposed to be in there for two years. And my kids came in too, there, it was not a good environment because there was so much yelling, like right in your face yelling.
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here [gestures with hands to personal space in front of her] and you were constantly cleaning the house and it was a big mansion, it was a beautiful house and there were probably 20 of us in there. And we were all young, I was in my 20’s and so was everybody else there, I think. And um, I had met this man, or, obviously I was divorced from my second husband by then, that didn’t last too long. And I met this man who was a friend of my sister’s, and she lived up in BC at the time, she and her husband, and she wanted me to meet him and I was just going to go into this treatment center at the time and she goes, he’s really nice, he’s 40 years old he’s a school teacher and I thought—oh my god, how boring, a school teacher, somebody who’s 40 and, you know, I was 28 I think, or 27. But, I did go up for the weekend to see her and he was like, crazy about me immediately, you know, already talking about well, if we get married then I’ll do this with my house for the kids, kind of crazy. Then I went into Family House with my kids and when I was in Family House you couldn’t have any contact with anybody in the outside world. I couldn’t communicate with my parents or my family or anybody. They just kept you. You couldn’t look out the window, you couldn’t have a watch, you couldn’t listen to the radio. You know? It was very…really pretty cultish.

R4: Yeah, that’s the word that comes to mind.
P4: You couldn’t have any money and you couldn’t leave the house. Anyway. So, um. After—I was supposed to be there two years, but after five months I escaped from there in the middle of the night. And I told my kids who were like 8 and 9 at the time, or 7 and 8. I said, listen, I’m going to pick you up at school tomorrow but I’m not gonna be here when you wake up. And they were like, good! We’re getting out of here. So I left there in the middle of the night and I walked down the hill somewhere close to the Seattle Center and found a Denny’s and I had two nickels. One of which my son had given me and I had a nickel and I called that guy up in BC and he immediately came down and got me and my kids and took us to Canada the next day. It was a lot easier going across the border in those days! This was 1973, and um, you know until I got sober I always thought that was a really romantic story, instead of an insane story. And uh, but anyway I lived with him, and I was in the country illegally but nobody seemed to notice or care. My kids went to school and eventually we, I think we got married and then told them that I was there and
they were like, well you can’t be here and I was like, well we are and I am, and they were pretty cool about and were like, very well, we’ll find a way—

R5: This was before homeland security!

P5: Oh yeah, you know, Canadians are very polite and nice. Anyway, we lived up there and I didn’t stay sober once I left Family House, but I wasn’t doing opiates, so I thought that was ok since that had been the real horrible thing, I thought. So, I was just basically smoking weed and I did that like, all day every day. And um, just always. But you know, we had a pretty decent life and had a lot of fun and he was a very good guy and he didn’t understand anything about addiction and I guess he didn’t see it as a warning sign to go pick up a woman that was escaping from a treatment center and he was actually a really terrific enabler. He really was. And um, there was a time when we thought we would move to Bellingham and move to the states because property was so expensive up there and it was so cheap in Bellingham at the time. And so we did and we moved back down here and we bought a five bedroom Victorian house overlooking the bay on Eldridge Avenue for forty-two thousand dollars. Which seemed like a significant amount of money. It wasn’t as much as things cost in BC at the time. And I went to the nursing board by myself, I didn’t get an attorney or anything I just went there, had an appointment and talked to them about getting my license back. And I told them, well I’ve been through treatment, I didn’t tell them I escaped from treatment. And I remember them asking me well, what if this happens again? And I said, well I would certainly like, let you know. And they, they were naïve like most people were and they gave me my license back. And within a short period of time I went to work. I had had another baby when I was in BC and so he was 2. And I went back, I was just going to work like two shifts a week and I couldn’t get a job in Bellingham at the time, so I worked in Cedro Woolley at a little hospital there and within no time I was up to my old tricks, I don’t know, you know, it’s kind of like you can’t even recall the suffering and humiliation of even a week or a month ago. I just thought, well I’ll handle it differently—I don’t even remember having a thought about it. Before long, I was just back into the insanity, and that went on—I worked there for two years and I worked in Bellingham, and I was just
always like, on the edge and afraid, really afraid that I was going to get found out but I couldn’t stop.

[doorbell rang, short break]

R6: So you were working in Bellingham and Cedro Woolley—
P6: Right, and I was up to no good again. In fact at one point I was so desperate that I just took a leave of absence from work and I told them it was something to with my son who was a teenager and I needed to be there for him but, that wasn’t really the truth but I just wanted to get away from it. But I continued to smoke weed and drink and then the drinking escalated. And uh—every day, on a daily basis. And then I finally went back to work, I couldn’t stay away from it, I got an opportunity to be the head nurse of—cause I worked in labor and delivery, I worked with moms and babies—and I got an opportunity to help start a birthing center which, ironically, is in the same place that the birthing center is now, on the corner of Cornwall and Alabama. The women who started this one now didn’t know that that had been a birthing center so I went over and talked to them and said, you can thank us for that parking lot you have! They were like yeah! That was why we got this place! So I worked at the birthing center and that was ok but that was only two years. And uh, let’s see, then what happened. Then I went on unemployment and I was like, oh goody! Unemployment, I’ve never done that before. But you know, I mean, I—

R7: So that was a decision to like, quit working and drink full time? Or—
P7: Um, well, I was still drinking and smoking weed and stuff but I thought ok, so I don’t have to go to work, I can just coast on unemployment for a while but you know, you have to go apply for jobs when you’re on unemployment and I just, couldn’t lie about that. So I applied for jobs, but generally I was applying for jobs that I knew I wasn’t suited for.

And uh, I finally had to go to St. Joe’s, there aren’t that many employers, and they called me back and said, Oh P-! Come back! We’re so happy, we want you! And I was just like, oh no…so I think I had a little job before that—yeah, I worked for a local obstetrician for a short period of time. It was so horrible there. It didn’t work out, I won’t go into that whole story but, his receptionist really just made life hell for me and finally he said listen you know, P- you’re really excellent, I really appreciate you, but I have to let one of you
go because she was just complaining about me with just nonsensical things and I was always going to her saying listen, let’s work this out between the two of us you know, we don’t have to get Rob involved and, you know. So he said, I’ve got to let one of you go and she’s been here the longest so it’s going to be you but I’ll give you a great recommendation. So, that’s when I got the unemployment, I guess, yeah. But then I had to go back to the hospital and it was the same thing and I was just back in it, deeper than ever.

R8: It sounds like part of your mind was trying to find a job that would kind of keep you safe.

P8: Oh yeah.

R9: And that was conscious?

P9: Yeah, oh yeah. So I did go back to the hospital—I mean, I could have not worked at all, but I was married to somebody who like, would never save any money, we always lived on the edge. And I really needed to have some money because, the house was falling down around us and that was his character defect, was giving lots of stuff away to everyone so he could be mister generous, but meanwhile we were wearing rags and the carpet was down to the burlap. So, um, I uh…yeah, so I went back to work there and—oh, I’ll tell you, when I was working at the birthing center I—I’m gonna back up a minute. I had a lady who was going to deliver there and I was also teaching childbirth classes and she was in the Lamaze class and we got to be kind of friends, and she would say things like, well I’m an alcoholic and I would just cringe! Like, that’s not something you say out loud! You know? And so at one point she said, why don’t you come to an AA meeting with me and see what my life is about. And I don’t know if she knew anything about me or not but I did go, and I went to Dry Dock with her and it was a big—there weren’t that many meetings in town at that point and it was a big, booming group and I really felt like, oh my god, they’re talking my language. These people get it, like these people understand what I’m going through. And I stayed sober while I was going there for probably four months. And uh, felt good about that. Except that this woman who was very beautiful, very charismatic, very talented, very artistic, she um, was always making up something to do in some creative way. And she became a therapist with
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absolutely no credentials to do that. And this was back in the—when the big thing was
repressed memory and recovered memories and that whole thing. So anyway, I was in
one of her groups because I thought that was AA, I was new, I didn’t know better. And I
can remember the oldtimers at Dry Dock muttering about, that’s not AA, what the hell
are they doing over there. And I thought oh, they’re just old, we’re young and we’ve got
something advanced going on here. Anyway, it got really crazy with her. And uh, she
was trying to get people—I think people were coming up with stuff just to please her,
cause like, she sponsored a lot of women and uh, and uh, I kind of knew that was
happening and at one point she was telling people well, if you’ve been sexually abused—
and of course a lot of these women had been sexually abused because a lot of women in
recovery have been sexually abused, as children—and she said, well if you’ve been
sexually abused as children then you are an abuser yourself. So now we’re going to go
into these repressed memories and find these memories of how you have sexually abused
children. So then they were coming up with memories of that, and one of them
unfortunately came up with this memory of how they had abused this woman’s child
and—it hit the fan! And she called the cops, this woman was arrested, it was just this
insane, paranoid, crazy—and I backed away from it, I knew it was crazy. And I backed
away from AA at the same time because I kind of thought it was all the same thing. I
didn’t know better, I didn’t know that we don’t have gurus in AA and that you know,
outside issues or anything like that. Because I hadn’t wanted to get a sponsor, I hadn’t
wanted to do the steps, because I knew it was going to be like, telling the truth and I
wasn’t going to do that. I was never gonna do that, because nobody knew. So anyway,
fast forward a little bit, I’m back at the hospital—so, I knew about AA. But it didn’t
occur to me to go back there.

R10: And you said that, when she talked about being an alcoholic that you had sort of an
internal cringe about, don’t talk about that—was that because you knew on some level
that you were an alcoholic?

P10: Oh I knew that, I was never in denial about that.

R11: OK, so it was about protecting the—keeping up the facade.
P11: Yeah. My denial was that, someday I’m gonna be able to fix this. Someday I will stop. Because there would be—some days there would be a couple of days when I would stop and I would immediately feel better about myself, like, oh my god, this is—I’m gonna do this now. And it would only last maybe two days. So—and I was drinking all night—after I went to AA that first time, when I left AA I never smoked weed again but the drinking escalated tremendously. So I was like, drinking all night, and uh, I was—I didn’t want anybody at home to see me really drunk, although sometimes they would wake up and just see it, so I kind of liked to just stay up all night where they were sleeping and I would just drink and drink and drink and then when I’d go to work—well, you can’t go to work with alcohol on your breath and I did once, and they sent me home. So I was like, well that’s not going to work, because people can tell. So then I would just use drugs while I was at work. But I had to just, do something. And I felt tremendously guilty, tremendously guilty. Because I knew it was so wrong! But anyway in November—and I was an atheist—but November, I was like not just an atheist but an in-your-face atheist. I was a dues paying member of the Freedom From Religion Foundation and I, you know, liked to argue about it. And I remember one time I was working in Sedro Woolley and I drove home, it was about midnight, and I just felt suddenly so panicky and so crazy, and I pulled the car over and I was like, in a cow pasture, I mean, there were cows there—and I just got out of the car and I was like, screaming at the sky saying, if you’re so powerful, if you love me so much, why do you let me live like this? And uh, I don’t think that was really the right approach so I didn’t really get any help from that supposed prayer but um, in November of 1988 I was just at the end of my rope—and I don’t know why I didn’t just quit work, go to AA, those options didn’t really occur to me—I’ve never been able to stop myself, somebody always had to step in and stop me. And uh, my last drinks was at a little place downtown. And I didn’t usually drink with people, I usually drank by myself at home. But I was drinking with somebody and I was arguing the nonexistence of god, over my last drinks. And the topic was Satanism and I said, well, Satanism is foolish because you have to believe the corollary which is god, and obviously there isn’t a god, so the whole this is stupid. And uh, the next morning, I don’t know why, I just couldn’t live like that a minute longer and I got down
on my knees in my living room and I said, that, I don’t know if there’s anybody listening, but if you’re there I don’t think you can fix this—I didn’t think it was fixable—so, I’m not asking you to fix this, I just can’t be alone with it anymore. I’m just asking you for comfort, I just need you to be with me, that’s all I’m asking. So I said that, and then I guess—oh, I said if you do this for me, then I promise that I will live the rest of my life for you. And while I’m saying that, there’s a voice in my head going, what the hell are you saying? You don’t know how to do that? Are you going to go be a missionary or something? But that’s what I said! That’s what came out of my mouth. And um, I go into work that day and the director of nurses calls me into her office and she says to me—because there had been another incident that I barely remembered, but it was where I was like, really loaded and they couldn’t find me. Because I was holed up in some bathroom. And I think I had nodded off for quite a long time, you know with this tourniquette around my arm and they couldn’t find me. And stuff was heating up out there and they were really busy and they needed somebody and I was nowhere to be found and I couldn’t explain it. Anyway, she called me into her office and she said, P—, we think you have a problem. And I just started to cry. And then she said to me, well you’re a good nurse. Because I had never gotten a bad review in my entire career, ever, as far as nursing, not one single criticism of anything. And she said, but, there’s help if you want it. And I was like, I do! I want it! But St. Joseph’s hospital had a recovery center at that time, an inpatient recovery center and so was like, ok well let’s go and she just took me down there and put me in there! Like, nobody in my family knew where I was, or anything. And it was like, there I was. And I was just—my basic thought was, I was really ashamed, I didn’t know what was going to happen, I didn’t know if I was going to go to prison or not because I had seen pictures in the paper of nurses being led out of St. Joes in handcuffs. So, that was my big fear was that I was going to be in huge legal problems. And um, what I didn’t know until years later was that there had been this law enacted and it came into play on October 31st 1988, and I was confronted on November the 7th, 1988. Which was establishing the WHPS program which was, I want to say amnesty, but it was a monitoring program that you could go into in order to save your license. And there were a lot of hoops you had to jump through for three years, nowadays
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it’s five years. But um, I was offered that. So um, but I didn’t know that at the time. And I thought to myself when I was in there, I’m going to do this, I’m gonna be honest like they said—cause I remembered about AA, and the treatment center was 12 step focused. And I thought, I’m gonna—I know about this, and I’m gonna just do it now, whatever happens. And I’m gonna put myself in the—I’m gonna just surrender to it. So if I go to prison I’m gonna do it in prison, whatever happens, because I just can’t live like this anymore. And uh—I’m all in. So uh, they had somebody from the state pharmacy board come and talk to me about what I’d been up to and I answered every question he had, I told him the truth. And then that night I thought to myself, you know what, people who are not addicts don’t even know the questions to ask. There’s more. But I answered everything truthful so maybe that’s good enough. And uh, I talked to my counselor about it and she said well, we’ll get him back. So he came back and I told him everything. And somebody said to me—Nancy K who was the head nurse at the recovery center said, well, do you want a lawyer to go in there with you? Then I got scared and I said, what do I need a lawyer for? And she said, well I don’t know, I just am asking, you have the right to have one and I thought, no, I’m not going to have a lawyer. I don’t want this to be adversarial. I want to be…I want it all to be off of me. So, I would never presume to give anyone legal advice, but that worked really well for me. And then I got to go into the WHPS program and I had to go to this—and I didn’t work then. I wasn’t going to be a nurse anymore I thought, it’s too dangerous for me. So I’m just not gonna do it. I was going to voc rehab and they were like, what do you need us for, you have a profession. And I was like, listen, I have this handicap, I’m an alcoholic, I’m a drug addict, it’s too risky for me and I need something else. They were like, OK, and I started the process of testing but I—you know I didn’t work for which I’m really grateful today because I got to go to lots of meetings. And I was profoundly depressed. And I was afraid to like, take any medication—I don’t know if anybody offered it to me, but I was afraid I would abuse it, because I abused everything. And uh, so I just stayed depressed, and I felt a little bit better when I was in meetings so I just went to meetings, all the time. And uh, I was required to go to three a week and get a slip signed, but I went to like, 7 to 10 meetings a week. And uh, I...um, I had a train of thought, I don’t remember what it was. So anyway,
I got—and I went to NA too in the beginning, for probably six months and I just
thought—I really didn’t find good examples of recovery in NA. And it’s kind of been like
that in this town. I don’t know why exactly, I mean I think NA is strong other places. But
um, I found a sponsor in AA, who I loved and admired. And I just thought I better
concentrate on one book, and one program and one sponsor. So, I stayed in AA. And I
didn’t really seem to need—I mean, I qualified as an alcoholic for sure, I mean, I drank
like a pig. So I don’t need to qualify myself as an alcoholic-addict, which to me seems
kind of redundant. So, also I think keeps people—this is what I tell sponsees, is you need
to identify with us, but we need to identify with you too. And if you need to insist that
you’re somehow unique then some of these oldtimers, or maybe not oldtimers, who are
strictly alcoholic are going to think, well I can’t really help that person because I don’t
have that experience. Then you miss out on something you might have been able to use.
So yeah, I just apply AA to everything in my life and I haven’t found it necessary to go to
different groups. If I did find it necessary I would go. It’s worked for me just to do that.
And uh, yeah, so I wasn’t happy. I didn’t really get happy until probably around two
years. Something happened to me where—it was about the time I finished the ninth step
and uh, and you know I finished it. I didn’t hang onto anything. I wasn’t going to hang
onto anything or be unwilling to go anywhere, I was just like…AA soldier, showing up
for duty. Yeah, so something happened to me.

R12: When you finished your amends?
P12: Yeah. I don’t know I mean, they say that, you know. What we call colloquially the
promises are the ninth step promises. And that was exactly how that happened for me.
And uh, yeah. So, um…and then I met S- when I was going on three years of sobriety.

R13: So you were still married at that time?
P13: I was just—I had left my husband. I felt like at home then that I—cause he was like,
he did have his own demons. I mean, I’ll never say he wasn’t a good guy, because he
was. But he was not supportive of my recovery at all. And now when I look back on it I
think he kind of liked the fact that I was dependent…on him. Because he would sort of
like, do things to sort of sabotage it. And I was like, nope, this is life or death for me, you
can ask me, why are you going to that meeting, all you want, but I’m going. Finally I just
felt like I couldn’t breath. And I moved out and I lived in a house which is really odd, but
I lived in the same house that I live in now. But it was owned by this woman named N-
who’s in the program, but she rented out rooms, to people, and I rented a room from her.
And um, years later Steve ended up buying that house, so we live in that house now. And
I never think about that unless I’m telling my story, I never like, lie up in my bed and
think, oh, this is where I was in my little single bed with my suitcase and dresser, you
know, like a little monk in a cell. You know, it came down to very bare bones living in
there. But it was okay. That’s when I really got the third step, when I really, really got it.
And uh, yeah so, S- and I got together about three years, and he had ten years at the time
which impressed me—although now I know that’s not necessarily, doesn’t necessarily
mean anything. But he’s really—I remember one of the things he said to me was, we
were talking about drinking and he said, if you go back out I’m not going with you. And I
think that is the most romantic thing he has ever said to me and I thought, I love that
about him. Because he loves his sobriety more than he loves me. Because I can count on
this guy, you know? Anyway, we’ve been together for quite a long time, 23 years,
and…almost. And I’ve just stayed in AA and that’s been, you know, I know it works
because I didn’t do anything else. I don’t have a problem with other people doing
whatever they need to do, but I didn’t do anything else. I did AA. And I say I was—I was
content not to be happy. I was used to being unhappy, and just the fact that I wasn’t a
slave to alcohol anymore, and drugs, was enough. I didn’t really expect to get happy. And
I didn’t really talk much. I mean, I was kind of—I think god struck me dumb, really,
because I am a talker. And I also use that, those uh, verbal gymnastics and intellect and
my great knowledge of literature to like, don’t look at the man behind the curtain! You
know, but I had a sponsor who didn’t fall for that, she’d be—that’s all very well, but
we’re talking about step 2. You know? And she would just—so, I had the perfect sponsor
for me. And I didn’t socialize with anybody in early sobriety. She tried to get me to do all
these things, hang out, I just, I was really into the program not so much into the
fellowship for a couple years.

R14: What changed then?
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P14: Um, I think when I moved out of my—when I moved away from my husband, I don’t know, it happened about that time when I think that I knew that I really needed to depend on women, you know?

R15: And it sounds like at that time you were—you had encouragement from your sponsor. But you also were able to reach out at that point, calling women and…

P15: Yeah it started out that way—I was really uncomfortable doing it. I remember sitting in meetings and they’d say well, you have to change all your friends and I’d think, lucky me, cause I don’t have any friends! I don’t have to give any up. Cause I didn’t, I wasn’t connected to anybody at all. I was just so completely isolated and liking it that way. My sponsor was the one who told me I had to get an answering machine. Cause I just wouldn’t answer the phone and then I wouldn’t know who called me and wouldn’t owe them a callback or anything. This was before any—this was before cell phones or anything. I was like, aw rats! And I said to her, well then I’m gonna have to call them back! And she said, exactly. Got to establish some kind of network here like, what if you—what if I’m not available. And what are the chances that you’ll call them if you’ve never called them before. Pretty much zero, so. So…and that’s been a real lifesaver for me. I mean, I have men friends too and men have helped me too, but it’s really a lifesaver to have those women.

R16: What’s valuable about those relationships? That might sound like a dumb question, but I’m curious about that…how is it a life saver?

P16: Well, I think there’s a difference in how men and women approach things. I don’t think I’m sexist in saying that. And maybe it is as a consequence of sexism that men are conditioned to be one way and women are conditioned to be another way. But the fact is that they are generally speaking—of course there are lots of exceptions—but men, basically if you have a problem, they want to solve it for you. They’re really into solving it and they’re pretty good at that. But women will listen to you. They’ll listen to me, and I can then come up with what I need to do to solve it, with that kind of help. They don’t need to—they don’t necessarily need me to be fixed, I think. You know? I think they’re ok, more ok if I’m just kind of floundering for a while.
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R17: Sounds like...real, sort of companionship, instead of a productive relationship...or something.
P17: Yeah...yeah, yeah. So there’s things I talk to my women friends about that I don’t talk to my husband about it, and he would be fine about it, but I don’t have to. One would think—you know, I’ve been divorced three times when Steve and I got together, right? I mean, I didn’t have a good record of forming a true partnership with another human being. And I thought to myself—I mean, I was 40—in my mid-forties when I got together with him and I thought this is done. Nursing is done, relationships are done, I’m not gonna have that anymore and I’m ok with that. And um, my nursing was given back to me—I feel like everything that I have, everything that I have received in sobriety has been a gift, not something I have worked on. I mean, I really believe in steps six and seven, I don’t fix myself, that something else can help me, I just have to like, get out of the way. And uh, so I, what happened was, I was coming up on a year of sobriety I guess, or two years, something like that, and this doctor called me up out of the blue, and I think I had run into the woman that I had started birthcare with who was also married to a doctor, and she was a nurse and she asked me how I was doing and I said I was doing well. I had gone up to the hospital and had made my amends to the nurses and the director of nurses who was my supervisor up there and I was really terrified to do that—I mean, they had known all ready, but to go up there and face it was, it was, I’d made amends to my father who I’d hated and that relationship was so much better, I made amends to my ex husband who was so awful—for my part, cause you know, and that, that helped, he ended up making amends to me too. So anyway, I’d gotten through that, this obstetrician called me and said my nurse is going to have a hystectomy, she’s going to be gone for six weeks, do you want to come work for me for those six weeks? I thought, I didn’t ask for this, it just came out of the blue, and I’m not going to be exposed to anything scary there, it’s an obstetrician’s office...and after that, not too long after that, maybe a few more months, a family practice doc I had know because he delivered babies, called me up—I ran into his wife and she asked me how I was and I said, you know, I’m doing better. And I also, I had sent flowers up to the hospital on my one year anniversary, to the two colleagues of mine who had been the ones that turned me in and I just thanked
them for saving my life and probably some other people’s lives too. And um, cause they were really mad at me. In fact when I was treatment somebody thought it was a good idea to have them come down and confront me in treatment—maybe it was good for them! It was not good for me. It was not the right time for me, I was completely raw and completely exposed and I just had to sit there and listen to them. They were angry. I don’t blame them for being angry, it didn’t seem like uh—it didn’t seem very therapeutic for someone who was in treatment. Anyway, this guy, this other doctor called me who was, called me up and asked me if I would want to work for him. And I was doing all this other stuff with vocational rehab and I thought, you know, this is not something I’m trying to make happen, this is just appearing to me. So I went in and talked to him and I said Jim, listen, you know my history, you know, I can’t be around any narcotics. I don’t want to have possession of the narcotics keys, I don’t even want to know where they’re kept. I don’t want anything to do with it. Like, I will ask one of the other nurses here if I have to give somebody something for a migraine or whatever else comes up here. To do it for me, and I’ll do something for them in exchange, but—and he said to me, well, P-, probably you’re going to have to but, you know, that’s ok for now. And I said another thing is, if you ever have any suspicion of me, or even if you don’t, and you just feel like doing it, you can ask me to take a UA, just as protection for me. Even though I’m doing UA’s for the WHPS program now and they—random ones. Well actually, when I started in the WHPS program I had to go up to the treatment center every other day and pee in a cup. And they would choose which ones they would test, but I had to go up there every other day and pee. Now they have a computerized system where people just check in on the computer which is—I’m not sure it’s as good, there’s a lot of wiggle room, you never know, you could get two that were close together, but. And I ended up in that group for three years which was helpful to me because, um, I could really talk about stuff that I didn’t want to talk about in a meeting. I didn’t want to scare somebody when they’re thinking, god, my grandma’s in the hospital! You know, so um, that’s what was good for me, was an opportunity to just talk about that stuff, and I ended up running that group then, some years later. I did that for quite a while too.

R18: What is the—what is the acronym you’re saying?
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P18: W, H—Washington health professional services, I guess, so what happens is if a
nurse is somehow impaired and it comes to the attention of the board she can, he or she
can be referred to the WHPS program and not have anything come up in your license.
R19: I was, I’m familiar with the Pennsylvania model, and I just wanted to know…
P19: And some states don’t have it.
R20: So that comes up in, with situations where you’re at the mercy of your
administrators?
P20: And the board just takes your license. So…
R21: Well, this is an aside, but I remember that the numbers, the numbers are higher in
nursing than other professions.
P21: Oh I believe that, I totally believe that. One of the things I learned when I was in
treatment, was, Dr. - was the doctor when I was going to treatment and he was giving me
a physical because I was going to treatment and there was a little student nurse in the
room, the chaperone person, and he said to me, I might have been—well, I don’t know if
I was the first nurse they had in treatment. I know I was the first one they had in WHPS
because it was only a week old. And he said, well you know, 80 percent of nurses are
adult children of alcoholics, and I went, “what?!?!” and the little student nurse when,
“What?!?!” We looked at each other like, you? Me? Yeah, ok. So I talked to J- S- about
that, who was is retired now, but she was the one who started the program, she also had a
substance abuse problem but she was the one who started the program here in
Washington. And um, an uh, in fact they made a movie about her and I think Cheryl
Tiegs played her in the movie, I don’t think I ever saw the movie but, you know, it was
like, when this was just, it hadn’t been addressed before. She was tough though. Very
though, which you need to be with nurses because nurses think they know something.
R22: Well, they’re used to crisis it sounds like. I mean you’ve talked about, in your own
story there’s uh, a bad relationship with your dad, an abusive husband, chaos and drama
all the time, so you’re used to coping in a way not all people are.
P22: Right. And it seems not that abnormal. Um, so I asked her about it, the doctor said
it’s 80 percent! She said, oh I wouldn’t be surprised if it was even higher, maybe 85
percent. I was like, wow, why is that? And she said you know, I think we are trying to fix
what we couldn’t fix back then. And I thought, you know nurses are definitely fixers.

And then the next thought I had was, no wonder it’s so crazy to work with nurses because

it’s a bunch of untreated alanons is what’s going on. So everybody is a control freak,

nobody will let go, everybody’s running on fear that it’s not gonna be ok so they have to

be in control. And that caretaking comes out of fear, you know, it’s not so much out of

the goodness of my heart that I want to give to you, which I think we feel—I mean, I
definitely feel that, it’s why I went into nursing. But also I think it’s an attempt to try to

fix something. Yeah. So then I worked for, I did work for J- R- and Family Health

Associates and I never thought I’d want to work in an office cause I was addicted to the

drama and trauma of like, those specialty units like ICU, CCU, ER, labor and delivery,

cause all hell can break loose and you better know what you’re doing or people are gonna
die! And you know, I really got adrenaline rush from that. So here I am in a doctor’s

office and I’d think, oh, a chimpanzee could do this job. You know, take people’s blood

pressure, change the paper on the exam table, you know, I don’t know. But actually, it, I

actually ended up finding it really gratifying. It was good for me in a couple reasons—I

didn’t have to work nights, I didn’t have to work holidays, there wasn’t that insanity. I

had a regular schedule and a good nights sleep. And I got to know people over time, over

years. So I’d watch the little kids that I gave their baby shots to, grow up and go into high

school. You know, I knew their grandparents, I knew their parents, people trusted me, I

had really, real relationships with them. So that part I really like, and the nursing comes

in in the judgment, like, especially when you’re on the phone with people. Like, who

needs to be seen now, who can wait. And who maybe doesn’t need to be seen now but

you can tell in their voice that they’re afraid so you’re gonna see them anyway. That kind

of thing, you know.

R23: So it was meaningful work that saw you through a lot of the years of your sobriety,

I mean, not just early sobriety but all the way up through like, 15, 18 years.

P23: Yeah, so. You know. And I have to say, I didn’t really miss working at the hospital

at that point. There were certain things I missed about it, but I didn’t miss the—and it’s

still like that. It’s always been like that. I’m sponsoring a nurse now who’s uh, wondering

if she’ll ever get to be a nurse again, sort of like I was. But it’s always like that, they’re
always short-staffed. Because they don’t let themselves be anything other than short-staffed because if there’s ever kind of lull, then they call you off, so that those who are left are short! And they’re just scrambling and running their butts off. You’re always just kind of on the edge of chaos. You know, I remember thinking too, back to this nurse business, I asked somebody from the hospital one time—back when I was stealing drugs from the hospital, I used to think, I was just amazed that they don’t have us do UA’s, I mean, I’m glad they don’t because I would be in big trouble, but why—they do at Intalco or Cherry Point or any of these other places where safety is a concern and like, safety is really a concern here! And they say they’re so, all about safety. And I asked them like, why don’t you do that? And he said well, we’d have to fire like, half of our staff. And so, that’s ok with you then, to just have impaired nurses? Oh my god! And nurses are very hard to treat. I’ve had two treatment professionals tell me that they thought nurses were the hardest, yeah, to treat. And you know when I was in, when I did that nurses support group, of course people had to go to that, but they were a little more grateful. And I used to remind them, you know, didn’t used to be this WHPS program, you know? I’ll tell you my story because you’re lucky! You’re so lucky! You should concentrate on feeling some gratitude instead of bitching about it! But um, you know. So, but I, a lot of them were resistant to—let me put it this way. The ones who did AA did well. The ones who didn’t, didn’t do very well. You know, three of them, just in the time I was there, are dead. So, but there was just lots of—I think there was just a big huge fear of letting go. I mean, you’ve got the addiction part, but you’ve also got the codependency part. You know, yeah. Oh yeah, And you know nurses—my friend who works I the ICU there, she’s not an alcoholic but she’s married to an alcoholic, to a good friend of mine in the program and she said to me, have you ever noticed, P-, how many nurses like, end up with people who are like—men who are losers? Like, half the time they don’t even have jobs! And I started thinking about it and I was like, yeah, this is—it’s kind of true, you know, these guys who hook up with a woman who is like, smart and capable, and these guys just think it’s like, kind of ok, cause I mean, it’s that caretaker thing, I don’t know.

R24: And it’s familiar?

P24: Yeah, yeah.
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R25: Mm. Well, I have two things that I want to come back to a little bit, in whatever order whatever direction you want to go. I’m curious if you ever did address your PTSD, and how, and I want to hear about how you sponsor.

P25: Ok. I don’t think I ever directly—no, well you know, I did do some counseling. Uh, well, Steve and I went to counseling for a short period of time with an agenda. We wanted to learn how to fight better. We didn’t expect that we weren’t going to disagree, or even have like, fights. Because we’re both alcoholics and neither one of us likes to be told what to do. And neither one of us were gonna like—cause, not gonna go anywhere. Like, we’re in for the duration. No matter what, we’re staying. So, we’ve gotta work this out. Just so that we’re not up all night. So, and so we did that and went, actually to a couple different things. One was like, a seminar, and one was with a therapist. And then um, when I left my husband, my sponsor Lucia—who’s in town again, yay! She’s gonna come Thursday night, she’s one of the founders of the Fairhaven group, I love her to death. Anyway, she said to me, I’m not a marriage counselor. She’s not one of these sponsors that would give you advice about stuff she didn’t really know about. Like, if I had things about my kids, she didn’t have any kids so she’d say, well I suggest you go talk to Carol who has kids, or somebody else who has kids. You know? Talk to somebody else who’s a mother, because I don’t really qualify to give you any direction about that. So, that’s what she said about that, she said, you know I think you guys probably should go to marriage counseling. But my husband wouldn’t go. So I kind of went on my own, which was futile as far as marriage counseling. Doesn’t work that way.

So, it was good. I don’t know that it directly addressed PTSD, and I kind of stopped going to her after it came to this stuff about like, repressed memories and I was like, I’m outta here. I’m not getting sucked into that insanity. So, no I don’t think I ever really did. I think uh, and whether or not it’s still…influences me, I don’t know that I could answer that. I want to say that no, it doesn’t. I feel really recovered and I feel able to—I don’t live in fear, and I don’t have to like, control.

R26: It sounds like part of your process was learning how to let people support you. And finding the right people to do that…so, differentiation on some level. So maybe it got—
P26: Yeah, I feel very supported and also, one of the most valuable things I learned in recovery, talking about forming a true partnership with another human being, is to let him be. Cause I think so often, uh, I think women especially think—well, V- said to me one time, he said, a man will look at a woman and here’s his reaction, here’s what it looks like, it’s like, glong! [pops head forward with neck rigid, bugs eyes out] That’s about all it is. And a woman will look at a man and she’ll think, hm, I could do something with that…[laughter]

R27: There’s potential there!

P27: Yeah! So, what I found out after all these many divorces and no skills whatsoever, well, one of the things I did was when Steve and I went to counseling together, if I started getting up into some fear or whatever, I wouldn’t even talk to him about it, I would talk to Lucia, my sponsor about it. I went to the women about it. And I just told the truth about myself. I was like, I have this jealousy, and I feel like it’s so ugly. And I wouldn’t talk to him about it or try to get him to behave differently because he was just being the friendly guy that he is! And he had lots of women friends, I mean, he told me that when we met—he said I’ve got lots of women friends, men friends—and he was just being like, cause he can be very charming and women were drawn to him, and I could see that—in fact they would tell me that! They’d say, oh, S- L, nobody’s ever been able to get next to him, yeah, we all tried! They said! So I thought, you know, it was a very old feeling of jealousy brought on by, I think my first marriage where my husband had gotten one of his student’s pregnant and had like, 30 affairs that he told me about that I knew of, and uh…So, I would just talk to her about it about my feeling of jealousy and how that was my fear and that I needed to ask for help with that. But it really wasn’t his responsibility to fix this. I mean, if he had been doing something out of line, then—but he really wasn’t actually. And so when I got more ok with things, and I just concentrated on adoring him, that worked really well. He really responded to that, because I think that’s what—I really think that’s what, when I talk to women about that I say, I think really what most women want is to be cherished—and I think maybe men want that too! And it might look a little different or something, they might interpret some things a little differently, but really what they want is to be adored. That works really well. And then you know, they change
to like, really wanting to please us. You know? And I do things in my relationship where
like, Steve’s job is to wash the floors and every time he does it he has to say, do you
notice anything different? Whereas, when I scrub the toilet I don’t come in and go, hey,
did you notice anything? And I could say, and I would say in the past, hey, you live here
too. There’s no reason you shouldn’t do that, I don’t think you necessarily need any extra
praise about that. But instead I’ll say, oh honey! It looks like a white tornado came
through here, I’m so pleased! I just make a big fuss about it, which makes him want to do
it more! So maybe that’s manipulation, I guess? But it’s also like, you know, it’s the
same thing you would do with your child, you really praise them for things.
R28: Positive reinforcement?
P28: Yeah, yeah, rather than negative. You know what I mean? And I don’t really
criticize him. Unless, I mean, there’s times when something’s really not ok with me. But
I don’t do it a lot. Because it just doesn’t work. It’s destructive. So, yeah.
R29: So you were able to sort of heal, and change how you interact with people and relate
with them?
P29: It’s very different. And how I relate to the world. It’s very, it’s completely different,
you know. And it’s just, I think it has to do with just, thoroughly working an AA program
which affects everything in my life. Which doesn’t mean I don’t still have vestiges of
whatever those fears are. I mean, like I have fears sometimes about like talking to, I mean
I’m a pretty like—a woman who can carry myself well and make things happen, and
every once in a while things will come up and he’s like, well you need help with your
computer like, why don’t you call the—and I’m like, oh, will you call them for me, ehh, I
can’t, it’s too scary! Like, I’m capable of that, but I want you to do it. Get somebody over
here to fix it, cause, they’ll say words that I don’t understand, and then I—then what? I
don’t know what—then they’ll probably explain them to me, but you know. So, I’m not
saying that has gone away completely, but I pretty much have trust and faith in the world
and the people in it.
R30: So, what does your program look like today?
P30: Um…
R31: Maintenance, you know? What do you do?
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P31: I...go to meetings regularly, that’s never stopped. Um, I’m in Arizona half the year so I have a home group down there. I go to other meetings down there too. That was a little bit of a change because of course, it’s not Whatcom county AA which I think is so, has so much emphasis on the traditions and service, and a lot of places don’t know that, don’t know much about it and don’t really pay attention to it. And they seem to stay sober and they love their AA meetings, but I really love that about here. The dimension of knowing greater AA, and um...

R32: Being tapped into the broader structure—

P32: Yeah, the big picture. And the history and all that stuff. Um, but it works down there and they’re not connected to anything much, but they’re—it’s older people, been sober a long time, most of them. Although we have our 70 year-old newcomers come in and they’re like, so grateful. It’s pretty amazing.

R33: But you have—you do identify a regional difference.

P33: Yeah, oh yeah.

R34: Have you gone to AA anywhere else that you can compare to?

P34: I’ve been to lots of AA meetings around the country and Europe, I’ve been to lots of AA meetings. That’s like, here?

R35: No, I mean, to support the—I agree from my experience that there’s something distinctive regionally, in a lot of places, but certainly here.

P35: Yeah, so I don’t know that I’ve—we spent a summer in Alaska when we were working on a movie up there. We found a group that was comfortable for us. It was basically a big book group. That’s usually what we look for, what I look for when we travel anywhere you know, we’re gonna look on the schedule and go oh, here’s a big book meeting, let’s go to that. That’s generally what I try to do. Or some kind of a study meeting. Cause I just like to hear people share about their experience with that—

R36: With the steps—

P36: With the steps, yeah, and the book. I just like to hear what they have to say about that. I’m not so much interested in—my boss was mean to me today—I don’t care, you know. I don’t. I’ve changed since I was a newcomer, every meeting was great, everybody was wise, everything they said was helpful to me, it didn’t matter to me. I’m like, maybe
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a little more discriminating, I think there’s a place for those meetings and people should
go to them. You know, I mean, unless they need help and support. You know, I’ll go to
meetings that are fine, you know cause they need some help, but I’m not really going
there to get fed. Although, I’m surprised sometimes, but you know, a lot of times I’ll do
that.

R37: Where do women’s meetings fall for you on that spectrum? Have you ever found
them to be valuable?

P37: Umm, I think the women’s meetings are better now in Bellingham than they were. I,
well I helped to start the Women on Wednesday meeting, it was called Step sisters,
originally. And it was Polly Pistle, myself and Malina, and then Martha got involved. She
wanted to have a women’s meeting at the same time as SOS, for like, maybe people who
came in from the county, they could come in as a couple—

R38: Because SOS is a men’s meeting.

P38: Yeah. And she said to me, what do you think about this? And I said, Molina, I will
support it and be on board with it if two conditions are met. One, I want it to be a closed
meeting, and two, I want it to be a big book study. We don’t have any big book studies,
any women’s big book studies. Because my experience with women’s meetings at that
time was that they kind of devolved into exactly that, meetings of women. Not AA
meetings. And I needed an AA meeting. Cause I have lots of women time where we can
just talk. So she, so P- P- was like, yeah! That’s exactly what we should do we’ll just go
through the book. So that’s what we did. I think they had kind of gotten away from that,
they were still doing the big book, but then the the next time I came back to town I think
they were like, reading the stories. And I was like, that’s not what we were going to do!
That wasn’t the group conscience! But, you guys are running it now, you’ve got your
own group conscience, you’ve got to do what you’re gonna do. That meeting almost went
under and Kim kind of saved it. And she was, we were kind of talking by email a lot
when I was in Arizona and I was kind of telling her the history of the meeting, and what
the original concept had been and you know, that kind of thing. And she helped get it
back up and going, so. I like Women in the Solution but I almost never go to that. I think
if I were going to go to a meeting on Tuesday nights I’d probably go to Into Action.
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Nothing wrong with that meeting, I just have really good friends at Into Action that I’ve known for a really long time, and I like the format better. So, there’s nothing wrong with what they do there. And when I’ve been there I enjoyed it. But, for one thing, I was brought up not to volunteer to talk. So, and that’s just me—

R39: By your sponsor?

P39: It was like, basically it’s a spiritual practice to wait to be called on. And you know, if you really have something to say then you’ll be called on, and if you don’t, then you need to listen. And I really believe that I have not gotten well by going to AA and talking about myself. It’s not group therapy. I get well by listening, and I try to help others by sharing. And I tell my sponsees that too, if you share in a meeting you should be thinking about the newcomer. Even if there’s not an identified newcomer there, you don’t know—there could be somebody back from a relapse and you don’t know. You share about the solution in your life, for somebody else. And you listen for yourself. So, I just, I had that realization at a meeting in Ireland, I guess, it was in Dublin and they had this one group, it was like the first group in Europe and it was great, and then they had this other group that was a lot of, maybe younger people, and by that I don’t mean real young, but people would volunteer to talk. And that used to happen here, in some of the open discussion meetings, people would kind of step on each other, to volunteer to talk. And I sat there the whole meeting thinking—Steve will not volunteer. He absolutely will not, even if he’s in a little meeting with five of his friends—you’ve got to call on him, he just won’t. But um but I will, I mean, it’s like, when in Rome, sometimes you have to because that’s their group conscience. But the trouble is, sometimes—that just leads to too much thinking for me, cause I sat there thinking, I think know that I have something to say, but is it worthwhile? Should I just let them talk? It was just, thinking about me the whole time! And I couldn’t really listen! I got into too much thinking about self. That’s why I don’t really like it. You know. So…so that’s the problem with WITS for me, is that that’s part of their thing. So like when they say, does anybody else have a solution? I’m thinking to myself well, do I have one? Is it good enough? Would somebody else be better? I could certainly talk on this issue, I can talk on anything! But am I the one to do it? Or, is this gonna look like, bad, because I haven’t been here for months and suddenly
I’m telling people? I don’t know! You know, so…yeah. So um, I’ll tell you what women’s meetings have been really valuable to me is, when we’ve had women’s retreats at the Fairhaven Group. Those have been really great because I really get to know people over that weekend. And people that I haven’t really gotten to spend a lot of time with, prior to that? You know what I mean? Cause we all have our own certain friends, but I like to be able to know all of them and spend some time with people I haven’t known that well.

R40: You know, it’s so funny because I find myself trying to um, I’m not trying to elicit anything in particular. I don’t have an opinion about women’s meetings or women in AA that I’m trying to prove, um, but even when you say like, that these women’s retreats are so valuable—so most women’s meetings, well, meetings in general, have women’s retreats. So somewhere we have an instinctive sense that like, there is something to be gained from women supporting each other, or men supporting each other. So I wonder if there’s something that’s so intuitive or obvious that we almost feel like we don’t need to say it, about what women offer each other. Does that make sense?

P40: Yeah, yeah…yeah. And I had a hurdle to get over in getting sober because I didn’t trust women. I mean, I didn’t trust men either, but I didn’t trust women. Yeah, they’re, cause I had this jealousy problem. This huge jealousy of feeling insecure and threatened and not good enough because of being cheated on by, all kinds of people. And uh, sometimes by women friends of mine. And so I just didn’t trust women at all. Not like I was trustworthy either! I wasn’t. So, it took a while to get, open up to that. It really took me a while to open up to anybody. But now, that’s the most valuable part of my program is my friendships with women.

R41: Which is something you really had to learn from scratch, is how valuable these relationships are.

P41: Yeah, because sometimes I’ll be talking to someone I sponsor and she’ll be like, oh, I always had women friends, I never had any problem with that. And I’ll be like really, huh? OK.
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R42: It’s interesting, I’ve heard and read, a lot of people say that you know, it’s one of those things like, women who come into AA often don’t trust other women. So, it’s interesting that your experience with sponsees has often been—

P42: Some of them, yeah. Some of them have ongoing, good relationships with women friends.

R43: And, that makes sense. I mean, there’s all kinds of people.

P43: Yeah. So, I first like, practiced with my sponsor. That was one of the things that was like, really good for me, was being really honest with a woman about like…icky things. And by icky things I mean like, jealousy and envy, which you might call the smaller defects, but really those are the things I just really didn’t want to talk about. Because, I want you to see me this way, I didn’t want you to seem petty, and small, and sneakily saying something about her in a way that, you can’t pin me down for saying it, but I know how to do it because I’m that sneaky. You know?

R44: The manipulation.

P44: Yeah. And in fact at one point, she—oh, I know, I was somewhere like in my first year or two. And my sponsor was single at the time. And I was very aware of that. Because A, she didn’t confide in me, she had friends, she didn’t need this person to support her. And also, my head was up my ass most of the time. I was not even aware that she had a life outside of me. And uh, so then she was single and then she was kind of looking around, and she was kind of boy-crazy, quite frankly. And I was aware of that, but I sometimes would get irritated or hurt by it when she was supposed to be spending time with me. And I didn’t know if I had a right to say anything about that or not, cause I just really thought she was wonderful. And um, so at one point I said something about it to this woman, Carol, who had actually been the person who brought me to Fairhaven when I was in treatment. I didn’t know her, she took me to Fairhaven, and uh, she had been sponsored by Lucia too, so I told her about this one meeting I had gone to at Southside, I was supposed to meet Lucia there, and she was running around like flirting with everybody. And I thought, I thought like, we were supposed to talk. So, I drove home from there crying, saying, they say you’ll love you until you can love yourself! And nobody’s lovin’ on me! So I talked to Carol about that, and she said, well you’re not
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wrong about that. And you know, maybe you want to look for a different sponsor. And I thought, I don’t want a different sponsor. I love what she tells me and gives me, it’s so clear, so true and it’s so purely alcoholics anonymous. She doesn’t make anything up or anything else. She just gives that to me. And um, so I don’t know why I was even brave enough to do this, but I decided to talk to her about this. And I have to say, I had never done that in a friendship even before in my entire life. Because I was an air force kid, we moved every year, I had to drop them anyway. If somebody did something I didn’t like, I just didn’t seem them. And I didn’t feel the loss of it. But this was something that had become valuable to me. And um, so I did. I talked to her about it. And I could see her kind of go, oh my god, oh my god, if Pam, as sick as she is, is noticing this, it must be really out there, you know, I must be a little out of control. And she also said, well you’re right about that and I’m wrong for doing that, and I won’t be doing that when you and I are together anymore. It was like, it got solved. Like she listened, she heard, she acknowledged it, she offered to fix it. That was the first time anything like that had happened in my life. Luckily I did it with somebody like her, she didn’t say like, Well!

R45: It sounds like it was a pivotal experience for you to realize that you could have a relationship with a woman that was invested, you know that both sides were invested and there could be honesty in you know, where previously there would have been manipulation.

P45: Right. There could be honesty, and there could be like, acceptance, and there could be willingness to work to make it better, you know?

R46: So the relationship can grow.

P46: Yeah.

R47: Which for you, sort of, hadn’t been part of your life—these relationships that evolve, and get richer.

P47: Right, right.

R48: So is that part of what happens at these women’s retreats too?

P48: The only one I know about is the Fairhaven one. We started that years ago when Fairhaven was a pretty small group. And Steve and I have a little cabin over on San Juan Island and we started—and there was a very small number of women, like maybe seven
or eight women in the group. So I started having them over for a weekend in the summer
to the cabin. And we would hang out, and one of the guys was like, what do you women
do over there? And I was like, well we’re girls, so we mostly like, eat and talk. And then
we’d go for hikes and go to the beach or whatever, and it was just like this intimate group
of women. And I really felt like some deeper connection the first time we did it. And it
was funny cause most of us said, I don’t really wanna do this, like, we felt kind of
nervous about being like, stuck there for a whole weekend, I couldn’t leave because it
was on San Juan Island—what if I was uncomfortable? So, I think a much deeper bond
was formed because of the time. And then people could go off in groups of two or three,
and we’d always have meetings at the retreats where, probably like any women’s
meeting, something of more depth is shared because you don’t have the fear, as much
fear about—you feel safer with women I guess. So we did that for a few years—oh I
knew what it was. It was like a sponsorship line that we did, my sponsor, the people she
sponsored, the people they sponsored. So then some other people came to town and
joined our group, like Eileen and Veronica and Arlina, and Molina. So, they weren’t part
of our sponsorship group, they had their own sponsors and their own way of doing things.
And we thought, we can’t really do this anymore, it’s exclusive. And we thought, we
need to open it up to all Fairhaven women. So, we did that. And that worked for a couple
times over on the island and then we just had too many people. So, we started looking
around and we’ve had it in various places in the county. And uh, I just think, the fact of
spending a couple of days, really, with people, is what’s valuable. Like, I noticed this
year they changed it a little bit and they opened it up to people who weren’t gonna spend
the night here but wanted to come—and they would pay a lesser fee and just show up in
the daytime. And then someone who is important to me only showed up for the meetings.
And I think part of it was that I missed her, but I also thought, it’s kind of disruptive.
When you have this thing established where we’re cooking together, figuring things out
together, we’re going on hikes together, people are swimming or some people are just
sitting on blankets talking. You know where, you’re free to do whatever you want and we
had like a campfire at night, you don’t have to have like, real organized things. Or some
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people got together and played a boardgame or whatever. And I thought just having
people come for the meetings was disruptive. Now maybe that’s just me.
R49: That makes a lot of sense to me. I mean just that process of togetherness, it’s a
process. And the people who are coming in aren’t aware of that. Whether it’s good or bad
or casual, they don’t have the awareness.
P49: Right, right. I mean, it still worked for me, I mean I got to know some people, Becca
and Susan and Alyssia, people I didn’t have as much background with. I mean some of
these women I’ve known for years and I have a lot of background with. But I like to get
to know people that I haven’t connected with that deeply yet. I mean, I’ve known them,
but I haven’t known them that deeply. So, I still got that out of it, I just noticed that one
thing. There’s something about like, going away, that’s kind of what retreat means. That
you’re out of you’re life and you go away and you’re here, now let’s see what happens
here. You know. You don’t have distractions, then let’s see what comes out of it.
R50: Do you sponsor people here and in Arizona?
P50: Um, I haven’t had an opportunity to sponsor anyone in Arizona. I’ll tell you, I’m
reluctant to take on any newcomers because I’m gone half the year. And sponsoring a
newcomer from afar, I don’t know if that’s fair to her. I mean, I’m always willing to do it,
I did try it once, it was somebody who had experience in AA but she relapsed, and was
like oh, please, please! But she did have knowledge and experience in AA, but it didn’t
work. And I don’t know if it would have worked with her anyway, she just went off and
was crazy for a while. So, I have one sponsee who’s been sober for 20 plus years. And,
Mary and I sort of co-sponsor each other. That really wasn’t my idea. But, I asked her to
sponsor me—she had been my service sponsor when I was doing a lot of district service.
But Lucia was gone, she had moved away and I was sponsoring a lot of people and I was
like, thinking like, I’m kind of not checking in with a sponsor really, I don’t think that’s
right that I’m not—I should have somebody to tell on, tell about myself to, and get honest
with myself. Because I don’t want to be like, the guru here. So I called Mary up and I was
like, hey Mary, are you taking any new sponsees? And she said no, which is always her
first answer, and I said oh, rats, I was going to ask you to sponsor me. And she said oh
you? Oh yeah, I’ll sponsor you! She thought I was going to foist some newcomer off on
her. And you know, her experience is that she had, you know, she was—it was almost 40
years ago and they didn’t really have this sponsor thing like they have it today, so she
doesn’t really have experience doing that, specifically, but she’s getting it. She’s got
somebody that’s new now, and she’s doing it. So then, after she was my sponsor then it
was like, a year or so, she was like, well, you know, I call you my sponsor too, we
sponsor each other and I was like, you didn’t even ask me! I hadn’t like—maybe you’ve
just given me sponsor direction like, we will sponsor each other which, it works out ok, it
works out ok, you know. We’ve both been sober long enough that we can do that.
R51: That you can provide each other with some accountability?
P51: Yeah, that’s what it is. And very rarely do we really need, but you know, what if it
is—or if I notice that I’m being…the only thing I can really think of in the last few years
is I had this huge resentment against this guy down in Arizona, and uh, it was a huge
resentment because he had 30 years, and he’d tell you at every meeting. And he was
always telling the newcomers to go drink, like, if you had resentments, who cares about
resentments we don’t need to worry about that, rigorous honesty, give me a break! I
haven’t had a drink in 30 years and if you’re having resentments you should go drink!
You know, and I was like—it pissed me off so bad! And everybody else in the group was
like, la la la la la, and I’d even try to get them to talk to me about it and they wouldn’t do
it! Cause they were all about patience and tolerance I guess, and I was like, am I the most
intolerant person in the group? So I had to talk to her about that, and it lasted through two
years, you know. And you know what really helped me, not praying for him, not loving
him—Mary told me to love him—you know what helped me was this guy, John, after the
meeting one night he was like, that guy, I just wanna punch him!
R52: [laughter] You had some fellowship around this experience!
P52: Yeah! I was like, ok! I’m not the worst person in the room you know. And I’d call
Mary up and I’d be like, Mary, this guy is bothering me so much that I’m starting to plot
things that I can say when I share—and he’d call me out too, I’d say something like, I’d
just quote the big book or something, I’d say it requires us to be honest or something and
he’d say, honesty—he made a point of commenting on what I’d say. So I said, listen
Mary, I’m starting to plot things on what I’m gonna say, and I’m gonna call him out, only
not directly, and here’s what I’m gonna say. We have accountability, but everyone in the
room is gonna know what I’m saying, so I’ll say, you know, I’m so grateful to be relieved
of the enslavement to alcohol, and uh, beyond that I’m really grateful to AA for giving
me a design for living so that I don’t have to be an asshole! Like I used to be, you know?
Because of these steps—because he never talked about the steps so you know, the steps
have really delivered me from being an asshole—Mike! [laughter]. So just telling her that
helped me not to do it, sometimes you just tell on yourself. I mean, you know better but,
you know. So its’ stuff like that, or she has decisions to make about her daughter who is
just a hopeless, hopeless alcoholic. She’ll have questions about that, about boundaries or
something. So it’s that kind of thing, we’re both like, we’re not high maintenance. So, it
works for us. But I have started sponsoring a newer person and the only reason is because
she asked me, and she asked me because three other people in the program I think had
kind of tried working with her and they all told her to call me. I think because I’m a
nurse, and she’s nurse, and she’s lost it all. She’s really struggling. Got a lot of wreckage.
A lot of wreckage. So I have been working with her, but she’s really willing. So it’s
working so far. She’s afraid about me leaving, I just go, well, we’ll cross that bridge
when we come to it, and maybe you’ll find somebody here you can work with. Or we’ll
try it by phone. We’ll see, we’ll see.
R53: Mm. Rich stuff! So, I promise that I will conclude these things in 90 minutes, and
we’re a little bit over that, but I don’t want to rush you. Because it’s not for me, it’s
because I want to be respectful of your time, so I guess I just want to give you a chance to
tell me anything else that you think is important.
P53: You don’t have anymore questions?
R54: No, I just, you’ve given me great things to think about. Um, lots of experience.
P54: You know, what I was thinking about was the question, what is recovery? What
does recovery look like, is it different to different people, or something like that, and I
think about this and I often quote this line, it’s my favorite part of the 12 and 12. It’s in
step 12, it’s near the end and it says, service gladly rendered, obligations squarely met.
And then later on in that paragraph it says, true ambition is not what we thought it was.
True ambition is the desire to live usefully and walk humbly under the grace of god. So I
was thinking about that in the last few days just kind of thinking, what does that mean as far as, cause my desire is—I had a desire to get sober, that was my ambition. And then in the book it says my ambition is to live usefully, so to me I think that’s what recovery is, is to live usefully. To live usefully means to me that my life has a purpose. And I think that, I don’t think we get self-esteem from other people, I think we get self-esteem from the things that we do, and uh, having a purpose to ones life. I mean, you’ll see these studies now with like, scale of happiness, and that’s always on there, like, to have a purpose and also to have a sense of spiritually. So like, to live usefully I think is like a purpose, however that manifests in different people’s lives. And I think that has to do with looking out into the world as opposed to looking in so much. And uh—

R55: The world actually grows.

P55: Oh yeah! It gets, my world was so small, and had been getting smaller in late stage alcoholism. And um, yeah, so like, living usefully like living in the world and being of use to people, like, having something to offer. You know, and uh, then walk humbly. You know, that business about ego deflation. And Bill Wilson wrote on this a lot, you know, that’s really the whole point of—that’s what anonymity means. It’s this ego deflation, you know. Which makes life so much more comfortable, it means I didn’t have to fight all the time! I was such a fighter because I thought nobody was going to take care of me, I had to do it. And uh, out of the grace of god, which means to me that I have like, a spiritual center. And again, that manifests itself many different ways for different people. But for me it’s like what I asked for the day I got sober. Which was comfort. That’s all I asked for.

R56: And you had the desperation at that moment to not, put conditions on it or to, uh, psych yourself out by making guesses about what it would look like—it was just, whatever is going to give me peace of mind—

P56: It was pretty pure! Yeah, yeah, I can’t be alone with it. And I’ve never forgotten that deal, I think it was a deal. In fact, when I look back on it I think I probably took those first three steps right then—I couldn’t have identified that I had done that but I admitted my powerless, I admitted that I couldn’t do it by myself and that I, asked for help. I did have to go and then work those steps. And sometimes I still have trouble with it like, I
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don’t know what this third step is! Or, I’m having trouble believing in any kind of higher power! So, you know, some of those things don’t last. You have to continue to work on it. And that’s what recovery for me today is, it’s going to meetings to be reminded, to be reminded that I need to be here, that I, it’s risky for me to leave given my own history, I’m reminded of my history when I listen to other people talk. And then you know, staying in touch with the people and having fellowship.

R57: Mm, that’s beautiful. Service gladly rendered, obligations met squarely.
P57: Yeah, I think it says service gladly rendered, obligations squarely met, problems solved, something…with god’s help. You know, I mean I wouldn’t have thought that was attractive when I first got sober, service gladly rendered? Obligations! No! You know, but it’s kind of like, when I was archivist for the district, so I was really interested in history—I’m interested in history anyway, but we had gone to Akron at one point, went to the Akron archives and looked at Dr. Bob’s big book and that kind of stuff, and my sister, her father in law had passed away, and he had stopped drinking but he never worked a program and he was sober but he was an asshole and when he died nobody like him, and he didn’t ever pick up a drink again. And she said well we’re going through Robby’s things and he’s got this big book here and I thought of you. And it turns out, it was a first edition—not the first printing, not the big red one, but it was a first edition big book and I’d always wanted one. And I was so excited I was like, vibrating—I gotta get that big book, I gotta get that big book! And Steve’s like, yeah Pam, that’s great! You can like, share that at a meeting, you tell the newcomers, all you gotta do is stay sober for nine years, and you too can get an old book! [laughter]

R58: Life gets so simple!

[end interview]
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R1: Please tell me about your experience getting sober as a woman in AA.
P1: OK. Do you want like, back history?
R2: You can tell me anything that think will help me understand your experience.
P2: Oh, Ok Um, well, I got sober um, august 25th 2010. And I basically, I had a lot of
struggles growing up with like, identity issues and I started drinking in college. And I felt
like, it really helped me um, I felt like it helped me break out of my shell, like just not
care so much, and just um, I don’t know, I just was never really good with emotions and
dealing with myself. So when I started drinking it was amazing for me because I just was
able to fit in, I guess. And so um, being really um, self-conscious is sort of a lot of my
story, and intertwines with men. And so, I did a lot of sleeping around when I was out
and, you know, sleeping with multiple people and just, you know I always felt like, this
sense of—nobodies’ going to love me and this was the only way I could find passion, or
just—you know, it was a lot of self-degradation that went into a lot of my drinking. And
so, how I got sober, I spent seven years with my ex who I’d met in college. And he was
very controlling and abusive and just, all around not a good person. And so it was sort of
the situation where my parents had met him and immediately were onto his games. And
so, I basically chose him over my family for almost a decade. And eventually it came to
the point where like, he ended up getting arrested, and I ended up having to bail him out
um, and it was just…it was just a bad situation. It was sort of like, the straw. And so I
ended up calling my parents and saying, I can’t do this anymore, you know. And so they
ended up coming and getting me because they were selling their house in Arizona and so
they came and got me and I came out here. And I thought, like, my thing when I left my
ex was, oh, I need to get sober and work on myself, but you know I was sort of leading
into, maybe there was a possibility of us getting back together, but I knew there wasn’t, I
was just saying that so he wouldn’t kill me, you know? Um, but—
R3: You mean really kill you?
R4: Oh yeah! Yeah, yeah, yeah, He was super like, violent and crazy. Um, he’d spent
most of his juvenile time in corrections because he tried to kill somebody. Yeah, he spent
like, six years in jail when he was 11—started at 11. Yeah, he was super like, unstable.
And so I ended up, um, coming out here and being like, oh yeah, I do kind of want to get
sober. Because I was drinking so hard, just dealing with my own demons and dealing
with the relationship and, um, dealing with being away from my family, and just not
having any kind of support at all. And so when I came out here I was like, things are
gonna be different! So, I was gonna live with my brother in Portland and just,
immediately ruined that. Just, like, I started drinking like crazy, met some dude off the
internet...just, off and running! Doing my thing! And of course my brother immediately
was like, no, just no, that’s not gonna fly. And of course I was pissed at him because he
wouldn’t just let me do what I wanted to do. And in hindsight of course, now I’m like, he
loved me, didn’t just want to let me throw my life away—get with another person that,
yet again, it’s just not gonna be a good situation for me. So I came and lived with parents
out here in Bellingham after ruining it with my brother in Portland, and did the same
thing. Just, didn’t show up one night. Just, was out doing stuff, and my parents were like,
nope, we can’t do that. Sorry, we’re too old for that shit. And so I ended up uh, coming
home like, really early in the morning just drunk off my ass and my parents just didn’t
know what to do, so I guess they—I don’t know if they went to a therapist or what, but
they ended up eventually getting to an alanon meeting. And then came home and like,
threw a bunch of AA stuff at me. It was like, either you read this and get sober or we kick
you out. We just can’t do this anymore. And in the back of my mind I was like, well, I
guess I’ll just move back in with my ex. Knowing that I really didn’t want to do that
because it was just like, my life would be over, you know. So, I ended up going to
Fairhaven on Thursday and it was just super scary. I was still hungover, still had rosy
cheeks and alcohol on my breath and feeling a little woozy. So, I announced myself as
new, I don’t think I even said I was an alcoholic, I just said my name’s M-, I’m here. You
know. And after the meeting I just got surrounded by women—they were like vultures! I
was like, this is intense! And they invited me out after the meeting and I was just like, I
don’t know, it’s a little sketchy right now with my family, they would probably think I’m
like, out at the bars.
R5: And they probably would have.
P5: Yeah, so I was just like, I think I better just go home after this or whatever. Which I
did. So I was—I don’t know, I think I felt a little...I mean, I felt hopeful but still a little
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confused and weirded out by the whole thing, you know. Like I remember when I sat—
when I first got to the meeting there were two girls, I think it was, R- and P-, and they
were like, getting out of their car and just like, laughing. And my thought was, oh, well
this is just—it’s not even a real thing, like they’re probably just here like court-mandated
and…

R6: So you saw their happiness as suspect? It didn’t occur to you that they were just
happy?

P6: Yeah! I was just like--Cause I was so unhappy! I was just not feeling life at all. So
just to see them be happy and being sober, or whatever they were, I didn’t know, I was
just like—I basically felt like they were taking it as a joke. Like, I was there and it was
serious business, it was life or death for me, and then these chicks over here are just like,
whoo! Going to an AA meeting….you know, and I was just like, that’s not funny, that’s
not anything to laugh about. So I was just super resentful, I was just in a bad place. I was
just really…I hadn’t had happiness for so long that I just hated seeing it on other people,
you know? And, so yeah, when all these ladies surrounded me after the meeting I was
just like, this is weird. I don’t know. Because men are such a big part of my story, getting
any kind of attention from women was like, foreign to me. I was the girl who always said,
Oh, I get along with dudes better than girls. I never really gave girls a chance though,
either. They’d ask me to hang out, and I’d pick the dude to hang out with instead. So it
wasn’t just them, it was that I wasn’t giving women a chance, you know. And I don’t
know if it was because of the back history of being an adoptee and being abandoned by
my mom, or you know, there’s—it could be a number of things. So, after that I ended up
kind of just hitting up a few more meetings. Um, and it was just, it was sort of a
whirlwind after that. It was just, AA, AA, AA. And it was good—oh, so I remember. I
ended up doing that Fairhaven thing, and then I had been told about a picnic that was
happening at Fairhaven Park, and I was just like, I don’t get it, so….like, you guys are
just having a picnic for AA? Like, I don’t understand. And they were like, yeah! We have
homegroups and we have picnics, and it’s just a chance for us to all hang out and be
sober together. And I was kind of, it was the weekend, so I was like, it probably is a good
idea for me to do that. Because I was at that point where every second I wanted to drink.
That’s all I could think about. You know, I went into the corner store and I’d buy an energy drink because I was just trying to find any kind of, you know, stimulation from anything. And that’s all I could think about was drinking this energy drink, you know, I can’t drink enough of them. And, I had a bottle in the back of my car, in my trunk, that I had just bought the night I got busted by my parents. And I just had that like, rolling around in the back of my car.

R7: And you knew it was there?
P7: Yeah. I knew it was there!
R8: So you couldn’t throw it away, couldn’t drink it—
P8: Couldn’t throw it away! Couldn’t even look at it! Just knew it was back there. So, I went to this picnic and I got there early. And I’m just like, swinging on the swings by myself and I thought, this is so lame…I don’t even understand! And I had one of those like—it’s either the red pill or the blue pill, like which one am I gonna do here, you know, like I could either just say, fuck it, and go drink for the day. Or, or actually give this thing a try. But being sober for even just a few hours, or through the night, it was killing me. Because as soon as I had gotten away from my ex I was drinking every night. Basically I would wait until my parents went to bed and just start guzzling until I was sick and throwing up in the middle of the night at 4 o’clock in the morning, and just do it all over again. Just every night, so even to be sober for a night and a few hours in the morning was so weird, I was just like, I can’t understand! So people ended up eventually coming and I started talking to the ladies. And one of them—I was like, well, how long have you been sober? And she said five or six years, and I was like, wow! That’s amazing, I don’t get it? How did you do it? Like, did you relapse, or—and she was like, no, I just stopped drinking, you know. I’m doing this program and I have a bunch of friends and we stay sober together, one day at a time. And basically I was like, well, you’re not the kind of alcoholic I am because—
R9: This doesn’t compute! Something’s not adding up!
P9: Yeah! Because, that’s not how I roll! You know? I just, I just didn’t understand, like, that’s so weird to me. So I ended up uh, basically just continuing to do a bunch of AA stuff, because I did at least grasp that, any time I spent alone or not busy was time that I
could spent thinking about myself and how miserable I was and how I just wanted to
drink. You know? And so, I just would go to meeting and then just be like, ok what’s
happening after the meetings, and just, hanging out with a bunch of AA people and
talking about sobriety and, doing these really uncomfortable things like going on road
trips with people I didn’t really know. Like, we would go out to meetings in Everson and
Maple Falls, and you know, it was super weird to me. It was just the community aspect of
AA, just, it was awesome yet scary, almost. You know, there’s a lot of trust issues, and
there’s a lot of white people, and I’m like, riding in their cars to who-knows-where in the
middle of the woods. And you know, nothing weird ever happened—I was sort of
expecting the ball to drop, you know? And so uh, A- was actually one of the people I
ended up sort of shadowing. When people talk about my recovery they’re like, yeah, you
would just follow A- everywhere! I was like, yeah, yeah basically. And that’s sort of a
pattern of mine, you know, to follow around the protector, you know, somebody that
could like, protect me. A-‘s not like super aggressive or anything like that, but he’s a big
boy, people aren’t gonna mess with him. So subconsciously I think I was like, oh, ok, this
is somebody safe that I can tag along with, and he’ll protect me, you know?

R10: You trusted him sort of implicitly, from the beginning.
P10: Yeah, yeah. And there was just nothing, there was nothing weird like, I was trying
to get something out of him, he was trying to get something out of me. We both learned a
little bit more about ourselves, like we were both adoptees. And I remember one of the
first conversations that I had with him and M- was just, it was amazing you know, talking
about being adopted and some of the damage that had caused. And being just, obviously
so grateful that we’re here! I mean, I’m from Armenia, Columbia, so if I hadn’t been
adopted I probably wouldn’t be alive, or I’d be in an even worse situation. Um, but you
know, dealing with that pain of not knowing, and you know, the sort of nature versus
nurture thing. My mom was—obviously had issues. And wondering…because I
remember feeling that, whenever I would drink I would feel really close to my birth mom
for some reason. It was really weird, like, I never really—I’ve never really had a
conversation with her, obviously I’ve met her, but I’ve never really met her as an adult or
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anything. But I remember just feeling like, I don’t know, when I drank I felt like…this is what’s up, this is where I’m meant to be.

R11: Well, you said something about how your struggles were with identity, and it sounds like in some sense alcohol gave you an identity. That, no matter how terrible it was you really could, like, grab onto it—it was for real.
P11: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. And it sort of molded, it helped mold me, I felt, into a person that I wanted to be. Like, I felt like I couldn’t be that person sober. I couldn’t be emotional, I couldn’t say what was on my mind, I couldn’t just not care…and it was just—like, when I drank was the only time I could ever talk back to my ex, and even then it was like, super dangerous. But, you know, it was just…and even then it was like, when I drank I felt like I could get the balls up enough to leave. But sober it was just like, protector mode, you know, like I’ve gotta be the breadwinner and the consoling one and just super meek and you know. Not very strong I guess.

R12: So alcohol gave you a voice in some sense, it gave you courage, it gave you balls, um…the voice sounds really important, I mean, that’s part of all those things, that you couldn’t speak up.
P12: Yeah, yeah, and I remember too, it was interesting, my mom—you know, my mom had a really hard time through this whole thing because her mom and her were best friends and my mom and me, just were, never…were totally different people. I mean, she’s like, artist hippie-lady, and sort of like very butch in her ways, and just not very girly. And I’m not the girliest person on the block, but I still like shopping, wearing makeup, wearing high heels, getting cute, and she’s like nope! Not feeling any of that. So we just never were close like that. Um, and so, it was interesting because when I was drinking and I was living here and I was out and we had some conversations on the phone that were really heated because I just said some of the things that I would never say to her. I never was the type, like, I never was rude to my parents growing up. We always were raised to respect your parents, and I never was like, you’re not my mom! You know, I never said some of the things that kids like, say to their parents. My brother actually was the crazy one who would—F you! And duh-duh-duh. I never swore at my parents, never you know, talked back—
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180 R13: can I, just for clarification—tell me if it’s not relevant—you’re brother is not you’re
181 um—does he know where he’s from?
182 P13: No, he’s their biological son, so he’s my…
183 R14: OK, so he’s the one who would pop off.
184 P14: Yeah, cause he’s, cause my mom and him are both hard-headed and very much
185 alike, so they would just get at each other all the time. Um, yeah, she just had a really
186 hard time with this whole thing. But I remember her saying, yeah, it’s really frustrating to
187 me that you can’t be truthful unless you’re drinking. She’s like, you show no emotion
188 unless you’re drunk. She was always like, you’re so stoic! And I never really had any
189 idea what that meant. I always thought it was like, I was brave or you know, that type of
190 thing. But the more she used it I realized she was saying I was just so disconnected to my
191 emotions, I just was so…she just couldn’t read me, it was just like, I was so used to
192 hiding my emotions from people and not letting people in. And um, so…yeah, I
193 remember her saying that to me and just being like, yeah, that’s totally right, I can’t, I
194 can’t show my emotions when I’m not drunk. I don’t know how to show them, I don’t
195 know how to feel.
196 R15: Sounds like you didn’t even—you’re not even aware of them. You’re just in a
197 frozen state.
198 P15: Yeah, yeah and then when I would drink it was just like, blah! And I remember, I
199 sort of remember the conversation with my mom and I was screaming—just screaming at
200 her. And saying, you don’t even understand what I went through, do you want me to tell
201 you all the things that he did to me? And just trying to, just like hurt her basically, or
202 provoke some anger in her, which is not my nature, um sober. I wouldn’t try to do that.
203 So, that was definitely interesting and it has been an interesting process for her as well
204 because she now sees that change in me, you know. And it’s like, people that know me
205 sober um, it’s awesome but they don’t know the other me, they haven’t met the other me.
206 They haven’t seen the growth, I guess.
207 R16: You mean the emotional, erratic you?
P16: Yeah, yeah. Because when I came in, um, you know I definitely have changed a lot and they’ve seen that progression there. But they never saw like, the crazy erratic me, or, I’ve never relapsed, so.

R17: So, um, this is fascinating to me, and I want to make sure—I’m gonna come back to this. Because you’re talking about something I think people have never considered—I mean, people who don’t drink alcoholically, have the idea that when you drink you do things that are out of character. And I think a lot of alcoholics are aware on some level that they drink, um, because they need to and on some level it works—you know, that whole idea that it’s not that alcohol doesn’t work, it does work to help you access parts of yourself that are otherwise inaccessible. So I’m wondering about this process, if you feel like part of you is kind of, I don’t know—surgically removed, or if there’s integration—like, how’s it going? To try to access those emotions now?

P17: Yeah, um, yeah, I think that that’s been like, the biggest part of my sobriety, like learning, um, how to deal with emotions. Or even, how to provoke emotions. I mean, that’s why K- and I are so close because we’re like, the same, we don’t really like to—we see like, crying and being too like, emo or whatever, as weakness. And it’s like, I just gotta—she said to me yesterday, I said, you seem like you’re doing as well as can be expected and she was like, yeah, I got my game face on. And I was like, yeah, I feel ya on that one, because it’s like, I do the same thing. I can’t, unless I’m alone, then I can really feel like I let out my emotions. But at the same time, when I do that I’m really sad that I’m alone doing that. So it’s sort of this psychological mindfuck. It’s like, can’t show emotions when people are around because I’m too scared to show that I’m weak or let my guard down. But then when I’m alone the emotions just fly out, I have nowhere to— they’re just out there, in the room. So I don’t have any really, I still have that connection to being lonely when I’m emotional. Dealing with my depression which is also like—getting depressed, feeling like I’m all alone, like, I don’t have anyone here to help me. And it’s just like—you do that to yourself! Why are you trippin’? Even like my husband, he saw me cry once since we’ve been together and we’ve been together for like, three years. And he saw me cry when my cat died. And that was it, and I didn’t even cry that long. It was like, he got put down, I cried, and I was back, you know, back in my little
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hole. So, it’s just like, that process has been really hard for me, I think, the emotional—the emotional thing. Because sometimes I feel like I want to be emotional at some things and can’t, because I’m so used to just closing it in, and I feel really, uh, I feel like I never get that release. And alcohol did that for me. I would get really angry, or sad, or just frustrated or whatever, and then my thing was, I’d grab a drink! You know, and I’d get through it, I’d cry over it, I’d throw stuff or break things, or just do whatever, or get crazy, you know. Just let it all out.

R18: You’d let people know how you felt about things.

P18: Yeah, so now it’s, being sober is, it’s still hard for me to find that outlet for it. And sometimes—I mean, I definitely like, psychoanalyze myself all the time, because like, I know when like, really serious stuff happens I’m so, I’m in the moment but my feelings aren’t. Like, my feelings always catch up like a week later, like a week later I’ll be like, aw, man, I feel really off! Like, I just don’t feel good, I’ll feel bad about myself, or I’ll feel super frustrated or agitated and it will be like, a normal day, and I’ll be like, oh that’s because of what happened last week, you know?

R19: So it sounds like you go—this is a different version, now that you’re sober—you called it a protective mode, which I think is interesting. You’re mom called it stoic, um, the words that come to me—oh, and also I think there’s a caretaking aspect to it, like, you’re going to make sure everybody else’s needs are met when you’re sober, not attending to your own, um, but there’s something frozen about that posture. It’s like reserve mode, you can only afford to address like, life or death threatening situations, and feelings aren’t part of that. So now you’re noticing, maybe a week later, whereas you never would have noticed before if you didn’t drink, but you still have a hard time processing in the moment.

R20: Yeah, and that’s like—I’ve been doing this for four years and it’s still a process for me. And the program really helps me because, I see other people being vulnerable on a daily basis in meetings, or having a group of girlfriends now where we actually do talk to each other, and talk about, you know, women’s issues and things like that. And so I see other people doing it, but I’m still a little bit reserved about you know, putting my shit on the street. Even though they’re like, my girlfriends—like, I have one girlfriend that I tell
her everything you know, like me and her just have said our deepest, darkest, worst things. And that’s like, it’s so great, you know? But at the same time, like, she’s able to let out her emotions like, she’s cried with me and freaked out with me, and she’s even said like, you never really, you know, like you talk about stuff but it’s like, you never really let out—you seem, like, I feel like people—I’ve heard people say a lot, like, I don’t even know why you’re in the program because you’ve got your stuff together, like, you seem so put together. And it’s just like, that’s awesome to hear on one hand, but it’s sort of like, when you see a skinny girl and like, she could never have weight issues. She could never have like, a problem looking at herself. And it’s really like, that’s probably the farthest from the truth, she probably has like—we all do! So it’s sort of like, don’t judge a book by its cover. And so sometimes it’s like, I wish I could be a hot mess! But there’s the other part of me that’s just like, nope, I can’t do it. You know.

R21: Because there’s a price to keeping the façade up.

P21: Yeah. Yeah. So, yeah I think, I don’t know, I’m still trying to figure out ways to, I guess let people in? Or even let myself in, I guess, I don’t even know. It’s sort of um, taking away the alcohol um, really inhibited my ability to um, to just think whatever, you know, or do whatever, I guess.

R22: To drop the walls, and the defensive posture.

P22: Yeah, yeah.

R23: So you’re still looking for a new solution. Alcohol was your emotional solution.

In some way that feels counterintuitive, but it really was.

P23: Yeah, and I’ve gone to therapy, I went to a therapist and that was great. But I also feel like I’ve been so—I’m able to like, break myself down so much, that again, they’re like, ok, what do you need from me?

R24: Again, you can’t let them in.

P24: Yeah, so it’s like, I end up feeling like I just talk the whole time, and then I’m like, well, if I just did this then that would probably be better, and…I just end up not getting any, you know, sort of like, I want them to be like, oh, this is why you do this, and just break me down in a way I’ve never been broken down before. You know, like, oh I probably do this because I have like, subconscious feelings about such and such.
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R25: You’re use of the word breakdown is compelling to me, because you’re talking about them breaking it down, like telling you, well this is this and these are the ingredients and this is the reason it’s happening that way. But a breakdown can also mean like, emotional breakdown, which is really like—you have this suspicion that that would be more fruitful on some level? So you’re kind of stuck.

P25: Yeah! Yeah, so, I don’t know. I mean, I’ve definitely learned a lot in recovery about um, about this emotional thing and dealing with life on life’s terms and um, accepting the things you can’t change and all those little things that we learn and seeing it really in play. And hearing my mom be like, I love my daughter. I mean, she’s said I love you before, and said that, but the way she says it now is like, I know it’s not just crap. You know, like I actually believe it. And I feel like, I had a lot of struggles too with the whole love thing, which is also another emotion. So, you know, I just, like I just, it sort of just clicked to me the other day listening to someone’s story that, when I was out, you know—I slept with a lot of married men, and was totally ok with it. I mean, I’d have some times where I’d be like, oh this is—I’m a horrible person. But then I’d be like, well, it takes two to tango. And I’m not the one who’s you know. And I think that for me doing that was sort of like, nobody really loves anybody. Because if this person can just sleep with me, and they’re supposed to like be with their wife and love their family, and they’re willing to put all of that on the line just to be with me, then like, nobody—yeah, nobodies really in love with anybody.

R26: And nobody really respects each other.

P26: Yeah, yeah. It’s just all, you know, it’s all just a façade. Like these, I don’t know—it was sort of like, everybody lives a double life and nobody is really truthful to each other. And I think it was also sort of, trying to find love within that. But also realizing that that—that it wasn’t that at the end of the day. You know it was like, oh, I can get somebody that is in love with somebody else to love me. Like, and then realizing like, that’s not actually what’s happening at all.

R27: Well, you were choosing impossible situations where you could never be proven wrong about your theories that people don’t love each other.
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P27: Yeah, it’s just really interesting. And you know, I felt like my relationship with my
family has definitely just changed so much. Because I felt like growing up was just—it
was really hard for me to like, assimilate into my family. And I felt like they never really
understood how difficult that was going to be, or it was.

R28: Were you an infant when they adopted you?
P28: Yeah, I was 18 months. And um, they went and got me in Columbia. And my
brother is three years older than I am. And my mom is Jewish and my dad is like, white
guy, I guess, Irish, Scottish. And when they adopted me they were living in Portland. And
then we ended up moving to Arizona because my dad didn’t get his tenure at the college
he was at. And so we ended up going to Arizona of all places. And it was horrible. It was
just like, brown girl living with a white family. In sort of, the better side of town, was not
very easy for me growing up. Like, I ended up—the elementary school that I ended up
going to, my parents took me out of that school because the teacher was being racist to
me, apparently—I don’t remember any of it—but I ended up having to go across the
railroad tracks to the other side of town where all the brown kids went to school. And
then, that was all fine and dandy, except they were like, you’re parents are white? What’s
up with that? And I was like, I don’t know…

R29: Did you know—did you always know you were adopted?
P29: Yeah. So they would just be like, well, what’s it like being you know, living with
white people? You know, it wasn’t like, well what’s it like being adopted? It was like,
what’s it like living with the enemy, almost?

R30: So you were sort of being given language about your lack of an identity, because
they’re assuming things about you because you’re brown, and they can’t—they
don’t even have a picture about, you’re in this family—so you were divided from the
very beginning.
P30: Yeah. And it was really hard. It was so hard to make friends, and I was so outcasted.
So, I went to junior high on that side of town. And then my parents got this bright idea
that, oh, we want you to be able to get into your freshman year and know people, not just
come in as a brand new person. So they switched me. Because we have 7th, 8th, and then
9th was high school. So they switched me back.
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R31: Mid-year?
P31: No, at the end of the year. So I did seventh grade over there and got switched back 8th grade. And that didn’t help much. I still didn’t make friends, and was still like, the oddball, and you know, it was just very, um, like very introverted, actually. Spent a lot of lunches by myself just walking the halls. And then high school came along and at that point I was just tired of not being seen, tired of not um, feeling like I was noticed at all. And like, over the summer I had sort of blossomed and, totally different person. And that’s when I figured out that, oh—when you wear makeup and do your hair and all that stuff, like, you get attention. You know? So that was sort of the beginning of realizing that you know, F the girls, they don’t want to be my friend, obviously. And dudes don’t care! They don’t care if my parents are white, they don’t care, you know, they just accept me for wanting to get in my pants, you know? So I was like, well, that’s better than nothing. At least I’ll have somebody to walk the halls with. You know, not just myself. So, there was a lot of, already like the seeds planted for like, not being myself. Being me, the adopted Columbian girl in the white family. It’s not very cool. It’s not the person that I want to be, so. And it was just like, so I think that with the sobriety thing because you have to own your shit, basically. You can’t just be like, oh, I’m just kickin’ it, I’m not really an alcoholic. You have to say, yeah, I’m an alcoholic. This is who I am, this is the damage that I did. And I never did that, I never did that in life. I was just always trying to be somebody else, or like, justifying my behaviors or um, just not really um, in touch with reality at all. You know, cause reality hurt me. So, um, being in the program uh, has helped so much with that, but at the same time it’s still a process. I’m still like—just using a recent example would be like, K-. So, I talked to her, probably 20 or 30 minutes before her mom passed. And so like, I talked to her and then, I was doing an event with my rescue group so I look down at my text and she was like, my mom just passed away. And I was like, fuck…and I ended up talking to B-, cause I didn’t see the text and she called me and was like, K- just told me that her mom passed away and I was like oh my god, oh my god, and, so I checked the text, see it, and I went over to the ladies and they kind of knew the history of what was going on and I was like, yeah, my friend’s mom just died. And one of the ladies didn’t know like, the whole story, so I told her and I was like,
yeah, she needed to get out to her mom ASAP, didn’t really have the funds, we like, raced and got the funds and ended up sending her out there and it was like, two hours after she got there her mom passed. And the lady that I’m telling that to is in tears. And I’m like, how come I can’t do that? I mean, obviously I was emotional and I felt pain for K-, but it was just like…fuck…I can’t even imagine it, but I couldn’t dredge up tears, I couldn’t dredge up that feeling. And I was jealous of this chick who could just cry from a story about somebody she doesn’t even know, you know. And she was just like, oh my god, that’s so terrible, I just feel so bad for her. And you know, it was just like, it was sort of like one of those things where I could sort of imagine K- thinking the same thing, where, if I could just drink right now, it would just come out. I’d be able to reach down wherever those things are and just pull them out. Yeah, I don’t know. It’s still a process of figuring out—and I guess maybe it’s something about myself that I have to figure out, because not everybody is emotional. You know, there are some people that just cry over everything—my mom, cries over everything, you know. And sometimes I’m like, I think my mom takes all the emotions from me. Like, I see her and I’m like, oh I can’t cry too, I have to be the strong one. My dad doesn’t cry, but my brother cries. Also another situation where I, I just got married and I had this wishbone from—so, I got sober in august and I had the wishbone from the turkey that um, we had the year that I got sober. So it was like, a few months after I got sober or whatever. And I had saved it and I had kept it, and I was just waiting for an opportunity to give it to him. So at the rehearsal dinner I gave it to him in this little box—

R32: To your brother?
P32: To my brother. And so I gave it to him, and I had forgotten the card, like a dumbass. And so he comes over after and he’s like, so what’s up with this wishbone, I don’t get it? And he was there with his girlfriend because she was there through the whole thing and I had gotten her a little wishbone necklace. And I was like, oh yeah, sorry, I forgot the card so I’ll explain it to you. And I was like, yeah, I’ve kept that, I held onto it as a reminder of how close I came to like, losing my family and losing you as a brother and just like, totally burning all the trust and I thought there would never be a chance to rebuild it. And yet here I am, about to get married, you know my whole family is here and they’re so
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happy. And he was just like [gestures tears], just crying and I was like, yep, that’s about it. It was just, still nothing. So yeah, it’s just, it’s really interesting. And I don’t know how that all ties into like, the fact of being a woman and being in these previous relationships or being with people who depended on me to hold my shit together even though I was the alcoholic. Even my ex, he didn’t have an alcohol problem. He had an anger problem and a bunch of other problems, but I was the breadwinner, I was the one who was like, follow your music career, you know, I just want to see you happy! I was like, taking the mom role, you know. Yeah, like, I had to be that stable one, you know. But then he also let me be a drunk. That was ok because I still went to work and still brought home the checks, still gave him money for his weed or whatever, never complained and, so. Yeah, it’s just…it’s really interesting to see, to watch other women in the program because it does help me realize that I’m not the only one that deals with those feelings and those thoughts of, everyone is looking at me, everyone’s gotta rely on what I’m doing. You know, there’s women with families, that um, have to keep their shit together and that’s like, I don’t even have kids. I have two dogs and a husband. That would be a little bit scarier I think. This kind of ties in too, with where I’m at with my recovery. I’m like, do I want to have kids or not, and my biggest fear is um, not being able to stay sober through it. Not that I think my kids would drive me to drink or anything like that? Just, failing them somehow, being emotionally unavailable. Like, that is one of my hugest fears. Like not being able to provide for them or protect them. Which is, I think, a fear of a lot of women, you know. Of just, you know the mom, I guess, is the one that sort of holds the—she’s the glue in a lot of families, you know. And um, knowing that my own birth mom couldn’t do that I think really messes with me emotionally. And my adoptive mom, you know, she’s always been there for me and, has been that um, rock that I could lean on. Um, but I think it’s just that internal thing of, um, knowing that my birth mom was not that for me. Being like, oh, maybe I’m just like her. Like I drank like her, when I did shit that she probably would do. Like not caring about myself, just running the streets and just, that kind of behavior. And sometimes I worry that the life that I’m living right now as a sober woman is not the one that comes to me naturally. Like I feel like, naturally I would be good at just running the streets. Being, doing illegal
activity and drinking and being gangster, just doing crazy shit and this life that I’m living
now, even though it’s awesome and I love it and now I’ve really grown accustomed to
not having such a chaotic life—I mean, it’s not boring, I’m always busy, I’m always
doing something, but I guess sort of realizing that the path is what you make it too. You
know it’s not always like, things aren’t always just set in stone. Because I felt that a lot
with the identity stuff growing up too, and I feel like this is not—like I’m not supposed to
be here. This is not the life that was meant for me.

R33: It sounds a little bit like a um, like an authenticity thing. Like you don’t, I mean you
can’t change what color you are or where you’re from—I mean, so when something is
that concrete. Like, people can tell I’m not biologically related to my parents, you’re
looking for something that’s as certain, as undeniable, as irrefutable as, I’m Columbian.
Or…and something about what you’re doing sometimes feels like…like being adopted—
I’m not sure what I’m trying to say. Like, if you throw a pinecone in the river it floats
like—there’s only one way to go, it goes the way it goes. And for you, there have been a
lot of choices that you’ve had to make that felt somehow superficial—not superficial, um,
maybe. Maybe like, superimposed.

P33: Yeah.

R34: I wonder if other people feel that way but it’s attached to different things. Do you
know what I mean? Like, you’ll hear, we’re alcoholics, we drink. Like the normal things
for me to do right now would be on a barstool somewhere.

P34: Yeah, it’s interesting. Cause um, in the program is where I’ve met the most adoptees
I’ve ever met in my life. And of course I’ve read things, like studies and things that lead
to that sort of um, adoptees, with the whole, you know, theory that alcoholism is
somehow genetic and, the identify issues. So I know I’m not like the only one. But it’s
definitely been helpful to meet other people that aren’t adopted that are in the program
that are like, yeah, been there done that, or yeah, I struggled too growing up, or I feel a
certain way too, when I drink. You know, just escape my feelings—

R35: Or feeling like a fraud when you get your shit together.

P35: Mm-hmm, exactly. It’s not really like, you know my friend that I was talking about
that we share everything was like, it was sort of that feeling like, why do I still think these
things, you know? Like, why do I still have these internal battles with myself, and it’s just, it’s not a crime to think stuff, you know, you’re still going to have the same brain. It’s just how do you take that thinking and how do you interpret it and what are you gonna do with it, like are you gonna go drink over it or are you gonna take it and analyze it or, what can you do to change it—or do you need to change it.

R36: So it’s like, getting some perspective on it.

P36: Yeah.

R37: So it’s like, getting some perspective on it. Those sound authentic. These are real connections, you’re not going through the motions of being connected to these people, you really are connected to them.

P37: Yeah.

R38: So that’s got to lend some strength or sense of reality to what you’re doing and the kind of life you’re having.

P38: Yeah, it definitely does. All of my bridesmaids are in the program. And they were all people that have helped me with the whole identity thing and trusting other people and feeling like not everyone is gonna just let me down. And I think all of that emotional unavailability also helps me with feeling like, people couldn’t let me down or people couldn’t hurt me. So, um, definitely the friendships that I’ve had with women have been so helpful with just all of that. Like, I went on a couple of retreats, women’s retreats. And there was a lot of fear in that. Like, they were part of my homegroup and people I’d been with but I was like, a whole weekend? And I can’t escape and I can’t just have a break, you know, I have to just immerse myself. Those have been so great because, just hearing other people let loose their emotions and crying, and just loving on each other. And not taking it to any weird place, you know. Like not um, it felt so real. Like, being able to um, be like, wow these are really people that are not gonna be like, fluctuating in and out of my life. They’re not related to anything bad. It’s like something that’s, like one of the biggest accomplishments of my life. They’re not like a friend of my boyfriend’s, or a friend of my family. They’re not just like, some person that I met randomly. These are people that are on the same wavelength that I am.

R39: They’re your friends, your circle.
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P39: Yeah, yeah.

R40: And that’s—I mean, in your story there’s this miraculous quality, and it’s what I’ve sort of been trying to get at. It’s easy to say, well my women friends are so important to me, but for you to even make female friends was a miracle.

P40: Yeah.

R41: And we sort of take it for granted that female relationships are profoundly important, I think it’s maybe so intuitively obvious, that we don’t even talk about what we offer each other. You know? And both of those things, like identity, and I don’t know what else might come up for you, but it sounds like they’re teaching you how to express emotions, about support, like…what was so powerful at that retreat? You know?

P41: Mm-hmm, yeah. Yeah it’s definitely, having women friends has been a miracle for me, and even like what I was talking about with my mom, I never had that bond. It was just like, there was always still a wall up. And um, being able to not have any distractions of like, men, it’s like, ok this is all women, like I can’t—I have to just immerse myself with them and uh, pretend like I’m having a good time, and it’s all like, I just thought a lot of negative things going into it, like oh, this is going to be terrible. But then getting there and doing things that I’m like well, ok, if this was a guy I’d be doing the same thing but it’s not the same like we’re actually bonding, and it’s not over sex and it’s not over—we’re not trying to get something out of it. I guess that’s sort of a little bit of it. Like, when I’m with dudes it’s always like, I’m trying to evoke that emotion, that passion, that love, any emotion that I can get. And with women it was never like that, it was like, oh yeah—I never felt like I had fun, you know, and then with the women in the program I had fun with them! And I’m sober and I’m feeling that fun, you know. And I’m like, oh, I’m having a really good time! Laughing our asses off about whatever, and, being able to have like, that comraderie. Like, that sense of um, I don’t even know, that sense of community I guess. But like a community of women. And I guess, it’s been amazing because now when I think about it, like going back to the having kids thing, or certain feelings or emotions that I get I feel…I don’t feel alone in those so much anymore. Like I can actually like, find other women I can talk to and who won’t be weirded out by me talking to them about it, and find that strength from them, and learning about how they
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did it. You know. Cause before it was always just, I was envious of people. It was like, I
don’t care how you do it, but it’s just crap, because I’m not doing it. I just always was
yeah, I guess I had sort of a sense of jealousy or, insecurity, and maybe that goes back to
like, sleeping with married men. It was like, I see what you’ve got and I’m gonna break
it.
R42: Or take it. Or both.
R43: So, it was adversarial. So this whole idea of comeraderie between you and a woman
is a new experience.
P43: Yeah, and not wanting to like, take what they have or be jealous of what they have.
I’m like, I can have that too, I just have to talk to them or, you know, have them be a part
of my life and be a part of their lives. It doesn’t have to be this like, jagged thing, you
know?
R44: It’s a pretty profound switch from like, a famine mentality to an abundance
mentality. Like, there’s enough for everybody, we could all have love.
P44: Yeah, exactly.
R45: Which is something that, you would have probably laughed at anybody who told
you that five years ago.
P45: Yeah, it’s just, having these relationships with these women is just, it keeps opening
my eyes everyday. Like one of my girlfriends the other day, it was funny because when I
started hanging out with her, well, she started asking me for rides to meetings. But it was
always really awkward with her. And like, she’s black, so I think immediately, I was
already a little standoffish, because I was used to being like, the token person of color.
And so, it was like, ok how is she gonna receive me, and how is this all gonna play out.
And so, it was just sort of weird in the beginning. And then I learned like a few years
after, she was like, yeah, I thought you were so—I thought you were so weird. She was
like, you were so quiet and I was used to being really loud. And I think in hindsight, it
was sort of, like I was trying to see what card she was gonna play first. I didn’t want to
just put my deck out there and see how it played out. And she kind of took that as me
being like, not really into—emotionless. You know? She couldn’t feel my personality,
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she was like, yeah you were pretty bland [laughter]. And I was just like wow, I’ve never
been—people that know me wouldn’t consider me as bland. I’m known as being pretty
outgoing and pretty outspoken, but yet, still reserved. But still, definitely not the quiet
person in the room. So she told me that I thought, that’s hilarious, because she’s the one
person, she’s my one friend that I feel like has really helped me not pass judgments on
people. Like I always had this thing where I felt like I could really read people. And I was
just like, yeah, this chick really doesn’t like me! And I don’t know what it is, I was like, I
watch her behavior with all these other people and when it comes to me she doesn’t have
time to talk to me, or can’t even get two sentences out, or um, you know, and my other
girlfriends would always be like, well, it’s because you’re a threat. And I was like, I just
didn’t get that. I think all my girlfriends are beautiful and I was like, you’re cute and
she’s not hating on you, I don’t understand, it’s not like I’m Beyonce or something. You
know, I’m barely five foot, I look like I’m twelve, I’m just making up all these things,
Like, I’m tired of hearing that excuse. That excuse is like null and void to me. Um, and so
she’d always be like well, did you call that person, did you get her number? And so, there
were like three different girls that I swore didn’t like me, and always acted like, funny
style, and so I ended up taking her advice and being like, ok I guess I’ll like talk to her,
get her number. And they’d end up being totally cool to me! Like I ran into this one girl
in the smoke shop the other day and she was just like, oh hey! And I was like I haven’t
seen you around, and she said, oh yeah, I moved to Seattle but I’m back now, we should
hang out, and just like, without that guidance it still would have been like—just as much
as I think I can read people, people can read things off me too. So I can’t assume that I’m
not putting off vibes even if I’m not trying to.
R46: Well it also sounds like too, you’re seeing these women who are responding to you
in a way that you have responded to other women and on the one hand you believe it, but
now you know too much. So you know that it’s kind of bullshit.
P46: Yeah, exactly.
R47: That kind of um, competitive or adversarial attitude toward other women. Cause
you said, I love what you said—don’t tell me it’s because I’m cute. I’m sick of that
excuse! But you still kind of fall for it but you also know it’s complete garbage. So
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you’ve had the courage to move through, like to do enough experiments to know that it’s
totally not true, that it’s a lame excuse.

P47: Yeah, I’m like, I’m not trying to hear that anymore. You know, I try to be nice and I
try to do all this stuff. But, it’s all perspective, like, I could have some scowl on my face
or—

R48: Bitchface?

P48: Totally! Because I remember R- was like, do you ever think that it’s like, maybe
they saw you—because I have really bad migraines, and not from drinking, well, drinking
didn’t help but, um, so yeah. It’s just, um, hereditary or whatever. So anyway, my first
year of recovery was horrible that—I lost my job, it was bad, it was major. So Roger was
like, do you ever think it could be like, maybe it was like, you were having a migraine
day and you just looked like you didn’t want to be talked to and they just, took that one—
you know, first impressions are everything. And I was like yeah, I guess you’re right—I
could be just like, not feeling life at the moment and they took that and were like, well,
stay away from her you know, whatever. So um, yeah, it’s just it’s amazing to um, just
have those experiences with the ladies that are in my life now, that teach me stuff. Like I
never thought that I could be taught things by women. And you know, I do feel like the
women that are in my life now, I do have that sense of love for them like they’re family.
Like they’re my sisters, or mothers or—you know, my sponsor is just like, super
amazing. You know, I talk to her about probably more stuff than I talk to my mom about.
I try to follow the code of like, don’t dump all this stuff on your loved ones all the time.
Like sometimes you need to walk it through with your sponsor and figure out the right
solutions. And sometimes your moms or dads or husbands or boyfriends aren’t always
the person that needs to be unloaded upon all the time. And so that’s also been another
amazing difference of like, I’m going through something and I don’t know how to get
through it and it’s frustrating, and the first person I think of calling is my sponsor, a
woman in the program an who’s not gonna judge me for whatever it is, how silly it might
be or whatever. And like, sharing that experience with me. So…

R49: I have something I want to ask you about that, but can we take a quick break?

P49: Yeah.
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627  [Break]
628  R50: What you just said about your sponsor made me think—like on the retreats and
629  things, like there’s this idea that you don’t have to get anything from the relationship, but
630  I think it’s more—I’m wondering if it’s more like, there’s something that you get that you
631  didn’t even know about before. So like, when you’re with a man, even if you’re not going
632  to sleep with him you’re still able to elicit something that you need, something that’s like
633  a drug for you—admiration, or sexual tension, or whatever you want to call it. And that
634  precludes all kinds of things that can happen between people that we don’t know about if
635  we grow up with that being kind of our source of self worth. And so you learned—for
636  you, sobriety has been a process of learning that—you’re still getting something from
637  your sponsor, but you didn’t know it was anything you needed before, or could use or
638  wanted.
639  P50: Right.
640  R51: And so you’re giving something too. It sounds like you’ve become aware of that as
641  a place for growth, as a process. That women have something that I do want. But that it’s
642  mutually satisfying and beneficial.
643  P51: Yeah, and I think it’s to…sort of like that mutual, that friendship. Like, it’s really
644  interesting. I sort of, so like with K- for example, she and I are very much alike as far as
645  like the whole emotional—it’s hard for us to cry in front of people and let our feelings
646  show like, how was your day, oh it’s ok. Like my thing was always, like, just, oh I’m
647  tired, like if I was actually going through something instead of talking about it I’d just be
648  like, oh, I’m tired. My mom would always be like, uh-huh, yeah, what does tired mean
649  exactly. So with K-, a lot of it, I see myself in her. And at the same time I love her as a
650  person, as a friend and a sister in sobriety. Like, she’s taught me so much about like,
651  strength and courage and being able to feel like you still have that default of not being
652  able to show your emotions but yet being so caring and so loving. Like, she always calls
653  herself sappy, but she’s just so in touch with how to make herself, make somebody feel
654  good. Or like, checking in and um, so it’s sort of um, the parallel is interesting with
655  another person in the program. So like with K- I’ve—she’s helped me a lot just as being a
656  friend and doing things with her. But with other stuff, like with life stuff I feel like I’ve
been really more of a prominent friend in her life. And not that I think that finances are like, any sort of means of showing love or anything like that, but like, you know, she needs money I’ll give it to her. I’m not going to ask questions—I have the means and I can help her out, you know. Um, I let her borrow my car and certain things like that like, I do that because I love you and you’re my best friend and I care about you, and you’re like family. And then there’s this other person in the program that has sort of seen that kindness and played upon it a little bit. You know, I sort of started doing that with that person because I was like, wow, I really see your struggle, like, you’re new, I want to help you out, like giving you rides to Seattle and help you with your situation, like that exchange isn’t there. Like, I haven’t found that bond. It’s just like, instead of me being like, oh I just need to back away or whatever, I sort of got angry about the situation like, again, it was just another person who was just trying to use me for my weakness—or my kindness as weakness. Um, and so, it has been interesting to see that, to actually acknowledge like…I don’t know, people that are there in my life as you know, friends, or sisters, you know, and that difference and somebody that um, just wants to take advantage of the situation. Because it can happen with boys and girls alike. And I never knew that before because I never let girls in. And so, it was like, it sort of like, made me feel that used feeling again. Even though they hadn’t really, it was a different kind of feeling I guess, but it was sort of the same.

R52: But you recognized it. And so in that, you’re also recognizing how much you have to offer, besides sex.

P52: Yeah, exactly. And that’s also an interesting thing because I—in the beginning, first like year or two, I had times where I was like, really doubting myself. Like, why do people even like hanging out with me? And even with my husband like, now, or before we even got married, and even some days now, I just like, feel like I’m replaceable. And I feel that these relationships with women have helped me not feel that way so much. You know what I mean? Because it’s like, they don’t, you know, they don’t want anything out of this relationship, they just want to learn with me and to be my friend and to hang out with me because I’m me, it’s not anything else. And so I think that was also sort of parallel with this—the relationship with K- and the relationship with this other
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person. Is that I know that K- isn’t hanging out with me because I help her out in certain
situations. I think she recognizes that I’m a good friend and that’s what good friends do,
they don’t turn their back on their friends, you know. And with this other person I’m like,
you’re not recognizing me as a friend, you’re recognizing me as a pot of gold, or
whatever—
R53: A source of something.
P53: A source of something that is not friendship. And that hurts, you know. It’s sort of
evoking that emotion of like, instead of just being, instead of just going along with it and
being like, yeah, you can use me, cause I just want a friend, or whatever, now I can be
like, that hurts my feelings! You know, I’m not cool with that, it’s not how I roll. So, so
yeah. It’s really, these relationships with women have been so instrumental in, in even
my relationship with my husband today. I am the woman that I am today because of
women in recovery. You know, like, I wouldn’t know how to be. I don’t know about this
whole being a lady thing, cause I still burp in public and I do very unladylike things, but
you know, they taught me how to, how to receive love. On a genuine level. And that is
crazy. It’s so crazy.
R54: It’s a miracle? I mean, I don’t have a better word for it—
P54: Yeah, yeah. And it’s just like, being like this is what I have for you and I just want
to love all over you and you can either take it or leave it, but either way, it’s here. And
like, ok…I don’t know if I wanna, I don’t know…you know, but then realizing, not even
on a conscious level that I’m doing it back. Like, I hate talking on the phone, it’s like the
worst thing ever for me, but um being able to be available and like, listen to somebody
else when they’re like, can I call you? And being like, I don’t want to talk to anybody on
the phone you know, but then being like, I just need to put my shit aside and be there.
And even that small gesture can change somebodies day. And it’s just, yeah, it is a
miracle. It’s so amazing to be able to say now, I know what love feels like. I can’t define
it really, but I know what it feels like. Because if you had asked me when I was drinking I
would have said, I’m not even sure that exists, I’m not even sure what that is exactly, like
I know what infatuation is, and I know what being like, passionate about something is but
I don’t know about this love thing. And I think another thing with the women in the
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program is that there’s been consistency. Like, I never had that before. Like even if I had a friend, I don’t know any of the people I grew up with anymore, I have no connection to any of the people I grew up with. Even, like, I had best friends, and, I don’t know where they are now. I never had that consistency. And granted, it’s only been four years, and I honestly can see myself years and years down the line like, still knowing all these people and them keeping me in their life and me keeping them in my life.

R55: They’re part of your identity now, and helped you forge, like you said, I am the woman I am today because of them.

P55: Yeah, and sometimes that’s scary, like I think sometimes with my alcoholism I still have those moments where it’s too much, like I just want to run away and not have anybody know me and not be like, present I guess. But it’s recognizing women like K- and other people that still show up in light of like, major shit going on in their life that show me that, yeah, you can’t just like, run away from it, even if you feel like running away, you know? That showing up and being there, like—and that was one things I told her, she was like, I don’t know, I want to come home so bad but I’m nervous about being around people, I’m nervous about going to a meeting because I might cry in front of everybody and that’s gonna be really weird. And I was like, yeah, it could be awkward, but you never know, you could be that savior for somebody this happens to years down the line, or even somebody who’s gone through this already. It sucks to think that you’re a martyr or something like that, but it’s not even that, it’s like, paving the way for others. Which is what was done for me.

R56: The way you talk about love makes me think of the way some people talk about higher power and their pursuit of that. Like, they spend their whole life going, fuck you god, there’s no god, I know there’s no god, and they’re trying to prove that god isn’t there, like, obviously there’s no god if you let me live like this!

P56: Totally.

R57: You know, you were doing that with love. Like, and then you come around and like, really, I was pursuing it my whole life. I wanted it to show itself. I mean, it strikes me almost as a version of a higher power.
P57: Yeah, yeah definitely. And being able to say that I have that in my life now, that it is encompassing my life, it’s what holds my life together, um, and that’s why it’s so hard with the K- thing. Because my family has been instrumental in my recovery. And also my mom, you know, like my mom and I are so close now. And we were never—like I actually now—like when she used to tell me that growing up, oh me and my mom were best friends, it was actually in light of the fact that we weren’t. And like, that stung, you know, I was like, I want to be best friends with you but we’re different people. And now it’s like, regardless of our differences, we still have that really tight bond. Like I talk to her almost every day. And we share in each others lives, like I’m not scared to tell her stuff now, and when I had my bridal shower she spoke a little bit and like, was fighting through the tears but it was just like, I love my daughter, I have the greatest daughter. And hearing that was just like, I’ve arrived! I did it! Like I somehow broke through that barrier. Cause I felt it wasn’t just breaking down my wall but breaking down hers as well, that she’d built because of my craziness. So, yeah. It’s truly amazing. And everyday I learn something new, from the women, you know.

R58: Well, I don’t want to make you late, but I was going to ask you also, do you sponsor?

P58: Mm-Hmm. Yeah.

R59: So you really have women that you are actively passing it on, then.

P59: Yeah, which has been so...awesome. It’s actually interesting because, well one of my sponsees is, she’s more like, narcotics anonymous, but alcoholics anonymous works better for her program which is interesting because I never really got into like, hard drugs, but I can only imagine that I would have had like, addictive issues. I mean, was into some of the harder stuff but it was never like, I was never meth addict status or anything like that. So that’s been really interesting to sort of talk about addiction just in general, and not specifically alcohol stuff. But, that’s, it’s just really great, it’s been interesting thought this week—so, we got up to, she’s basically going to be on her ninth step and she got a job and she’s like, I’m too busy for life outside of work! And I’m sort of, so my sponsorship I think is different than a lot of people’s, um, because um, I think it was just sort of the way—like my fist sponsor was very hands-on yet hands-off. Like you
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have to initiate everything and our relationship is strictly like, how I’m helping you. It’s not like a vice versa thing. Which I had trouble with. I was like, you’re not a therapist, like, when I ask you about your day I’d like to actually know, you know, like, how am I going to do a fifth step with this person if I don’t know anything about them? You know, it’s not that I have to have dirt on you if you’re going to have dirt on me, but it’s the mutual—

R60: The mutuality, yeah.

P60: Yeah, so that was interesting. Because I ended up basically firing her at nine months. When which was like, the worst time to ever not have a sponsor. And it was sort of—it was sort of a weird situation where I felt really hurt by the, by her actions I guess. So she was really, I was told later on that she does this thing where she’s sort of like, super into the program, super into the program, then she’ll just like, drop off, just disappears for four months, then she’ll come back. So I sort of had that period with her where she was sort of not very available. And, I remember I was, I was at nine months, my pink bubble had burst already, I was just like, going through it—I was really having a hard time. And you know, I tried to rekindle the relationship, I was in Portland with my brother, visiting. And it had sort of gotten to that point where when I was going through a hard time, my first reaction was not to call her it was to call one of my other girlfriends.

And that’s great, I mean I love talking to my other girlfriends, but I should want to also talk to my sponsor. And I remember talking to her, and she was saying that she was getting a tattoo of her pig that had died and I said oh that sounds cool, you should send me a picture of the tat once it’s done, and she was like, oh it’s kind of a sensitive thing, I’m not really comfortable with—maybe later, sort of thing. And I was like oh ok, I understand, like, I get it. And so I went on with my day, and I’m on Facebook, and she uploaded a picture of it! And I’m like, what the fff! Like, this chick right here! So that was sort of the end of, I ended up telling her—like, I didn’t tell her that was why, but—

R61: That is was the pig tattoo that broke the camel’s back? [laughter]

P61: Yeah! But I ended up getting—not being sponsored by her anymore. I was sponsorless for like a month and half and then I ended up getting my current sponsor. And my current sponsor is also—doesn’t really sponsor the way I do, basically what I
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guess I’m getting at, is I try to be really hands-on. Like, I’m always constantly checking
on them. Because I feel, for me, there were so many times when I was in my spot of
feeling lonely, or doing my whole like, I’m crying alone thing and no one is here to
console me, and yet, I’ve hidden myself. Um, I do a lot of checking in on them. Like,
how are you doing, how did your dentist appointment go, what’s going on with this—I
feel like, I am sort of trying to learn how to balance that out a little bit because they also
need to learn to have some accountability for their program a little bit. I’ve reminded the
one you know, hey, you need to reach out, you need to keep this alive because I want to
get you through your steps and then you can pass it on to someone else and like, it’s so
easy to let it go by the wayside. Um, but for me I’m like, I’ve experienced so much from
the relationships that I’ve had with these women that I’m like, you’ve got to keep this
thing alive! Like, if you knew what it could be like or what it could offer you, you’d want
it too. Because I know what it gives me and I’m like, hey, come on, come on! I’m like
rooting for them, and um, but this week I was like, I’m not going to send a text, or I’m
just going to see how they react to it, or whatever. And my one lady had relapsed, and so
that was sort of—she’s done it twice. And the first time I was really—kids gloves, you
know. Like, it’s ok, this happens, we met in the park and we talked about it and she was
like, I’m never gonna do it again! It’s so horrible! And I shared my experience and was
just like, hey, the next day keep hydrated, remember to pray, read a little bit of the big
book, do something nice for somebody else. Um, so I’m sort of trying to learn how to
balance that out because I don’t want them to feel like I don’t give a shit because I do.
And I think it’s hard because like, I’ve heard some people say that their sponsors are like,
I’m not here to be your friend, I’m here to be your sponsor. And I’m like, ehh, I don’t
know about that. Because we talk about sponsorship as um, one alcoholic helping another
you know, and there’s not supposed to be a hierarchy. Like I’m not your boss, I’m not
your mom, I’m just a fellow alcoholic helping you out as a designated person to walk you
through the steps. Um, but I don’t think that in any way negates us from being friends or
from being able to learn from one another. And that was sort of how I felt with my first
sponsor. It was like, there was not mutuality there. With my sponsees I feel like, I can
learn stuff from anybody, you know, anybody in the program. And I don’t ever want to
close that off or close that door because I’m supposed to be their sponsor. Because
regardless in friendships—like I feel like the reason my friendships with the women that I
have now are so strong is because we don’t sugarcoat it for each other.
R62: It’s mutual accountability, it doesn’t just go one direction.
P62: Yeah, it’s like, this is how it is and this is my experience, or whatever, so yeah, the
sponsor thing has been a little challenging in that regard because I think I have so much
of my own fears wrapped up in it, like oh, I don’t want them to feel like they’re not loved
you know, going back to that love thing.
R63: Right, yeah. And that’s where the balance is important. So that you’re responding—
you’re having self-respect and you’re responding to their needs without sort of, taking
care of yourself by taking care of their—your imagined sense of their need for love.
P63: Yeah, exactly. So, um…and my one sponsee, she has kids that are young. And it’s
just, it’s such a…sensitive area, because I don’t want to be like, dude! Your fucking kids,
man!
R64: Yeah, but you can’t not have that feeling, either.
P64: Yeah, I’m like, don’t be like how my birth mom was, or how so many people that
are in the program now because their parents showed them, this is how you deal with shit
in life, you get drunk. So, yeah. It’s crazy.
[Wrap up, end interview]
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R1: Please tell me about your experience getting sober as a woman in AA. You can share anything that you think will help me understand your experience.
P1: My experience as a woman in AA—I got sober up in Kodiak Alaska, so as a woman it was way different there than it is here. Because the male to female ratio is different—is so much more vast.
R2: Meaning that there are more men—
P2: Way more men. Ten men to—at least ten men to every one woman. And then there’s the aspect of me coming in, I got sober when I was 19, so, it was me—little me, little young me, with all these old, old men—fishermen. And a lot of natives and so forth. And so today we have some—today alcoholics anonymous has become rather structured, and I got sober—it was real redneck. Service work was, hey come on down and help me bait these tubs. And while we’re baiting tubs or building fishing nets or whatever, these guys out here were talking, and they’re talking about steps and they’re talking about sober and talking about—telling some old drinking stories, and talking about, hey yeah—B-, that’s how—that’s first step stuff they’re talking about when they’re telling some of their old drinking stories. You know, B-, that’s first step stuff. And then they got to talking about god, and how, man I just—how they got drinking so much that the desperation drinking led them to AA led them to god, made them want to be sober. Um, the fact that I was a woman, that a was a female, um, you know they didn’t treat me any different. What they could have done was really ostracize me or isolate me as a young person, but they didn’t, they said, oh no honey, you’re no different than us, no-no honey you’re age doesn’t matter, no-no honey, what’s between your legs doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter—your race, your sex, your creed, your religion, native or non-native doesn’t matter. Race, sex doesn’t matter. It’s all about getting sober.
R3: Do you feel like that was a product of AA, the inclusiveness of AA, or was that regional?
P3: No, that was the inclusiveness of—it’s the inclusiveness of AA, it’s the unconditional love that we have—today they have changed it. Um, and I was lucky enough to get sober—and I got sober in ’86. And the course in miracles and the women who love to much—you know I got sober in the middle of the, seeking out your inner child and all
that stuff, and the guys would say um, you know—the people that I got sober with would say, gee B-, you could always go read this book. We didn’t have a lot of counseling on an island in the North Pacific but what we had was the big book of Alcoholics Anonymous. And there was always somebody ready to talk about the big book and work steps in whatever capacity that was, you know? And they welcomed me. And obviously when I came in I had all the, how do you say it—the inappropriate sexuality issues. So I tried using the sexuality, my sexuality, and they were like, no-no honey, we don’t do that. And they taught me. And it took time, and some of them did take advantage of that. You know, I will never knock the thirteenth stepping that went on, you’ll never hear me knock that because I firmly believe it was part of what kept me sober. Some of those men taking advantage—all though they were taking advantage, although they were sleeping with me, we were still talking about the big book. They were still modeling sober. We’re doing stuff sober, you know. That make sense?

R4: Mm-hmm. Yeah, so, that was even maybe a benefit for you, because there weren’t very many women

P4: Absolutely, absolutely. Well, it was all I knew. I mean, when I came in, the bottom that I had was very sexuality oriented. I came out of the sex-industry. I’m not proud of it, I’m not ashamed of it either by the grace of god and alcoholics anonymous. But when I walked into alcoholics anonymous, if you would have told me that I had to drop everything and that too, you would have killed me, that would have killed me. Because I didn’t know anything else. Other than how to be cute, and how to be young, and how to use it and how to play, and this and that.

R5: So, did you work with a sponsor at the time?

P5: My first sponsor was appointed, she uh, her name was laurie and at the time I got sober I had 7-8-9 months, somewhere in there. She ended up getting drunk. And she was appointed, it would be a phone call here and there. Sponsorship wasn’t like it is now. She’s the one that held me accountable, but we didn’t ever do anything real tangible, so after she got drunk I never—my next sponsor was Katie, and she had like, god, at that time five years was a huge, huge oldtimer there, and Katie must have had like three or four years so she was way old, and I used her a lot. And um, then what happened was we
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just drifted in and out, but like I said, nothing was tangible but it was encouraged that you not just use your sponsor but you use your mentorship. Use your oldtimers. So I used my oldtimers.

R6: So you were doing bookwork with a variety of people.

P6: Anybody that wanted to do bookwork with me. Today they have this thing called spiritual consent, you know, in the AA world community, it’s like, back then they didn’t ask you for spiritual consent to tell you the truth, they were up your hiney ten ways from Sunday you know, they were all the way up. Because it was expected that they were trying to help me save my life. We don’t care what you think about us, we don’t care if you like us and you’re uncomfortable or not. We’re gonna get in your—can I cuss?

R7: mm-hmm.

P7: We’re gonna get in your shit, we’re gonna get in your ass and we’re gonna get to the root cause, because causes and conditions is what drives us to drink. We don’t care, we love you enough to tell you the flipping truth. And they didn’t pull punches. And god bless them for that. Um, today you have to be nice to people. Today people have boundaries, and I have boundaries and you can’t talk to me like that! And they were like, this is life and death. That’s the way that I got sober. We don’t care—male, female, black, white, age, we don’t care. Let’s save your life. And um, so anyhow I had a lot of my mentorship too so when I was without sponsorship I always had someone who was working with me. Um, and then when it was time to—you know, I never hired or fired a sponsor—and um, I was in a meeting and I was intangibly sponsored, Katie was in my life but it was kind of, here and there you know, and I had complete respect for her. There was nothing inappropriate, she wasn’t doing anything inappropriate or wrong, and god put this woman in front of me—Lorraine. And she was from the lower 48, she had a broader experience with AA and she had huge life stuff going on and that’s what I had gone through my first year of sobriety. Her brother was dying of AIDS and we had—there was never any AIDS on the island yet, it didn’t exist for us yet. And um, and she was the first person I ever met who ever went through that and it was a huge, huge thing back then, a huge scary thing. And I had just buried my dad, my mom had had a massive
aneurism, I’d given my child up for adoption, I had just gone through a bunch of huge life stuff—

R8: In that first year.

P8: Yeah, my dad died, my mom had a stroke—or a massive aneurism seven days before my dad died, and I was six months pregnant. So, I had all this huge, huge stuff going on and here was another woman who walked through big huge stuff and was doing it staying sober, talking about it and still had peace and love and integrity and—wow. She was just an amazing woman. And she talked about things like, having to drink the men under the table. And that’s how I had to drink. Basically, she read my mail, she told my story. And uh, you know god puts in front of you—god puts the people I sponsor in front of me. I don’t go seek any of it. I was never taught—you know, when you’re looking for something, pray about it. Gee B-, maybe you oughtta pray about it! And I prayed about it you know, and this woman was amazing. She’s the one that first sat down and walked me through step work, on paper. Fourth step. Four columns, out of the book, as it’s recommended, tangible, all the way into my amends and into ten, eleven and twelve.

Now mind you, I did little spot check inventories along the way. You know, gee B-, maybe you should inventory that, you know. You ok?

R9: Yeah, the water—I’m going to have a cough drop.

P9: Do you want an allegra or something?

R10: No, it’s not that bad, it’s just my throat gets a little bit itchy. I won’t get anaphylactic or anything.

P10: It’d be fun to watch.

R11: You’d do the right thing!

P11: Only if it gets bad enough. I’ll let you hit bottom first (laughter). Um, but anyway, so that’s my sponsorship. Loraine was my sponsor all that time up in Alaska. When I moved back down to the lower 48 um, in ’90, I came down here, kept Loraine and then I moved down to Oregon, they moved to Montana where they were originally from—eventually. So now, I’m in Oregon, they’re in Montana, she’s still my sponsor. So then it was becoming apparent—I’m going to school and stuff down there—

R12: Is that why you went to Oregon? To go to school?
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P12: Yeah, essentially. That and a him. I married him. Well, when the oil spill happened I got hurt. I blew my knee out, so I couldn’t fish anymore. I blew my knee out so I couldn’t take the roll of the boat. So I went to school, I had to go somewhere. And there was just nothing left for me on the island. It would have been toxic for me to stay. I wasn’t that coherent—that cognizant of my mental health, but everybody said B- you need to go to college, you’re dumb as a brick, you need to go to school.

R13: And this was the people in, the people you were accountable to and you trusted.

P13: The only people I had were the people in AA. I walked away from everybody that I was drinking and using with up there.

R14: So you were up there using and drinking and then—so you got sober there, you didn’t like, go to Alaska to get sober, you were there and you sobered up.

P14: Yeah, I was there, yea I was there drinking and using and I got sober there. And after I got sober all my dealing buddies thought I became a narc.

R15: That probably served you well?

P15: Actually, I ended up with a knife at my throat. I was sitting in the passenger seat of a cab one day, right after I got out of treatment and they thought I was telling stuff to the cops. And I had a guy um, reach in around me, and he had a picture of me getting high, and he said if you ever talk…

R16: Jesus…. (pause). So you went to Oregon for school, you didn’t have community there.

P16: No, not until I got down there. I got down there and plugged right into AA because that’s what I was taught. That’s what you do when you go to a new community, to a new town, plug right in. I had let’s see… well I knew my now ex-husband down there. He was a normie, he just didn’t drink. He was down there, and so I knew like one person in my husband’s band that was sober. That’s how I met my husband. But I went down there and looked up AA in the yellow pages that’s how we used to have to do it. And used a telephone, had to go to a payphone—we still had rotaries back then. And called AA and they said, oh yeah, there’s—it would be the equivalent of an Alano club, but it’s not an Alano club, it has a board of directors, it’s just a sober club. There’s two of them in Salem. And I went down to the SOS club and I pulled in and there were all these people
there and I was like, oh wow. I mean, I’d never seen this stuff, I’d never been to a
conference, I mean, we had potlucks, we had an annual halibut haul in May, and then we
did a potluck at Christmas and we did a dance in the middle of the year. We always had
dances. But I’ had never seen clean and sober clubs and Alano clubs and all of this stuff.
Coffee cups that have the serenity prayer on them, you know. I bought that sucker! Right
now! I had to have it, you know. Bumper stickers on your car, with a circle/triangle. That
was amazing! It was astounding! And all these people. And that’s how I got plugged in
was just going to meetings there. I kept Loraine as my sponsor for a number of years, for
a long time. And met a woman who was very big book oriented and a strong woman, and
asked her to be my sponsor and we did big book, very tangible. And she was, gosh, for
seven-eight years. And then uh, she went through—I think she was menopausal, but she
went through and fired literally everybody she sponsored, everybody. All of them. She
had a new boyfriend too. But anyway, um, and so after that it’s like, wow, so I got an
interim sponsor, cause actually I was in the middle of working the steps and um, I got a
guy to sponsor me, interim, what was his name? Wayne. And I did fourth and fifth step
with him, and actually it was one of the best fifth steps I ever did. And then uh, god put
P- in front of me. And P- was my sponsor until up here, oh goodness, 2004? When did I
come up here…2005. Cause I was going through the death of my husband, walking
through all that. And then when I met Polly was up here. And I thought, oh, there she is!
R17: So your husband died down there. And this was your first or second marriage?
P17: Second marriage.
R18: So you went through a divorce pretty early in sobriety.
P18: I got married six years sober, divorced eight years sober, then I got married again
seventeen years sober.
R19: Wow. OK.
P19: Yeah. And then he died, well, he killed himself 95 days after we got married. (long
pause)
R20: And then did you move up here pretty quickly? Was it partly because of that?
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P20: Yeah, I always hated Oregon. I never liked Oregon. I’m rather conservative, and they’re rather not. And I kind of thought Washington was a little more conservative than it is.

R21: Oops!

P21: Holy god! I saw sandals and socks the other day, I about pooped myself. Not really...

R22: You’ve got to go east of the mountains!

P22: I know, I’ve got to find some nice redneck man. Anyway…um, I have no idea what we’re talking about now.

R23: Well, one thing I have a questions about, you talked about—you’ve worked the steps and you’ve done it a lot of ways, but book work can be working the steps and book work can be something really different. So you’ve had this communal, getting into the book in Alaska. And then it sounds like you went all the way through the steps with—Loraine, before you left Alaska.

P23: Right, I went all the way through the steps, but probably with fifteen different people. It wasn’t…this is me, this is you, I am your sponsor, I am the only one you can go through the book with and work the steps with. That’s not how it really is—was, is for me still. That wasn’t my experience. I learned step one—and we did book studies and step studies. There was one book study and one step study a week, and by god, you were at it. But it’s like, when I’m looking at step one, it was explained to me—I learned step one, I had step one done before I ever came into the rooms of alcoholics anonymous. I knew I was powerless and unmanageable otherwise I never would have walked in. Otherwise I wouldn’t be here. I—god drove me into the rooms of AA. When I came here I looked around and thought, wow, these people seem to have their shit together, these people seem to have a solution. Um, they said you better find something more powerful than yourself because you can’t keep you sober. Maybe it was because I made the group my higher power and while I worked through my resentment—I was raised catholic, and while I worked through that also found a god of my understanding. I was 19, I had the mentality of a seven year old for christ’s sakes. They said well, picture something that’s more powerful than yourself, but you better not make it the door knob because that will
fail. It was explained to me, we used Styrofoam cups back then in AA, and we smoked—
a lot! And this guy, one of the guys explained it to me, he said you better not make one of
these Styrofoam cups your higher power and he turned it over on the table and he went,
wham! And he popped that thing—for whatever reason it popped really loud and it made
a really huge impression upon me that I better not make it something that’s fallible. They
said, you’ve got to find something that’s more powerful than yourself. And the only thing
that I viewed as power was a big guy that sat on a Harley. So if I needed to picture a
higher power that I was it. And I must have been ten or twelve years sober and I was in a
meeting in Oregon and I told that story, I said you know—my higher power used to be a
big guy that sat on a Harley. And I don’t think it’s changed all that much, maybe now he
just wears white leather instead, or rides a white Harley. And my friend H- yells out, B’s
higher power is Elvis! So now my higher power is Elvis. You know, it takes what it
takes…if it works, I suppose. But yeah, that’s—we did it with everybody. It’s like,
no one—sponsorship was not ownership. Sponsorship was my go-to girl. When your ass
is falling off, you call your sponsor.

R24: Yeah, you said before that with L-, and even with K-, it’s not exactly a pact but you
agree to be accountable to each other.

P24: Yeah. What it is, is this is the person that at three o’clock in the morning when my
ass is falling off, I’ll call her first. If she’s not answering, I can call any number of other
people. She’s my first call though. My ass is falling off, any time day or night, she
agreed, yeah, call me, I’ll be there. I’ll have a certain level of accountability to you. I’ll
have a certain level of um, of honor and integrity, responsibility to my relationship with
you. Now mind you, here’s how god works in my life, um, I needed a lot of parenting
when I came in because I never really had a lot of parenting, I was the youngest of 8 kids,
my parents were done. By the time I came around they were done. And so they did that
with me. They taught me the hygiene things, and they literally dragged me to get my
GED, literally dragged me, sit down in this chair, take this test, no you’re not getting up
to go to the bathroom, you’re going to take the test. OK, you passed the test! You have
your GED, you can go now. That’s how I got my GED—it was by no choice of my own.
I didn’t have a choice, I didn’t have a choice to get my drivers license. They said, ok,
now where are we? We’re at the DMV. You’re going to go take your drivers test now. I am? Cause I was driving without a license. And they explained this thing to me called honesty and integrity to me. And they said, no, we don’t drive without our drivers license because that’s not honest and you won’t stay sober doing that. And they taught me about feminine hygiene, and they taught me how to grocery shop, and you know.

R25: So, really, really practical stuff. No like—

P25: The inner child stuff?

R26: Well, like, if you think about…it also sounds like you’re saying AA changed.

P26: Oh, it has. Absolutely.

R27: So for you it was like…the rubber is hitting the road right now, all the time, we’re focusing on practical stuff. In some ways it sounds less structured?

P27: Oh, it was. Absolutely. What’s more important is what you and I are doing sitting at the kitchen table…one of the things I always say is, the message that we receive in the fellowship of alcoholics anonymous today is not necessarily, quite often not necessarily the message that is transmitted in the big book of alcoholics anonymous. The message that we receive in the fellowship today is not the message transmitted in the big book of alcoholics anonymous. And alcoholics anonymous is a book, it’s not a meeting. Alcoholics anonymous is a book. Those people are just people who have experience with this book, who do the shit that’s exemplified in this book. And that’s what we’re supposed to be talking about. Nowadays what we are supposed to be talking about is what it used to be like, what happened, and what it’s like now. But what it has changed to is, we’d like you to share your experience strength and hope, even if you don’t have any experience. Go ahead and share it anyway! We only want you to share for three minutes so everybody has a chance to talk. But trust me, you know on the day I walked in there, the day my father died on August 23rd of 1987, and I walked into that meeting and they asked you know, has anybody got a topic. And I piped up and I said yeah, gratitude. And we talked about gratitude because I had been given the opportunity to make face to face amends to my father before he died, in the previous may. And they let me talk, they didn’t stop me, because they knew I needed to be able to have that stuff. And now what we have is, pay your buck, dollar an hour therapy. Which is different than an alcoholics
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anonymous share, which is, here’s what I’m doing. Here’s the shit that I drink over. I don’t know if that makes any sense.

R28: It does. Um, I’ve been given a lot to think about by the women that I’ve been talking to. And I wasn’t aware of how much it’s really changed.

P28: Oh goodness yes. It’s been whitewashed, it has been treatment-ized—I think treatment and the courts have screwed it up, they have screwed up the beautiful purity and unconditional love that is alcoholics anonymous, and we’ve created cliques, exclusivity and—ok now, I need to stop with my opinions because it will just piss me off. Because, we used to have a 75% recovery rate! 75% success rate, and now we don’t, we’re lucky if we have a 1%.

R29: Right, and so when you say that—you said exclusiveness and cliquiness, we’ve talked a little bit about that. Do you see different kinds of meetings as part of that? Like, do you go to women’s meetings or do you avoid them because you think it’s like—

P29: Oh, there’s absolutely a time and a place for women’s meetings. Um, I think that—the way that I was taught and the way that I do things, absolutely there is a time and a place for women’s meeting. Um, but as my sole meetings, if I’m only going to women’s meetings then I’m missing the male perspective. I’m missing perceptions that—men are not bad. Men are just men! And I need everybody.

R30: So there is an emphasis there on being an alcoholic, and not a kind of alcoholic?

P30: What do you mean?

R31: I guess I just am interested in that, some people are opposed to women’s meetings, to gay and lesbian meetings because they say, we’re alcoholics! That’s the point! We’re here because we’re alcoholics and if you’re worried about what kind of alcoholic you are then you’re missing the point.

P31: Um, I was encouraged to attend women’s meetings. We had one, we had one in the town. I was encouraged, when I got sober, to attend the women’s meeting because I had sexuality issues. I didn’t want to reach out to women, and it gave me an opportunity to reach past that—oh my god—homophobic, it was a level of homophobia as well. You know um, and I went, wow, these ladies are nice, and they walked me through this pregnancy that I had, and childbirth, and I got to realize that wow, women aren’t bad.
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Women were out for three things, your money, your dope or your old man. And um, wow, these are ok. And so are the co-ed meetings. We didn’t walk in and talk about who we were fucking that week, in a woman’s meeting. Nowadays, quite often it’s, you walk in and she’s talking about him. And it’s like, wait a minute? I mean, does that make sense? And it’s like, that’s not what women’s meetings are about. Women’s meetings are so we can have a commonality. And I believe there’s nothing wrong with—like, women’s meetings are fabulous, especially with where I’m at right now, coming out of a relationship. Coming new to sobriety when you need to meet some women, it’s great, absolutely there’s a time and a place for it. But as my sole meeting, absolutely wrong. Um, but—and at the same time, I have kind of an oddball opinion about the gay and lesbian, I don’t know because I don’t go to those. Um, but it’s kind of like…we don’t have straight meetings, why would we have gay and lesbian meetings? But you know, I’ve never played in that pool so I don’t know what the water tastes like, so. You know, it’s kind of like what’s the point?

R32: Well, and so I wonder, what’s the point of a woman’s meeting? I mean like you said there’s a time and place for it, there’s commonality—
P32: The inappropriate sexuality that I exhibited, I needed to be around women. I needed to learn that women are not a problem, women are not the enemy, women are not fucking all bitches. I hated women, I didn’t want to be around women because I couldn’t manipulate them. Because I couldn’t con them. Because they would call me on my inappropriate sexuality issues, in addition to a lot of the men, but they would tell me about that. Does that make sense? And that’s sometimes, that’s what we need.

R33: How important do you think that was for your sobriety?
P33: Oh, it was incredibly important.

R34: Ok, so it would have been a huge obstacle if you couldn’t connect with women?
P34: Um, yes. There weren’t that many women there, I mean there were three of us, or four of us—on a big night we’d have five women there. But what it taught me was, the things that it taught me besides that we’re women and we all have va-jay-jays, is that women are a safe place where I could go and they weren’t going to take sexual advantage of me. Although there were women there that were attempting to take sexual advantage
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of me, which is kind of another reason that I have this weird kind of backwards view of
the homosexual meetings or whatever the hell you call them now days, does that make
sense? You know, this isn’t about sex.
R35: Ok, so AA’s not about sex, this isn’t—so again, there’s something about
inclusiveness that you have to get to be just an alcoholic among alcoholics.
P35: Right. It also allowed me to work safely through those fears that I had of women.
Anyway, I don’t know that I’m making any sense. It was very strongly beat into me, this
isn’t about being a woman. This is about me being a real alcoholic, just an alcoholic and
an addict if you will. Because where I got sober there was no NA. And…is, ain’t.
Anything else is just—the twelve steps work for all of us.
R36: Yeah. So, how do you, given how much it has changed, I mean AA has changed,
your experience of AA has changed, it sounds like there are some regional differences
too. How do you—what does your recovery look like today, what does your maintenance
look like? How do you work with other people?
P36: Today what it looks like is um, and I get a lot of sideways glances from a lot of
people because I’ll work with anybody. I’m kind of an AA whore, I’ll do coffee and AA
with anybody, anywhere for any reason, you know. I’m not above taking a young
newcomer guy to Starbucks, in fact I did it just last week, goldarnit! Now if I have a
sexual attraction to him, that’s different, I won’t do that by any means. What does it look
like today? I have no—I don’t have those issues with women, so when a woman comes to
me and says hey, I need a sponsor or some mentorship, I’m OK to do that today. I don’t
do the exclusivity that some people around this area seem to do with sponsorship. I don’t
call them sponsees, I find that very degrading. I know that when I came in here and they
called me a young lady and a woman for the very first time in Alcoholics Anonymous,
here we are, you know um, I know that our self esteem comes from within and our love
comes from within, but it was somebody on the outside going, you are a young woman
and a young lady, whether you think so or not, whether you believe it or not, you are a
beautiful woman and a child of god. And I went, huh? Just a half inch of—it’s I don’t
know, what’s the word? Where somebody else lifted me up and I was able to step up just
a little bit more. Somebody opened that door and I was able to push it just a little bit more
open. Wow, you mean I have some use here? Um, so I don’t call them sponsees, a lot of people around here call them sponsees, I had a lady ask me, well what do you call them then? I said, I call them by name, ladies, women, what…and they’re like, oh, yeah. And I piss a lot of people off because I’m very confident in my beliefs. I earned my beliefs the hard way, I got them—you know, I’m one of the blessed people of alcoholics anonymous, I took one bong hit after I walked through the doors of alcoholics anonymous, that was my relapse, quote/unquote relapse. You know, I took one bong hit—it was killer dope, that was the best dope I ever smoked—I was baked, one bong hit and I was baked. But by the grace of alcoholics anonymous, god and alcoholics anonymous, I haven’t had to drink or use since then. But, that’s I believe that my program, the program that I work, is why I am sober. Because I am very clear about, if you’re not honest you’ll get loaded and die. Dishonest, loaded, dead, ok…break law, loaded, dead. Fuck around on husband, loaded, dead. You know, that’s my, that’s where I go. I don’t know if that makes any sense. I don’t know if I answered the right question.

R37: Yeah, it’s fine. I feel like I know what you mean, but I want you to say it so I can make sure. When you say that calling them sponsees is degrading—

P37: I find it degrading, yes.

R38: Why?

P38: Because um, I believe it—I view it as name calling.

R39: Like, putting someone in their place?

P39: It’s degrading. To me it’s no different and, forgive me to call someone a sponsee is no different than me calling them the N word. It’s degrading. Because we come in here damaged already. I came in here with self-esteem that was whale shit. Dig deeper than whale shit, whatever’s 20 feet deeper than whale shit, I believed that was where I belonged. And…you know, now you’re going to call me a baby or a sponsee? And now you’re going to tell me well, now you’re just going to hang out with women—fuck you! You’re going to kill me! And now you’re going to tell me I’m somebodies sponsee? And one of the observations I make today—and this is just an observation, right or wrong, doesn’t matter, but I see newcomers—I see women going, hi, I’d like to introduce you to my sponsee over here, and what she’s saying, what this woman is saying is, I don’t have
enough—I’m not good enough myself, I need you to understand that I sponsor, that I’ve
been sober long enough to sponsor, that I’m a good enough person to sponsor, that I work
a good program, and this thing has just become an identity, a form, a lifeless form. And
now what I’ve done is I’ve taken this human, this sick, sad, scared, miserable dying
fucking being, and reduced them to something that makes me look better. And now I
have all of these little molded, melted sponsees, in my little stable of sponsees. And it’s
like, no, they lifted me up when I walked in, they called me a lady. Me! A lady! They
called me a woman. They called me a woman, they didn’t call me a whore or a cunt,
which is what I was. Because that’s what I am. They called me a lady. And they went,
here, we believe in you. Come on, let us love you until you can learn to love yourself.
And nowadays it’s like, just stay down. It mortifies me. I find alcoholics anonymous
today a level of tragic—a tragedy. And then it’s like, I don’t know. You know…and then
oh, sobriety dates. Somebody asked me yesterday, so how much time you got? It was a
guy, and I was like, wait a minute, that’s none of your fucking business. What it is, is,
how much time you got? We’re figuring out whose going to be in the power position.
Who’s gonna be in this power position? Who’s gonna be the sponsor and who’s gonna be
the sponsee. Who’s gonna be the mentor, who’s gonna be the mentee. Wait a minute!
We’re all shoulder to shoulder in this universe! We’re doing language of the heart here, it
doesn’t matter who’s got more time than us, you know. It’s like, unless I’ve got more
time than you my self esteem isn’t intact. And that’s not how I sponsor. I don’t have to
sponsor half the county to have self-esteem. I don’t have to tell you my sobriety date just
to have self-esteem. In fact, I’ve had more people—I’ve had more people um, look down
their nose at me because of the amount of time I have, because I’m supposed to act better
with this amount of sobriety. I’m not supposed to—you know, gee, if I had you’re
sobriety I’d fucking be loaded—if you had my sobriety you’d fucking be alive, you prick.
But you get these snot-nosed newcomers, and you just gently remind them, it’s ok, you
will never ever have to worry about having this much time with that attitude.
R40: Wow, that’s—I never thought about that. That it could be used to sort of, beat you
with.
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P40: Oh yeah, I get told, how in the world could you possibly understand how I feel at one week sober, how could you possibly remember that? Oh, believe me, I remember it. I remember it like it was yesterday because I remember my last drunk. S-Lodge, room 125. I can tell you the story. I can tell you about all the blood on the walls and the mirror. But yeah, but that’s a little bit of my experience.

R41: But you do sponsor though, you just don’t call those women your sponsees?

They’re women. They’re ladies. Are they friends?

P41: If I introduce—generally if I’m out in public, just out of respect for people’s level of privacy, and just being considerate, I’ll generally introduce, hey this is my friend Suzy, or whatever—I don’t generally think it’s anybody’s business who I sponsor. If you want to tell somebody I sponsor you I don’t care, that’s fine I have no problem with it. But I don’t believe it’s my place to tell people who I sponsor, I mean, that’s between me and her. That’s a private relationship, that’s a private thing. Um, it’s not super secret squirrel confidential, but I’ve also had people go oh, B’s your sponsor? Ew. Cause I’m kind of a hard nose. But you know what they say about hard noses. You know what’s the difference between hard noses and others?

R42: Tell me.

P42: Hard noses stay sober.

R43: So when you do book work, it can be like a spontaneous, let’s just crack the book. This doesn’t mean that we’re like, getting married or—

P43: Right, no. Nor does it mean I’m going to marry your firstborn male child. It’s a fucking book! It’s no different than saying oh, here’s the bible. We’re having a conversation, it’s like, we watched Noah last night on television, whose Methuselah?

Let’s find out, open the bible—it wasn’t in there, but. Oh, you’re having a resentment, whether it’s male, female or ape, I don’t care, I’m not prejudiced, I’ll do steps with anybody. What’s the line, I’m sorry, was there a rule? There’s not. Um, and then what happens, inevitably, inevitably followed by still—it’s not inevitable, but I’ve had it happen just recently, where somebody’s sponsor comes to me and says, now, now! Don’t you worry, she’s on-duh-duh-duh, and she’s working on this step. Just recently I had this woman, and she’s bounced in and out, but she can’t stay sober. And I said, you need to
do an inventory—she’s never done one, never done one! Always spends six months on
step one, but believe me she knows she’s an addict, and I said to her, you might want to
start a fourth step—and that was all I ever said to her, and her sponsor came to me
specifically and said, now so and so is—we’ve got her working on step one and don’t you
worry about it, you need to just not worry about her, I’m on top of it. And I just went,
OK.
R44: So that’s that ownership thing. I mean, as though that woman couldn’t say it to
you—or couldn’t, I mean, if she didn’t want your opinion, she could say, thanks for your
opinion, but—
P44: Yeah, but she keeps reaching out to me!
R45: But then her babysitter would come and intercede on her behalf.
P45: Her owner! What they do is they take an ownership today. And its like, wow, this
isn’t about getting a new puppy. It’s about trudging the road of happy destiny together.
We’re in the same boat. We’re all in the same—there is no us and them. But yeah, it’s
interesting. And I piss a lot of people off. There are a lot of people in this area that don’t
like me because I piss a lot of people off. And I’m ok with that. My ego is, my happiness
and my serenity and my ego does not depend on their acceptance in any way, shape or
form. I’m a good person, I know I’m a good person.
R46: So you have the strength of your convictions, you said that you earned your
opinions and it works. But you also, I imagine, need support. So how do you get support?
P46: I have support. My sponsor and my mentors are people that have thirty-plus years of
sobriety. My sponsor got sober the same way I did. She got drug out of a motel room. But
see what…you know, this was sober back then. It’s different today. And us old people,
we talk about the same—believe me, we all bitch about the snot-nosed newcomers and
we all say the same thing—that AA has changed. And the women that I run with, these
are women that are not medicated, that are not, you know—that don’t go—these are
women that…I don’t know. I don’t know where I was going with that.
R47: So you have—you’re entire adult life has been sober.
P47: Yes. I’ve never bought a legal drink.
R48: Yeah, which is like—I mean that’s just an interesting experience. And I’m wondering now, if this is a product of AA being different or being watered down. Because what you’re saying is, you get a lot of women talking about how they need young people’s meetings, or women’s meetings because they get shit from the oldtimers who say, “I spilled more than you drank,” or whatever, but that doesn’t sound like it’s part of your story.

P48: I disagree with it entirely. I think that young people’s meetings are terrible. I think it’s a terrible idea to have a young people’s meeting, then you have a whole bunch of young people—they herd! They herd and they pack up like wild dogs, and then they do things like think! (laughter) And they have things like ideas, you know? And I think um—you know, then they think hey, let’s have a volleyball game! And then she’s hurt and he breaks his and it’s all his fault and then he’s fucking her and she’s fucking him and then the whole group is involved. And I just sit back and go, well, what did you expect? Yeah, and I mean, there’s a time and a place—yeah. I’m very grateful that they didn’t have young people’s meetings in AA or NA when I got sober, because it would have just allowed me to stay in my own shitty behavior. I had adults that were lifting me up, that were raising my bar, that were saying no, B-, we don’t behave that way. No, B-, we don’t flash tits in our meetings. Yes, that’s what I was doing. No B-, we don’t steal the seventh tradition. Nowadays they want to take you to jail for stealing the seventh tradition! In my day, when I stole the seventh tradition they said pay it back! And now they don’t let them be treasurer anymore—I was forced to stay the treasurer because number one, they knew I’d never steal again and number two, they knew that I’d never steal it again! And that’s how I learned cash register honesty. That’s how they taught me, was forcing me. They didn’t give me a choice—I’ll turn over the treasury because I’m just getting honest and I need to make an amends and I need to not be the treasurer anymore—no! You’re going to keep doing it and you’re going to learn how to be honest and you’re going to learn to resist the urge to steal that money. And you’re going to learn things like financial responsibility and you’re going to get a fucking job and you’re going to pay your way and you’re going to keep that money separate from your money. Oh, oh.
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R49: You know what that makes me think of, and this is something that I was trying to formulate the other day—so, a lot of people say, well I use AA everywhere in my life. But you’re actually talking about um—AA isn’t like, something that happens when you go to a meeting. You’re living AA 24 hours a day.
P49: Don’t apply the steps to your life, apply your life to the steps.
R50: Yeah, there’s something to that. So that then, I mean like, your sponsor taking you grocery shopping when you’re seventeen and you don’t know how, is program.
P50: I didn’t admit that. I didn’t admit that—I watched her. She went grocery shopping and I watched her. Nowadays they say, put your hand in your sponsor’s pocket, so I’d hang out with these oldtimers—it wasn’t just my sponsor, it was anybody. So I’d hang out with her, she’d go grocery shopping—I mean, I was never outright about it, like, I don’t know how to grocery shop, but I’d do things like, stand back and watch. You know. And I’d do things like come over here and sneak in and look at that grocery list, like, what do people put on grocery lists? What do real people, what do normal people eat for dinner? Oh wow, she put tampons on her grocery list. You mean, you don’t shoplift those? Holy shit, she put them in the basket! Who knew! That’s how it was for me.
R51: And that was like—that’s part of your program is learning how to be a human being.
P51: That is the program. All of these girls coming in that I sponsor and I mentor, they don’t know it either. They’re not ignoring us when they’re over here talking to the boys. They’re backing up listening to our conversations listening. We’re not going to admit, hey I don’t know a goddamn fucking thing about having a relationship, so what I’m going to do is I’m gonna back up to this man and this woman and I’m gonna watch them, because I’m not going to admit that I don’t know how to have a marriage, they watch, they watch. That’s why it’s so important for us to model good behavior for our children and model good behavior. I don’t care how fricking good you can look for an hour in that meeting. I want to know what your house looks like, I want to know what you do—you know, any time you walk through that door—now, I haven’t had a home in a while. I have one now, um, anytime you walk through my door I’m gonna be pretty much doing the same damn thing. That means that it’s perfectly OK for you to show up unannounced.
Because B- is gonna be there hanging out doing something. Probably doing her laundry. There’s probably a coffee pot, or coffee made somewhere. If not there will be coffee shortly. Or a cup of tea. And there’s food in the fridge. And there’s probably a big book somewhere near by. And that’s the way I was raised. You have a big book in every fucking room. And if you don’t, there’s something seriously wrong with you. Why don’t you have a big book in every room? Why don’t you have a meditation book sitting next to your toilet? Cause if nothing else, there is two things you’re gonna do regularly every day, and that’s poop and read the meditation book. And when I got sober it was the 24 hour a day book and that’s still what I read. It’s not next to my toilet though. Not yet. It was in my last house though. I didn’t have a toilet until recently. You know, that’s what you do. And if you don’t, why not? I’ve got a big book in my saddle bag.

R52: There’s just, um…loving—like, you really, you know a lot of the stuff gets said so much I think maybe people stop hearing it. Like, practice these principles in all our affairs, like all the time—you’re always doing the work.

P52: Want to know what happens when I don’t? I start to think. Roulette wheel, ball falls in the slot—ah, maybe, maybe I should move to Montana. Gee I think I’ll—oh god, it’s always dangerous when B- has that, gee, I think I’ll—anything. Maybe I should—god, what now? She’s thinking!

R53: Well, how do you function if—I mean, you do have to make choices.

P53: Sure.

R54: Whether you pray about the first, or talk to your sponsor, you do have to make choices.

P54: About what?

R55: I don’t know—

P55: About whether or not to poop? I know when I have to poop.

R56: OK, so for example, you’ve talked about school, like for you, you were forced to go to school. Some people have to make that choice themselves for whatever reason, or whether to have a baby, or whatever.
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P56: Why? My friend T- decided to have a baby. They don’t have a baby yet, but he sure made that decision. I can plan the plan, I can make a plan. I don’t plan the outcome though.

R57: But you have to think to make a plan.

P57: Not necessarily. I take a group conscience. When you’ve got fifteen people saying B-, you need to go to school, I think it’s probably a good idea to go to school.

R58: So you rely on your mentors and your sponsor.

P58: Yeah, because god speaks to me through others. If I had fifteen people saying, B-, I think it’s a really good idea for your to go jump off that bridge, I would probably think about it.

R59: So when you say you get in trouble when you start musing, like, what if I move out of B-, I’m not that comfortable here, it’s too liberal, then you would run that by your sponsor and maybe a handful of other people you trust.

P59: Sure, and the first thing I’d do is I’d go, I’m thinking about moving out of Bellingham, and the first question in her mind—out of her mouth better be, why? Well, because I just really don’t like it here. Which is exactly how I got here. And so, because I just really don’t like it here. Well, have you prayed about it? Yeah. OK, well do you have a job somewhere else? Do you have a place to live somewhere else? Well, no. OK, how about if we just try first, apply for a job in Denver, for example. And then if you actually get a job, then maybe that’s an indicator that a door is opening there.

R60: So this is like, this is as practical as learning how to grocery shop from somebody who knows how to do it. You rely on people for that kind of practical guidance, checking your motives.

P60: Well, I mean, I do it myself because I was taught. This is what I was taught—I’m thinking about moving to Oregon, ok why? Well, number one, there’s a school there that I can go to. Number two, there’s a him. There’s always a him. Sometimes moving is a really good idea. But believe me, I don’t think about drinking too much today. But I certainly think about loading up my saddle bags and going on the road. Oh man, I could do that. Yeah, you know what, San Diego looks really nice, really nice. Or someplace
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shortly there out of. Because it ain’t here. Here I have these feelings about Jeff, about
work, about them about love about this about that, about AA.

R61: So you’re also talking about—it sounds like you’ve learned to slow yourself down
and have your default setting be to not do anything.

P61: When in doubt, punt. When in doubt, do nothing. Yeah. When I’m having second
thoughts, god gives us a feather or a brick, you know. A feather or a brick. My sponsor
said, gee B-, you might want to wait to marry him. There’s a 500 pound gorilla at the end
of that road. It’s ok, I know how to get around him this time. And 95 days later he was
laying dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the brain. In my bathroom. People are
sometimes quite right about my life. I made the decision to marry him. Decisions based
in self. But he’s so nice! And I love him and he loves me! That’s where my decision-
making skills get me. And he was wonderful. And I was convinced, he was amazing. Had
a good job, new house, new car, new bike. Handsome as the day is long, god, he was
great in bed. Fabulous guy, he was charming, didn’t have a gray hair in his head. Didn’t
have a fucking gray hair in that man’s head. And he didn’t have a gray hair when he was
laying dead in the bathroom either. And that’s what twenty years of sobriety can get me.
This is not—my problem is not alcohol. Alcohol is not our problem. I have a problem
with my head. Seventeen years sober, and I’m running in self. Me thinking about me.

How are we doing so far?

R62: Good! I knew I wanted to hear your perspective, because um—I’m trying not to
overthink this, I’m trying to just take it in.

P62: I can only suppose that I have a lot of different beliefs than other people.

R63: Well, I mean in some ways. But there’s just something so, like—

P63: Redneck.

R64: Just totally practical. Just practical. Which is—

P64: When you’re hungry eat. When you’re sad, cry. When you’re horny, jack off or get
laid (laughter). But for god sakes, when you’re an alcoholic don’t drink because you’ll
die. If you’re lonely, reach out. If you’re scared, get on your knees and reach out. And
remember, always that no matter what, it’s gonna be ok. God’s not gonna drop me on my
head. But don’t drink or use. Just don’t drink or use and there’s hope.
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R65: So, there’s no thinking required in that recipe.
P65: There is none. Drinking and using is no longer an option for me. Thank god for that one. Now, I could sit here and think about drinking. Geez, a bottle of this and a bottle of that—and nowadays that have very pretty little bottles, they’ve got blue bottles and green bottles—they’ve got whipped cream flavored vodka for god’s sake! Do you know what a cream-sickle would taste like? Getting shitfaced and knee-walking drunk in a five thousand dollar ball gown? Drinking vodka-whipped cream flavored creamsicles? I can mentally masturbate. I can sit her like, fuck! Even I want a drink! I’m really curious to know what Zima’s taste like! Or what is that other shit? It’s got a long name—Jagermeister! We didn’t have that! But I’ve heard it tastes like black licorice. I’d just hurl. You know. And I mean, they make it very pretty now days. And if I sit here long enough and play with the idea, sure I want to drink. And that’s part of the problem. We’ve got people coming in here, and they’re fucking dying, and they’re wanting to die and wanting to drink and not knowing whether to wind their butt or scratch their watches. And then people say, now you need to spend at least 40 days doing your first step, you know? So 45 days later and this little fuckstick can’t figure out why he’s calling his dealer—this was my experience last week—little whatzisface, so I said fine, call your dealer here’s a phone. And he said, but that’s not really what I want, and I said, so then are you ready to get into some work? And I put him into the big book and said, ok, and we went all the way through the big book into step four, got him into step four and then he calls his sponsor—his year and half sober snot-nosed sponsor, snot-nosed newcomer sponsor says, no, no, no! You’re working on step one! This kid is almost a year and a half sober and has never done an inventory, and he’s calling me going, B-, what the fuck do I do? And I bit my tongue, out of respect for—and I went against my better judgment, and I’m kind of kicking myself, and said, you do what your sponsor tells you.

R66: So it sounds like—and I’m sort of reading between the lines here, but it sounds like you don’t like a lot of people, but you’ll help anybody.
P66: Absolutely. I don’t have to like you. They didn’t like me! And I had people there, and they looked beyond the bitch that I was—I couldn’t carry on a conversation without using fifteen different four-letter words—
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R67: So, that’s probably the area where you’ve made the least progress (laughter). I’m kidding.

P67: Hey! Water seeks it’s own level, pumpkin. You know, if I could quit swearing, I’d probably get my way into heaven. I was hanging out with my little Christian friends. They’re very like—pray before food, and pray before—everything’s praying. Anyway, I absolutely lost my train of thought. Oh yeah, I said, I said I’d be a great Christian if only I could quit cussing! And then I throw funny little words at them like, god is either everything or he is nothing. And Joel, he’s really Christian, he’s a great guy, I really admire him. And actually we were talking about Jeff and, god is either everything or he is nothing and I get to hit them with some AA stuff and we’re all singing the same tune. God is either everything or I’d be dead. I have experiential knowledge, they have theoretical knowledge. I have experience, they have—experience versus, what’s the other one?

R68: Oh…I’m not sure what word you’re looking for, but you mean experience versus like, insight?


R69: The story of the orgasm? I’m not sure I’ve heard this.

P69: Anybody can study the book, the big book, it’s like, twin boys want to learn about an orgasm. One goes to school, he goes all through college and gets a PhD and learns all the physiological aspects of an orgasm. And his twin brother goes and gets a girlfriend (laughter). Knowledge, experience. I have a lot, a lot of experience. And actually, that’s another piece of me. Um…I’ve buried both my parents, I’ve buried two men, I’ve buried a brother. I’ve been through car wrecks and deaths and cancer. I’ve survived cancer twice. Stupid little piece of shit cancer, but I’m a survivor they tell me. And surgeries and painkillers and love and hate and work and no work….success, failure, food no food.

Rich, poor. I’ve done it all—sober. I haven’t jumped out of a plane yet. I have a shit ton, as they say nowadays, of experience. And I’ve, by the grace of god and alcoholics anonymous alone, I’ve been allowed—allowed to stay sober through him, and clean. And um, had the big AA wedding and the big AA divorce. A couple of them. Working on one now. And uh, it’ll be OK. And I know that no matter what, it’ll be OK. Just don’t drink or
use. And I learned a very good lesson seeing my husband who, eleven days prior, celebrated 20 years of stone cold clean and sober—or so he said—eleven days after he turned 20 years sober, he ate a shotgun in my bathroom. My freshly remodeled, redecorated bathroom, did I mention that? I looked forever for a throw rug for that bathroom. I was pissed. I’m still pissed about the carpet. I’m still pissed. Sorry, it’s a resentment. I refuse to give it up. Just in principle. He was a piece of shit, but god dammit I liked the carpet. Um, and that’s the deal. And what that did was—all kidding aside, I saw this person who was 20 years stone cold mother fucking sober, this ain’t about drinking. OK. Wow. You know, it told me a lot. That you know, is sober, aint sober. Is honest, aint honest. He wasn’t working program, he wasn’t practicing principles. Honesty, integrity, willingness. He was looking really good. Man we were doing high profile AA and going to meetings and being of service, chairing meetings, by god, we were looking really good in the rooms of alcoholics anonymous. But he wasn’t being honest, he was leading a double life. See, it all came out after he died, the truth. And the truth was, he had his recovery life, the people in recovery that knew him as Mr. Clean plumber Dave. And then there was the reality, and the reality was way different. And I got to learn very up close and personal that this is do it or die. And it was god reminding me 17 years sober, that I ain’t out of the woods. Nobodies out of the woods in this deal. You don’t hit some amount of sober time and think, ok, I’ve made it, I can relax now. And I always thought that was how it was. That some day, you crossed that line of…but you don’t.

R70: So it must be hard for you—I mean, I don’t know that it’s like a struggle, but it sounds like it comes up sometimes—I’m interested in the example of this guy whose really in danger of relapsing and he comes to you for help and repeatedly he’s reaching out to you, and you try to help him—

P70: I offer him what was given to me.

R71: You offer him what was given to you—which, you have like, shit tons of evidence that it works—and you really like, want to give it away, and yet at the same time, you have to say, or for whatever reason you say, ok listen to your sponsor.
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P71: You know why? You know why I don’t fight it? It’s a very sticky place…he’s on mental health meds. He’s on antidepressants. And we are not doctors, and if I say a word pretty soon somebodies going to be on the the phone to B-, saying B-, you’re not a doctor!

R72: Oh. And you’ve got to—I mean, those kinds of guidelines exist for a reason, because there’s got to be a part of your mind where you don’t know—you’ve got to have humility, right? So I have—you can only give away what you have, and the experience you’ve had and what has worked for you. But you can’t insist that you have—

P72: The answer?

R73: For everybody. Yeah.

P73: You’re right. You’re right.

R74: I mean, it sounds like a place of tension.

P74: You’re right. Yesterday—where was I, yesterday I was riding my motorcycle.

Before D- killed himself he had been in a motorcycle accident. I have PTSD really bad.
And as I’m riding, because I ended up riding with some people and I didn’t really want to, but as I’m riding I’m in the same position I was in when I watched Dave dive off of his motorcycle in an effort to commit suicide. He crashed his motorcycle before he committed suicide, trying to kill himself. Hindsight’s 20/20. So is inventory. And I was having flashbacks on my bike yesterday. It was wild, they were pretty bad. And it’s like, wow, I get the opportunity to learn how to walk myself through that and bring myself back. And I can ask god, like it says in the big book on page whatever the hell it is because I’m a really bad big book quoter, and it says, we pause when agitated or doubtful and ask for the right thought or inspiration, and here we go, I’m having flashbacks, and I know what’s going on because I’ve got some self-knowledge. I know, I recognize what’s going on. OK well, what do I need to do? Do I need to pull over and focus myself and get my shit together, if you will? What do I need to do? And I say, god damn it B-, your brain is still alive and well, so I say, OK god, walk me through this, don’t let me run into anybody. And it’s like, ok, well, if the guy up there crashes he crashes, you know, my visualization was somebody flopping down the highway at 90 miles an hour, you know. And it’s like, well, wow, the PTSD is still alive and well. And then anxiety attacks, the
last one was just driving my car, and my heart goes, bumpity, bumpity, ahh! Wow! OK, what’s really going on here? That’s what I did yesterday, what’s going on here? OK, well, I’ve watched a lot of people crash, I’m sick of watching people die. OK, well, I’ve been through this, what’s really going on here, well, the odds of that guy up there crashing are slim to none. OK, why is my heart going like this, well, I’m going into an anxiety-ridden circumstance. A very intense situation, and well, OK, of course you’re having an anxiety attack. Nowadays we call it anxiety, in the big book they call it fear. Nowadays they call it depression, in the big book we call it self-pity. But don’t you see…I have issues! You know, I can issue myself right into the fucking grave. And that’s what I see people doing. Baby S, god bless her, she’s issuing herself into the fucking grave. Mama S—did it last year. I have issues! I have um, I have—we used to call it dual diagnosis—I have a co-occurring disorder! Yeah, the big book works for that too, pumpkin! And then, there is a line, that you were talking about. My friend Billy, when he didn’t take his happy pills he would talk to his hands and they would answer. And he would be in meetings having conversations with his hands. There is a time and a place for mental health meds, absolutely, oh god yes. But what Billy did is when he got sober he worked with his doctor, and he did a complete physical inventory with his doctor and I don’t know that he got completely off, but he got a baseline, and I don’t know how to talk about it right, but he got a baseline so he knew, what is the right level of meds for Billy—

So that he could do the program—

So for you it’s important to not, not use meds as a crutch instead of the steps.

What’s important to me is that we give the program and opportunity to work first and then if we still need meds—because this is a program, this is a book that doesn’t information, this book transmits a spiritual experience. It transmits an experience, spiritual, a phenomenon, that is beyond stuff we can comprehend. I’ve seen it give people their eyesight back. I’ve seen it create lives. I’ve seen people go from railroad cars to Boeing executives. I’ve seen me go from a dope-shooting two dollar loser, a whore, to where I am today. Which is, oh yeah, unemployed, unloved…almost divorced. Yeah, I’m a high quality person today and you can be like me! I’m kidding. I actually have a really
good life. I’m blessed beyond my wildest dreams. Anything I deserve, that’s for damn sure. But I just encourage people to do that physical inventory. Because most of the time—and it talks about this in the big book—most of the time we ain’t being honest with my psychiatrist anyway! Because you show me somebody—how can you have any integrity in your diagnosis of bipolar if you don’t know this guy shot half a pound of meth into his arm before he walked into your office? Well, he’s not going to tell you but he walks in and goes—and he ‘s talking to trees. And of course you’re going to diagnose bipolar. But they’re very quick to diagnose bipolar and get those pills into them. And also I think, I blame a lot of it on the pharmaceutical companies and I also blame a lot of it on the doctors, because these days it’s more easier to—it’s easy for you to walk into my office and me to go, OK, take this pill, it will help. Instead of getting down to the causes and conditions and going, really, huh, I’m looking at your eyes, you’re looking a little spooked out, when was the last time you shot some meth? I don’t smoke meth! Oh yeah? Let’s call mom. Hey, mom is Junior—junior is so strung out he doesn’t know whether to shit twice or die! You know, let’s get down to the honesty. Because I don’t know about you, but I feel better when they get that prescription pad out.

R77: Do you encourage your sp—your ladies you work with (laughter)—
P77: It’s hard isn’t it?

R78: It is hard. Because it’s pervasive, it’s everywhere. But I really like the idea of not labeling, it’s more communal, like we’re all in this together.
P78: It’s loving. It’s about love, love is the answer.

R79: Yeah. So when somebody has asked you to be their sponsor or their mentor, or they say they’re working with you, do you encourage them to not take medication?
P79: I don’t encourage them one way or the other. I don’t tend to go into a sponsorship relationships, I will keep my distance with people that do meds. I’m sick of going there, I’m sick of it. I’m sick of it. And so um, what I do encourage everybody is, I encourage everybody, gay or straight to do a sex inventory. And on the lesbians that I’ve sponsored or the bisexuals that I’ve sponsored, they say that I’m only saying that because they’re gay. And then I encourage everybody to do a physical inventory—how’s my body, what am I putting into my body, how’s my food? Am I getting enough exercise, how’s my
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food pyramid? Because this is the stuff that I was taught. I gained about ten extra pounds
the last couple of months. I got my ass to the gym this morning. That’s my physical
inventory, it’s called being honest. Rigorous honesty involves my body. When was the
last time you went to the doctor and had an annual exam? What’s your doctor telling you,
what’s your blood sugar? And part of that is what kind of medications am I putting into
my body? Am I overusing ibuprofen? Am I taking vitamins? I’ve never taken vitamins
which is probably bad which is probably why my back is breaking. I don’t encourage one
way or the other, and when I run into, when I start talking about—you need to do the
physical inventory, you need to do the meds inventory with your doctor and take a look at
that stuff, um, anybody on meds says, you’re just saying that cuz you’re antimeds! And I
say, leave. Fuck you. What I have seen, my observation is um—I don’t know how to say
it because I don’t talk about it too much…I needed to—for me, I need to feel, and I
needed to feel like that absolute piece of whale shit, bottom of the barrel, I needed every
fucking feeling, every—all of that snot slinging emotion, fetal position on the couch for a
year—which I did—I needed that. And what I needed was, when they finally got sick of
listening to me whine—gosh B-, is it possible maybe it’s time to do some inventory
again. I needed that emotion, those feelings. I needed to be present for those feelings
because that pain, that gut-wrenching hellfire fuck the world pain is what motivated me
to get better. And it is my observation that we’ve got a whole shit ton full of people
coming in now that are medicated that don’t feel that level of pain so we’ve got them not
getting any better. So like such and such last week, sitting there getting ready to call his
dope dealer because he’s not feeling the pain. But don’t you know, I have anxiety issues!
If I go off my meds I totally won’t be—if I go off my meds I can’t be a mom to my kid!
And I go, and if you’re dead you can’t be a mom to your kids either, because you’re
going to be shooting dope in a fucking gallery again and you’re going to be dead of a
heroin overdose. Oh, but god dammnit you be present for that kid on the painkillers, the
antidepressants or whatever. If I don’t take my antidepressants I’ll end up on the couch
and I can’t be a mom to my kid. I’m like, you know what, we are two fucking blocks
away from the emergency room if it gets that bad. We have this beautiful thing these days
called 911, if you get too crazy like a shithouse rat, we can call 911, we can call the guys
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with the rubber—with the butterfly nets. We’ll get you right back on them meds if you get that bad! But, that’s just outlandish, that B- would say such a thing. No! And what we’re talking about really, what it gets down to, when you cut through all of the bullshit it boils down to one word. Fear. Fear. That’s OK, we’ve got a step for that. Oh, my god, what if I find myself depressed. What if I try to kill myself? I promise you, if you try to kill yourself we’ll get you to the hospital. If you really want to kill yourself you won’t tell anybody and you’ll go do it. I’ve seen that. They’re not calling their sponsor saying, I’m thinking about killing myself, you know? But they use that big S word, and we’re so afraid of that S word—I’m going to commit suicide! And the last person on earth I’m going to call if I want to commit suicide or drink is my fucking sponsor! I’m gonna go hang myself in the god damn closet! With a bottle! That’s what I’m gonna do if I want to drink. If I wanna drink I’m certainly not calling you. That’s what I told whatzizbutt the other day. I said, if you really wanted to use or drink you wouldn’t be on the phone with me. I said, you’re doing attention getting behavior. I am? I said, yes! Because you sure wouldn’t be talking to that bitch, B-, he said, my god, you’re right. I said, yeah, you really want to go get loaded? He said, no. I said, you’re right. Try a fucking inventory.

Well, my sponsor put me on step one, what do I do? Shoot your sponsor? Kill yourself? And what do I tell him? Do whatever your sponsor says. Try not to get loaded while you’re spending six months on step way, like you’ve been spending a year and a half on step one. God I’m an asshole.

R80: Well, I mean, you kind of have an obligation to share what you know.

P80: That’s all I’ve got.

R81: So, we’ve been talking for an hour and a half, but there’s one thing I want to ask you. You’ve kind of been talking about it, but so AA has changed and not for the better in your opinion. So there are all kinds of challenges and you get frustrated and you have to deal with that. So, how do you choose a meeting? How do YOU choose a meeting? You look at the schedule, given this watered down state of AA, how do you choose a meeting? P81: There’s no such thing as a bad meeting. Um, talks about it on page whatever in the fourth edition. The glass in my glass I backwards, you know, I can go in seeing all the bad shit in the meeting, or I can go in going hey, what can I contribute? See, if I’m just
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going in to take and you fuckers aren’t giving me anything, then I go fuck you I’m outta here. If I go in going what do I have to contribute? To give? Gee, do I get to hear something? I get to hear something. There’s no bad meetings. There are meetings that I prefer. Um, because some of them tend to get a little rutty, same person saying the same thing. I got a good taste of him today, he pissed me off. But anyway, I know what it looks like inside of his house. And I know he doesn’t practice what he preaches. He looks really good sitting in meetings with his time, but he doesn’t have a sponsor, he doesn’t work steps, he doesn’t do twelve step work. I know because I called him today about a twelve step call and he couldn’t be bothered. And believe me I wanted to tell him just what I thought, and I didn’t because I had a really hardcore twelve step call on the phone and I needed to deal with it. But believe me, I will do some serious praying for him! And if I knew who his sponsor, if he had a sponsor I would be on the god damn phone with him.

R82: So it sounds like sometimes you choose meetings not because they’re good but because you feel like you have something to offer.
P82: I choose meetings because—I just sort of end up at meetings. What part of town am I in? What day is it? Um, you know? It’s 9 on a Saturday, well the only thing available is—ok, do you want to go to a meeting Friday night what’s available? Amd I taking the car or the bike, if I’m taking the bike I might go a little further. God puts me where I’m supposed to be. I’ve walked into a men’s meeting before and been welcomed! That’s another thing they don’t do that they used to do. I walk into a men’s meeting and I’m like, I’m sorry I didn’t realize this was a men’s meeting—I’m out of here, and they’re like, no no no! If your ass is falling off, you’re welcome to stay.

R83: I saw that happen in Pittsburgh at a women’s meeting, a man showed up.
P83: You think that’ll happen here?

R84: It won’t? People are going to protect their women’s meeting?
P84: Nope. Principles before personalities.

R85: I was so impressed when I watched that happen, there was not a woman in there—
P85: Principles before personalities. But you won’t see that here. I’ve had elder members tell me that they won’t listen—won’t talk to a wet drunk on the phone. Because I do the
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twelve step all list, and she’s like, if they’re still drunk don’t call me. I’ve watched
people…you know, oh just take them to a meeting. Back in the old days we didn’t take
them to meetings until they had at least a week sober. Nowadays it’s like, let’s take them
to a meeting! It’s like, wait a minute, the guy is still half shitfaced!!

R86: So what are you doing there? You get a twelve step call and then—
P86: Sober them up on your couch!

R87: Sober them up and then you get them in the book?
P87: 24 hours! Age limits don’t—there’s not age limit, time limit, this whole, how much
time you got is made up, man made. Somebody’s opinion, you know—men work with
men, women work with women—somebodies opinion! No relationships in the first year
of sobriety—somebodies opinion! That aint in the book. None of that is in the book! Why
aren’t you on the twelve step call list? Because I’m not on the twelfth step yet, I’m still
working on step one—you’ve been sober for fifteen years!

Ew. OK, I’m gonna go play over here where people stay sober. I’m asshole. I’m not
worried about being an asshole today.

R88: Well, you’re not afraid to speak up.
P88: nobody was afraid to tell me the truth, in fact—somebody said, you know I would
rather tell somebody the truth and have them hate me than to give them a sunshine enema
and watch them fucking die. And they loved me enough to tell me the truth. Whether it
hurt my feelings or not. Like, I totally have boundaries today! What the fuck is a
boundary?? Let me know how that boundary works for you when you’re shitfaced.

R89: Is there anything else you think I need to think about in my efforts to describe
sobriety?
P89: No, I just think that we need to have a movement in AA. We need a whole bunch of
people singing the same tune. And there’s a few of us. There’s two meetings in this town
that do it, that spiritual honesty, that rigorous honesty. Nowadays you have spiritual
permission, but you get enough people out there with spiritual honesty and somebody’s
gonna get sober! Um, all I know is that, all I can do is teach the women that I sponsor and
teach the women that I mentor and say hey, this is what I’ve done. This has managed to
work for me for…a while. You know?
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921 [End of interview].
R1: OK, so we’re recording. This is really straight-forward, Please talk about your
experience in Alcoholics Anonymous and your experience working the steps with a
sponsor. Feel free to share anything you think will help me understand what it was like
getting sober as a woman in Alcoholics Anonymous.
P1: Now?
R2: Yes, ready set go.
P2: OK. Hi, my name is J- and I’m an alcoholic. Um, my sobriety date is April the 22nd,
1979, so I’ve been sober over 35 years. Got sober in W, in B-. My first meeting was in B-
, and the way that came about is, I was raised in an alcoholic home. I had a violent
alcoholic father. He was a world war 2 veteran who had come back after seeing atrocities
that shouldn’t be seen my anybody. And I Now know that he was very mentally ill and
broken. He was like that as long as I knew him, but my mother reported that he was not
that way when she married him. Which may or may not have been true. She might not
have known because they weren’t married that long and he got enlisted. Um, so, my
parents—I was born in Rochester, in—my parents lived with my grandparents in
Rochester, and that is because my father had just gotten back from WW2 and they were
searching for—they didn’t have enough money to find a place of their own and my
grandparents had a very lovely, large home and invited them to stay there. So, I was born
subsequently after he was back for a while. And I came along and my father drank
probably to blot out his memories because he had PTSD and he suffered terrible
nightmares and terrible, terrible anxiety all of his life. But my grandparents had been
against my mother marrying this man because she hadn’t known him very long. He was
Scottish, he was born and raised in Scotland and had had lost his father when he was 8
years old so his mother saved up for about 9 years to emigrate to the US and she brought
her five children over here. They landed in Ellis Island and they lodged in New Jersey in
a two room tenement. So my father got here when he was 15 years old. And 100 percent
of all his siblings, he included, were alcoholic. His sister died as a result of an alcoholic
fall right before I was born. So, my father and mother were living with my grandparents.
I was born, my mother was really quite a narcissist and thought she was a princess that
should be waited on, so my grandmother took over my rearing, my childcare. I called my
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grandmother mom, I called my mother Helen. And my dad got some kind of job in a
bank, and he didn’t have a car, didn’t have a license, so he would ride with my
grandfather, go downtown and go to his job and return that same way. So I was exactly
15 months old to the day and my sister came along. And during this time my father’s
drinking had progressed to the point where it was apparently very obvious to everybody.
So they decided they’d move out west because they’d heard wonderful things about
California. So my father was bound for Riverside, and um, he left town soon after my
sister was born and he flew out to investigate getting a job in Riverside and sending for
us. Well, his plane laid over in Phoenix overnight, and he liked it so he never left. So
when my sister was 4 months old and I was 19 months old, my sister and mom and I flew
out to Phoenix and that’s where I was raised. And so, my mother was not cut out to be a
mother. Because she was the third of four sisters, and her mother was extraordinarily
capable, my mother was cut out to be waited on. She featured herself as the third of the
four sisters in Little Women, the sickly one, and she got attention by pretending—
because everybody doted on her, poor little sickly Helen. And she was always falling
down and having terrible contusions so people would feel sorry for her. And that
continued throughout her adult life as well. So my earliest remembrances were of my
sister being a baby, I was a little toddler about two, and I wasn’t walking to take naps.
And my mother would want to be lounging or reading a book and these teenage boys
would come over and ask if they could play with me and she didn’t find that odd. So they
would take me around the back—this all came to me, it came to me in sobriety. But
anyway, they would take me to a basement and it was dark and they would do things that
kids do to little kids at that age. So I grew up with this terror of boys, terror. And feeling I
was dirty and just awful and disgusting. And felt like the only person in my life that
possibly loved me because she told me so, was my mother. And my mother couldn’t
tolerate my sister and me fighting as little squabbling kids fighting over a toy. So she’d
quite often put on a jacket or a coat and leave J- and me, and say I can’t stand being
around you, I’m leaving. And we would toddle after her or get on our little tricycles and
beg her to come home. So by the time I was four, she was searching for full time work
when I was little was rare, because most mothers stayed home. So my mother went to
school, my mother went to work full time when I was four, and I went to school when I
was five. And our house was across the street from our grade school, so it was
convenient. My mom would see us go across the street and then she would leave for her
job. And my father would come home every day at about 5:15 because it took him 15
minutes to get off shift and drive home. And we were terrified of my father. He was
violent when he was drunk and when he was sober he was irritable, restless, discontent
and had no tolerance for children. So both my sister and I felt pretty unlovable that this
man could never, in our whole lives he never told us he loved us. He wasn’t capable of
showing love or—I’m sure he loved us, but we didn’t know it and we believed it was us
that caused him to drink. So um, my father grew increasingly violent when he would
drink and I would rush out of my bedroom, run down the hall to this little living room
that we had and I would stand in front of my mom and protect her from him. From the
tiniest, like, six years old. And she let me. Because I thought my job was to be my
mother’s protector. So I didn’t really have a childhood. And by the time I was seven she
was confiding everything in me, I was her only friend. So I knew stuff about…her misery
and her affairs with other men and how awful my father was. But she kept saying, I love
you J-, so I was committed to protecting my mother at all costs. My little sister was the
lost child and the clown in our family, because there was only two of us, and she would
hide under the bed when there was fighting, and she lived in an imaginary world and she
still does. Unfortunately. Um, so anyway. I grew up hating alcohol, hating everything
about alcohol, vowing I would never drink. And I did not drink all the way through high
school. I had a boyfriend, I um, had no religion per se. My mother would take us and
drop us off at a Sunday school, but then we’d get in the car and all the violence would
erupt and I’d think, well, that was nice but now what. No faith lived out in my home. So,
(coughing) excuse me, I have asthma, I’m sorry. So anyway, I grew up and um, was
terrified of boys. Found this boy in high school who liked me because I was a good
listener. I figured out if you could listen to people they wouldn’t ask you about yourself
and I’m a good listener. So, he had the gift of gab and he was a drama and speech freak,
which I ultimately became as well. And my life with him—I went out with him for two
years in high school and lost my virginity to him, and pretty much just listened to him.
But again, it was all about him. And I look back at all the relationships I’ve had, and it’s pretty much always been about the other person. Much like my mother. I find myself drawn to people that are emotionally unavailable or narcissistic, so my picker is pretty sketchy. So um, went off to college and um, I was—I had sang for four years in high school so I was going to always be in concert choir, but I loved speech and I loved drama, so I was going to major in those two subjects, drama and communication, and I was going to minor in English and I set out to be a teacher. Well, freshman year at ASU was huge and I lived in a dorm and that was a very big university and now it’s a mega-university. So I ran into some kid I’d known in high school, who was a year older and he said hey, I’m turning out for this debate team, do you want to come? And I had no idea what the debate team was, but it was the first time I’d been invited to do anything besides eat meals in my dorm, so I went to a debate meeting and I thought well all right, this looks like I could do it. And I had no talent, I didn’t understand it, I wasn’t going to be a political science major, but they paired me with this other girl and she patiently worked with me and it soon became apparent that I had no talent. And this little, fat, bald debate coach came up to me and he said you better go find a sorority or something else because you’re never going to make it. Well, I’m stubborn. You don’t tell me I’m never going to make it. So I thought, I will just show him. And I burrowed in and I debated for four years and I went to nationals with the debate team when I was a senior with my debate partner who is now a judge in the state of Arizona. All to show this little fat bald [man] that I was going to prove him wrong if it killed me. So, in college it was hard for me to have a normal social life because we’d go away out of state for these tournaments. And so in my sophomore year I kind of got involved with this guy who was on the debate team. He was brilliant, and I now know I think he was a sociopath. But he was taken with me. And you know, I always admired a good mind, intelligence, and um, he was funny and so we started dating. And he rapidly got serious and I wasn’t serious about him. Junior year I find myself taking my major courses, my drama and my English solely, and he’s a prelaw major and suddenly I find him enrolled in my classes, including stage theater, you know makeup, set construction, oral interpretation. He’s taking my classes. And it turns out he’s taking them to make sure I don’t talk to another man. And he begins
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to stalk me and he begins to frighten me. And it got to the point where we’d be going
down a street and I’d say, oh, those are cute shoes! And they’d show up on my doorstep
the next day. He was buying me. And I was getting increasingly terrified of him. And
he’d do things like, he’d put his little hands around my neck and he’d tighten them and
he’d say, if I can’t have you no one else ever will. And I found that the only time he was
tolerable was when I was drinking, which debaters did a ton of. So I’d started drinking
when I started college, and I loved what it did for me. Because I could suddenly talk, it
was like a cork came out and my inhibitions feel away and I could talk, and I was funny
and, you know I felt just, like I was finally a member of the human race. So I liked to
drink, and when I was around him I drank a lot. And bad things happened when I drank
because my inhibitions would go down and I wouldn’t resist him and it was terrible. So,
by the end of my junior year I knew I had to get out of this relationship. Because if I
wouldn’t go out with him on an evening, every evening, he would wait outside my
dormitory to see who I came back to the dormitory with to make sure that it was my
roommate and not another person that was male. And he would stalk me all the time, and
he was in every class and he stopped me from conversations with other people. And I was
so ashamed, and I couldn’t tell anybody because people on the debate team thought he
was brilliant and funny and they thought I was lucky to have such a boyfriend. So, I went
home for the summer and the end of that junior year of college and was terrified. We
went out the first night I had moved back home and I broke up with him. I said look, I
just can’t do this relationship, I don’t feel the same about you, we’re done. So I got out of
the car and ran in the house. Well, the next morning—my father always worked on
Saturdays because he always got some overtime so he could pay for his extra alcohol
which was important to me. So the next morning B- (sorry, you can blank the name)
roared into our driveway and left screech marks on the driveway and started pounding on
the door about six. Pound, pound, pound, and my father—and this is the first and only
time he ever went to bat for me—and he answered the door and ordered him off the
property in no uncertain terms. And I was cowering, I was ducking down in the kitchen
so nobody could see me, as was my mother because we were both scared of him. And
after that time, the neighbors all knew what his car looked like and what it sounded like.
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and they would all report that he continued to cruise my block, cruise and cruise it. And I had a job that summer that I’d had all through college in the summers and I would drive my mother’s car and drive way out there. And it was a long, long drive. And often I’d see him following me in my rearview mirror. And I’d get there and run inside the gate and be safe. And sometimes I would come out and the end of the day, and we were dumb, we didn’t lock cars back then, and he’d be sitting in my car. And so my parents helped me get a restraining order, which back then, was very uncommon. And he never minded it, never minded it. Well, by the end of that summer I was such a nervous wreck because I was always terrified of where he would pop up and he didn’t respect the restraining order and I guess most abusing men don’t, so um, I was just at the point of a breakdown. So my parents sent me on a three week trip back to Rochester where my relatives were just to get me the hell out of Phoenix, which saved my life, probably. And I stayed with relatives that loved me, and I had two cousins that were born the same year as me, and we pretty much drank, because we’re all alcoholic, all the nine cousins except my sister who escaped the disease for some reason. She does pills instead. But nevertheless, I was in a different state, I was removed from him and he couldn’t stalk me. The day I came back, walked in my parent’s house, 2 in the afternoon, the phone was ringing and it was him. So somehow he knew when I got back, he was probably stalking me at the airport and I didn’t know it. Well, the blessing happened. He—because he came to all my classes junior classes, he didn’t get credit. So they gave him the boot, fellowship out the door and he had to go to college in flagstaff Arizona, I don’t why they took him, but he was a great debater. However, as soon as I moved into my dorm that senior year, he was calling my dorm room. He found me again. And occasionally, I would have to see him at debate tournaments and I was terrified, I tried to quit that year. And um, my professor and my advisor, my debate coach and my advisor really put pressure on me and I felt some responsibility to B-, who was my debate coach for two years, to at least finish this thing. So um, we had brought aboard in the debate program, a guy from Colorado who was getting his Masters. And he had been a national debater, and so he was an assistant debate coach. And he was just a nice, brilliant nerd, basically. And we went out to coffee about five times and I could tell he liked me. And we would drink, and we had a great old time.
But he was just a guy who was not going to put his hands around my throat. So we went out, about the sixth time at Denny’s in T, AZ, he’s getting out—I’m applying to graduate schools because now I’ve figured out I want to be a speech therapist. Well, lo and behold it turns out he’s applying to the same graduate schools for his PhD.

R3: This new guy?

P3: Yeah, J-. And um, J- is also applying and we both get fellowships—and we both got a full ride—I got a full ride, fellowship through both Purdue and USC. So did he. Funny thing, I don’t know how it happens, but it did. And so, we were sitting in Denny’s and he takes out a napkin and he’s starts doing numbers and I said, what are you doing? And he said, well, I’ve figured out that it’s way cheaper to do married student housing than single student housing, so why don’t we get married? And that was a proposal. And I like him a lot, I loved him as a brother, as a human being because I felt safe with him, he didn’t make sexual moves on me. He was just a gentleman. We liked the same kind of music, and he was just a non-threat. And so I didn’t—I was so afraid of hurting people and such a people-pleaser—I’m kind of a barometer, I walk in a room and I sponge up the feeling to this day, unfortunately, and I can sense who’s unhappy and my role from childhood is I want to help you, I want to make it better, I want to make you feel ok so I can breathe. That’s the part I’ve learned about me. If I help you, then I can take a deep breath because you’re ok. Part of my ism, my perceptions are wrong. So anyway, I didn’t tell him no and I find that by December of that year, I’m engaged to this man. And I don’t love him like I should love a husband. Well, my mother sees dollar signs, because this man is going to accomplish great things and he is, and he did. He climbed the ladder of success and he’s a multi-multi-millionaire. And my mother either went for looks or money. He didn’t have the looks but he was going to have the money, and she knew that. And I remember, in the spring of—probably February of that year, I was home and I went for a walk with my mom and I said, well how do you know if you love somebody? She said, well, it’ll come. And then she said, at some point before I got married to him, she said, I need to tell you about the wedding night. As though she didn’t—well, of course, I never told her what my sexual history was—she said, you just lay there and pretend you enjoy it. That was my introduction. So um, anyway about a month before I was to marry...
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him, which was the final year of my student teaching and my career at ASU, a month
before graduation, I attempted to break up with him. I told him the truth, I said, I don’t
love you like a woman should love a man, I want out. And so he and my mother sat me
down and said, you’re just nervous, this is nerves, and my mother said, J-, I’ve sent out
all the invitations, what will people think? And I was so mortified, I’m so weak—and I
didn’t know how to fight her and I didn’t know how to fight him. So I married him. I
married him four days after I graduated from ASU because he represented a ticket out of
the state of Arizona. And by now he had decided not to go to the graduate school, USC,
that I had accepted admission to. He decided that he was going to take a job of upward
mobility with a very large industry, called L- Industry which then owned [company name
and company name], it’s morphed over the years and it’s a very big conglomerate. And
he was offered this job outside of San Francisco. And it sounded perfect. I marry this
man, my mother picked out my bridesmaid dresses, my flowers, set up this wedding in a
church I’d never attended, I was just kind of like—I was a robot going through the
motions. Um, got married, in a church, had the reception in the church reception hall.
Went on my one night honeymoon and then we drove out of the state the next morning
and I thought, finally I have escaped alcoholism. So we drank the whole way up the coast
to California, um, we ended up living in Walnut Creek which is East of Berkely and San
Francisco, and teaching jobs were all gone because we got married in June, and pretty
much good teachers had been hired and I had to get my teaching certification in
California—I already had it in Arizona. So I thought well, I’ll do some graduate stuff. So
I ended up doing graduate stuff in political science at UC Berkely. And I’m getting a
small stipend for helping somebody in the political science department. And he’s
working in a nearby town, and every weekend we’re going to all the wineries and
sampling wine, and boy do they have great wineries in northern California. So what a
great life. And we’d bring home cases, we’d bring home cases of what we’d sampled.
And so my drinking really took off in earnest. And he decided that in order to be this up
and coming millionaire that he was going to be, I needed to be Martha Stewart. She
didn’t exist in my mind then, but I became a gourmet cook. We would entertain people
and always he would claim what I did and cooked as a business write-off, because he saw
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people as commodities to be used. And I was trying to make friends. And I didn’t really get—I mean, we never talked about, did we want kids? Was god a part of our lives? Nothing. Our parents voted for the same president and our mothers had attended Presbyterian universities, this must mean we’re a match made in heaven. So, five months into the marriage, I get pregnant. Now that was not on his life plan. He didn’t want children, apparently ever. And I was going to get an abortion and I said, oh no, I am not going to get an abortion. So, pretty much, that ended our sex life. Five months into the marriage. So, we were married on June 8th, and 14 months to the day later on August 8th, my son was born. And because I was having a son, because I was having a baby, that meant um, that shot any upcoming teaching career, so he took a job in southern California where he’d make more money. And my job back then was to manage the apartment building we lived in because that reduced our rent. And I got increasingly pregnant, and he traveled, usually five days of the week. Flew all over the country for this company. And I was home alone in this apartment, living in a Puerto Rican neighborhood. With people that didn’t speak English. They were very nice, very kind people. But I didn’t know how to communicate. Just get their rent checks. And so, it was a lonely time and you can really be anonymous. But I remember watching a program on television, and I’m pregnant—and I didn’t drink during that pregnancy. Because I knew better, for some reason I knew better. And I was watching a program on television one night in LA, and a woman was talking about alcoholism. And there was a number on the screen, and I called that number. And this lady came over and talked to me. And I tucked that away in my memory for future reference and then went merrily about my life. I had this huge baby, he was nine pounds, that was big for me. And um, a husband that was continuing to travel full time. So the baby was five months old and he accepted a job back in Connecticut and I’d never lived back east. So, closed down the apartment, he picked out a place to live in Manchester Connecticut because he was working in Hartford. And right after Christmas we flew to Hartford Connecticut which was five below zero. And I’d only lived in Western climates and it’s hard to know how to drive. So now I’m living in a condo, beautiful brand new condo, alone in the middle of the winter with this baby. And I have a husband who doesn’t want anything to do with me.
Sexually. And is stopping bathing. And is looking at me like I’m an energizer bunny and, if J- looks at me twice, she’ll probably get pregnant, so I’ll leave her alone. So I’m feeling really bad about myself. But I become a gourmet cook and we entertain every weekend because it’s important to his career. And at all costs I have to be pleasant to him and help promote him, even though that was never my dream, to be rich. So, the drinking increases, I’m still not drinking alone by myself, but it’s soon to come. We had a block party that summer and my baby was just about to walk. We went to the block party and there was this next door neighbor who looks at me like a man’s supposed to look at a woman. So we began this affair. And he was older than me and uh, but it was very flattering. And I never thought I would have an affair. I was very guilty about it so my drinking ramped up. My husband found out and that brought about the demise of my marriage. And that affair just about killed me. I drank over it for a long time after I got out of that marriage. Um, I was young, I had the baby, I moved back to Phoenix and—to wait for my divorce to become final because—Connecticut’s a catholic state, it took nine months, and you had to have witnesses. And there was plenty of mental cruelty that they could attest to. I mean, he could have slapped me with adultery, but he wanted rid of me as much as I wanted rid of him. And before the divorce became final he contacted me and he said, look, very straightforward, I went into this marriage hoping to avoid being drafted to Vietnam. Would you mind staying legally married to me until the draft is over. So, I pretty much felt like everything had been a fraud. And so, the divorce went through. Meanwhile, my sister is about to get married, I go to Phoenix in February, my divorce is final at the end of July. I go to Phoenix in July and my sister gets married the first of April. And we’re waiting for the wedding and I have a friend who introduces me to John, who is my husband now, and we’re to be godparents of her baby that’s born in April. Her husband had committed suicide because he was a Vietnam vet who couldn’t stand the aftermath. So, we’re helping this widow and we are the godparents. We’re introduced because he lives two blocks away with his dad while he finishes grad school. He lives two blocks away from my mother. So, we start getting together after putting the child down at night and taking walks. Turns out, we are both believing totally in reincarnation. Believing we had been married in past lives, we were soul mates. I didn’t want to get
married, he was never going to get married, he’s older than me and was going to be a
confirmed bachelor. And of course, we fell in love with each other because we had so
much in common, don’t you know, from past lives and everything. So I fall madly in love
with this man. He gets done with graduate school and moves to the Northwest to get a job
because he had always loved Washington. He ends up getting a job outside of Portland. I
know him less than six months. My divorce happens. Two weeks after that, me and my
baby fly up to Portland and I marry him. So I’ve ricocheted out of one marriage, into a
marriage now with a man that I don’t really know, but just love what I think I know about
him. And we’ve been married for 43 years. I don’t know how this has stayed together
because we didn’t know each other at all. What happened was, we ended up moving up to
Washington at the end of our first year of marriage. And his father had a little beach
property in La Conner, and said we could stay there because his dad was going to go out
of the country while John found a job in Washington. Well, we discovered that we didn’t
have the money, but we could make blackberry wine. And, boy, did we figure out how to
make blackberry wine. And it was godawful tasting, but it worked. And back then you
could buy gallons of wine in a liquor store called C- and it was 3 dollars a gallon. And
they had a white one, a red one and a pink one. And it was just like hog heaven. Between
our blackberry gag wine and this, we were just cruising along. And then we get pregnant.
And by now we were living in Whatcom County. And my second child was born, two
years after we were married and my oldest child is now for years old. And my oldest
child decides he didn’t want a brother. Not ever. He wanted to be an only child and he’s
going to try to kill this baby. And it turns out—I didn’t know this, but my oldest child is
ADHD and he has oppositional defiant disorder. So he’s born to a set of debaters, he
comes into the world debating, anything you say he will disagree with, to this very
minute. So I have no idea how to cope. And alcohol really became my friend. So I have a
new baby, the doctor sees that my son is out of control. We have a two bedroom house,
so my husband—doctor recommended that we build a six foot partition around the baby’s
crib and his diaper change table with a lock up at the top so they could stay in the same
room and the baby wouldn’t be killed. Because J- would come after him. Every time he
was out of his crib. And um, it was bad. So at this point, my parenting skills are shot and
he’s so mad that there’s a baby in the house, he’s just really acting out a lot. And he was a bright little boy, so fortunately, I put him in Kindergarten when he was five because he was already reading, and I had a daily reprieve from him, somewhat, so I could focus on the baby. And four years later, my baby B- was born, so I had J, E and B. And B was born in 1978. And by 1978 I am drinking during the day every day. I had recently found out that my first husband was gay. That also added to the lack of interest in having sex with a woman. And my son is ratcheting up his behavior. And one day he went to school, and unbeknownst to me, my husband had a gun and he stole the gun, found bullets, took it to school in fourth grade, he took my jewelry and any money we had in the house to school and gave it away to make himself popular. And at the end of the day—and I was drunk—the principal called and said, I need you to know what your son did today. Back then they didn’t sent the kid to Juvie. They sent the kid home with the revolver in a brown paper bag with the bullets. And I looked at him and said, did you do this? And he said, yes. And I hauled off and smacked him. And I smacked him on the face because I’m not a child abuser and I don’t know that you should hide bruises. So, then my husband came home and got him on the backside, and he was abused. By us. And the next day he went to school, and the duty on the playground said what happened to your face? And he said, well, my mother horse-whipped me. Whereupon, I was turned into CPS as a child abuser. And that was in 1978, and my drinking went down, and down and down. Because there’s few things more demoralizing than being a child abuser. And being drug through the system, and the counseling, and almost signing your child over to child protective services which I came close to doing, but didn’t. So, I’m drinking and drinking and drinking, and um, I just want to die. And I have three kids and I can’t do it. And my husband comes home one too many times noticing that I’m drunk. So he went to the community alcohol center and got some brochures on alcoholism. And this one night on April 22nd actually it was, that was my first sober day. And he sat my down and unplugged the phone after the kids went to bed, and he said, J-, you’re an alcoholic. And it was the thing I hated most because I never thought I would be like my father. I hated my father. I thought alcoholism was for weak, immoral people. And I was weak, but I wasn’t immoral, at least I didn’t think so at the time. So he throws these brochures at me,
and says here’s the number to call the CAC for counseling. You either get sober, or I take the kids and I leave you. And I knew he would get custody. So I’m sobbing, and all of the sudden I remember the phone is unplugged. And I go in my kitchen and plug it back in and the phone rings immediately. It’s about 10:30 at night and it’s my father calling from Phoenix. And he said that his twin sister had just been found dead of alcoholism. And she was in New Jersey. And her body had been alone in the apartment, unattended. And one hundred empty vodka bottles had been in her apartment. So I got the gong from my husband. Now I’m getting it about my aunt. And I knew that there but for the grace of god, would be me. So I got on the floor in my kitchen, and I prayed to a god that I didn’t really know existed. And what happened to me was, all of a sudden was physically wrapped in the warmest, safest—it was like a blanket came around me and I was safe. And I stopped sobbing and I went to bed and I honestly slept. And the next day I didn’t have the compulsion to drink and I haven’t ever since. So then I became insanely curious about, what kind of power lifted me out of this? The very next day I made an appointment to go see the counselor ant the community alcohol center and I saw her for six months. She sent me to 3 AA meetings. I had known a lady that went to AA, she was the mother of one of my babysitters, who probably knew that I was drunk every time I called for Lisa to come over. So I called this mother and I asked her, do you go to these meetings? She said yes. I asked her if she’d take me to one and so the very first one was in Bellingham. It was in a basement. And back then in 1979 everyone smoked in meetings. I had never smoked. Meetings started at 8:30 and they went until ten at night. She takes me down into this dark, smoky room and it’s creepy. And there’s really scary looking people in there. And the woman chairing the meeting wears her glasses down like this and she looks at you with laser eyes that see right through you. And I was terrified. And this room has couches all the way around in and there’s a great big table in the middle. And people were sitting on the couches, and they were sitting at the table. And I found a seat at the very back of the room and I tried to hide behind a post. And I listened to people. And something happened to me in that room. I felt like, I’m scared to death of these people, but at the same time I understand you. And I was terrified, but I was fascinated at the same time. And um, so I chatted, chatted, chatted with J the whole
time she drove me home, and I asked her, can you take me to another meeting? So a
couple of days later she took me to a meeting up in Lynden. Which was my second
meeting and that also was in the basement of a church, we meet in basements for
whatever reason. And um, she takes me into this meeting and these men look at me and
say, Alanon is in the next room, cause I’m young. And I looked at them and I thought,
you have no idea who I am, I’m going to prove you wrong! Because that was my theory,
I’m going to prove you wrong! I’m a coward but I’m a feisty coward. So, that was the
last meeting I ever went to. She subsequently stopped going to alcoholics anonymous and
she got drunk. But I got sober. And so, between going to L- where I was the pretty much
only woman attending for most of the first twelve years of my sobriety. I kept going there
for—number one it was close to my house, and number two, those men were like father
figures that I’d never had. They were loving and kind and tolerant and they didn’t judge
me. And through all of my insanity, they kept saying, keep coming back. I believed with
every fiber of my being that if you had a child like mine you would be drunk too.
Because by now, my child and my husband are in complete tug-of-war over me and they
can’t stand each other. I had two alpha males in my house and they can’t stand each
other. And the only time I felt free was when I got out of that damn house and got to a
meeting. And my husband didn’t understand, now that I am sober, why did I have to go
to these meetings? I thought you only had to go to three? But I now know that I couldn’t
go to three and stay alive, so I’m going every chance I get, which in the beginning, was
maybe three. So I’m going to Lynden, I’m going to Bellingham. I meet a lady that
becomes my sponsor and she tells me about a couple of other meetings, one of them
being Drydock. And I start going there and there are more women my age. And I started
finding friends, my age with little kids. And so I started saying, let’s have lunch dates in
the park. And we’d bring our kids and peanut butter sandwiches and we’d spread out a
blanket and we’d have a meeting while they were on the swings. And that was my early
experience of alcoholics anonymous. And more and more women were coming in, and I
was feeling more and more a part of. But I never could got out after meetings with people
for coffee because my husband was insanely jealous and worried about me and um. I felt
duty-bound to get back home. And I felt duty-bound even when I’d go to Saturday noon
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meetings, to get back home. Because he wouldn’t think about making lunch for the kids, ever. They’d all be starving and I’d come in and I’d feel resentful and I’d slap on lunch. That way I’m pleasing them, pleasing everybody. So I get sober. And about five years into sobriety my baby goes to school and I’m devastated. Because by now, I’m baking all my bread from scratch, I’ve taught myself how to cook and can, and I can everything all the way from the beginning of apricot season all the way through tomatoes. I canned all summer. And stored up stuff. I was really becoming quite a good homemaker. And I was sponsoring women. And when little B- went to school, I cried for about three weeks. And my husband said, you’ve got to do something with yourself. Why don’t you go back and get your teaching credentials in Washington, which sounded like a good idea. But instead I find myself applying to a graduate program that they have in Washington. Because by now I have a real love for children. And I get accepted into this graduate program in school counseling, believe it or not. So we’re in this same track of classes as private practitioners, but I have to take some extra education classes. And what appealed to me about working in schools was, it’s free, whereas in private practice you’re charging people. I just didn’t want to do that because AA had given me my life and it was free. So I get accepted into this program, and they only took six people every two years. So I get into this program, I went through it, and my second year I was in an internship at Bellingham high school, and at the end of that internship I was hired. So, a couple of years ago I retired after 28 years of a counseling career. And um, it was a job beyond my wildest dreams. It was a job I would have done for free. But my definition of a great life is, you find your passion and then find a way to get paid for it. And so, my school counseling career, here I am a former child abuser, working with kids. Having a heart for them because I’ve been at the bottom, and I have a heart for kids who’ve been at the bottom. But it’s also because I just connect with kids. It’s a gift that god me somehow, and I have this ability to hear with my heart. And so kids are telling me what their problem is, and I intuitively know—the book says I will intuitively know how to handle things that used to baffle me—well, I intuitively know, I get stuff at a deep level about people. Because I’m a listener. And so, my counseling career is pretty effective. And I learn how not to take everything home over time. And I learn how to balance being a
mother, being a wife, being a sober member of alcoholics anonymous who still is sponsoring a few women but I really don’t have time to sponsor many. And I go through different sponsors along the way. And um, at about 14 years sobriety I have a successful career, I have a good marriage, and I have successful children. And I get mad at my AA group in Lynden because one of my sponsees is dinkin’ around with a guy in the group who’s married to somebody else. And I get really on my high horse and I get real judgmental because they’re breaking up their marriages to be together. And he’s 27 years older than she is, and she’s a gold digger, and yada yada yada—you’re not doing what you’re supposed to do, you’re not walking your talk. So I get on my self-righteous high horse and I gallop out of town. And I stayed out of meetings for a whole year. During which time I become a restless, irritable and discontent person. Not fit to live with. Angry at alcoholics anonymous. Angrier at being alive and watching my husband and my kids go about their marry lives. And my family goes on a cruise and I see everybody drinking and I’m like, oh shit. We go into a—stopping in Cozumel and I have my niece with me and we go around a corner and there is my drink of choice, there is a tray of Kahlua in little cups, and if I had not had my favorite niece with me I probably would have picked up one of those cups of Kahlua because it looked so good and I could smell it. But I didn’t. So, we get home and my family does an intervention on me and they say, look, we liked you way better when you were going to those meetings. Please go back. And I knew they were right. So I slink back to Lynden where, I’m sure that because of my absence it’s shriveled up and gone down the toilet. Well, it hasn’t, it’s doubled in size! Lots more women….I know, I’m such a big deal. And I was expecting them all to say, where’ve you been? Well, one person did. Because I’m such a big deal in my own mind, but they did quite well without me. And so I’m back. And I’m trying to balance life and all of a sudden what happens is, my mother is living in Phoenix, she’s now a widow. She has developed Alzheimer’s and it becomes rapidly apparent she can’t pay bills. So I go become her guardian conservator, along with taking care all of her affairs, along with still having kids at home, a full time job and husband that’s a workaholic. So, I’m of the sandwich generation. You’ve got an elderly parent, then you’ve got the children and you’ve got the husband. And I stayed sober, but I sometimes wonder how. I credit
alcoholics anonymous for letting me come to the meetings and complain. And whine. 

And cry. And they loved me anyway. They just said, we love you and we’ll be here for you. And they were. So my mother, I had to move up to Bellingham. Unbeknownst to her 

I had to move her and she stayed up here for the last six years of her life. And I put her in 

an assisted living facility because I did know that I would die if I had to have her in my 

house. She was such a narcissist, and so self-centered and nothing I did was ever, ever 

enough to please her. And she exhausted me…it was like, when you’re with my mother, 

there is no oxygen left in the room to breath because she’s got it all. And she was not a 

nice Alzheimer’s patient. She was mean and spiteful and she would kick and be real 

spiteful to the other members of the community that she lived in. And eventually she 

would forget to go down for meals, so they moved her into the Alzheimer’s unit which 

was locked. And now I have a mother who’s got dentures, and um, she puts them in her 

room every night in the sink, and there’s another resident there who likes to go from 

room to room and mix up the dentures. So now I have a mother who never wears the 

right dentures again, nor did the rest of these people and she’s wearing other people’s 
clothes because they’d all get washed and then they’re in this dog pile, and it was really 
chaotic. But I was still the only caregiver. And my little sister lives in Atlanta, doesn’t 

have a job and could have taken care of mom, but won’t. So I was just the caregiver. And 

I had promised my father before he died that I would take care of my mother and I kept 

the promise. So anyway. I think the struggles with my mother those last years with the 
Alzheimer’s were some of the worst years of my sobriety. Because I honestly forgot to 

breath, and I would sit up in the middle of the night and I’d be shallow breathing. And I 

now know that I was probably pretty close to panic attacks. I didn’t quite pitch into them, 

I knew how to get out of them because I’d taught children how to breath in and out of a 
brown paper bag to dial down their panic attacks, so I knew how to do that to myself. But 

my mother finally died and I was with her and it was a sacred experience and I was 
grateful to be able to do that with her. But then I grieved the real mother that I never had. 

And I faced um, you know, you let go, you keep wishing for a better past. And then you 
grow to the point where you see that you never got one and you never will. And so what 
the program has taught me is how to make peace with my past. How not to shut the door
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on it, how not to regret it. How to look at myself, as a young woman, with compassion instead of hatred. The steps have come true for me. And my life has meaning because of the god I found as a result of this program. Because of working the steps, and because I continue—with 35 years of sobriety—to give away what was so freely given to me. And so I sponsor people. I now have two of my sons are full blown alcoholic. My other son is an alcoholic too, but he went to a counselor who said, you got two DWI’s cause you have ADHD. That was your original problem. That was just music to his little sick ears. So, despite the fact that he’s been in AA for a total of four years on blue slips he still doesn’t believe he has a problem. So that’s his life. He may or may not ever get sober, it’s not my business. But my sponsor told me, about my other two sons, you’ve got to go to Alanon because it’s going to teach you to love your sons without it killing you. And that has been absolutely true. So, the best years of my sobriety have been since I became a double winner and started to both. Because AA teaches me how to be sober and stay sober, and give away sobriety. Alanon teaches me how to live with you and let you be you and let your life path unfold as its supposed to unfold for you, without me getting involved and trying to rescue you from your path. So, in a nutshell, that is my life today. I still am living a lot with not being able to breathe, because since I’ve retired it became—by the end of the 90’s it became readily apparent to me that my husband was not well because he was starting to stockpile during Y2K. He was believing it would be the end of the electric grid and he was doing really crazy things. So I went to my doctor who is a member of AA and I described John’s behavior and um, he said, J, he’s manic. And I’d never heard that word applied to someone I was, you know, married to. So he was referred to a psychiatrist and he got on some medication in 2000, which helped a lot. But the psychiatrist left town as they often do and that medication over the years has ceased to be effective without more added in. So today he has a diagnosis of depression, mania, level 2 depression which is not the bottom of the belly of the whale—his depression comes out as irritable, restless, mean—he’s got mania, full on 1, but depression bipolar 2. So he’s got a cocktail of medications that occasionally work and occasionally cease working. So we cycle. And in his cycles things go really, really bad. So what’s happened with me over living with him and holding my breath and seeing the rages he can fly into,
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he has never touched me, but I see the jaw set, the slamming of the—so I live in fear. So, I have redoubled my meetings, I have redoubled my alanon meetings. I have redoubled my efforts to take care of myself. Because I know my mentally ill husband will self-destruct with or without me in the house. And because I love him, I hate his disease, he doesn’t want to be sick. He doesn’t have control a lot of the time over horrible thoughts he is thinking like OCD perseveration which I think he also has. So I live with mental illness. It’s not my choice. A lot of my sponsees say, why don’t you divorce him. Well, he’s 77 year old, he’s a lot older than me. He is a man of dignity. He is a good human being who loves me the best he can. And I’m not going to throw him away. I can’t. So it’s my choice to live there with him and when he’s riding the crazy train, which he is today, I look at him and I say honey, you’re on the crazy train and I’m not riding it ever again with you. So I’m going to leave and I’m going to take care of myself. And I think you know what you need to do, which is take your meds, eat, and go and exercise and get out of your head. I hope you’ll do those things. But I’m not in control of whether he chooses to do those things or not. So what I do is I have escape plans. I have places that I visit and I can stay at any hour, because I have to take care of myself and my sobriety is coming first. So that’s pretty much it.

R3: You talked about wanting to make friends and trying to connect with people, and connecting with other mothers and it sounds like that was really pivotal.

P3: Well, right now the best friends I have in the world are in alcoholics anonymous. And they are the last things I was looking for. I came in here, I didn’t know you would find real fellowship of the heart. I wouldn’t ever have dreamed that the people that know me best and love me best are in these rooms.

R4: And you weren’t even looking for that.

P4: I didn’t know to look for that, I didn’t expect lifelong friends. People I trust with my life and they can trust their life with me, and what they say doesn’t leave me.