

HEALING OF ADULT CHILDREN

Fr. Peter McCall, Capuchin

We have been asked so many times, “Why isn’t everyone healed?” We probably ask ourselves that question more than we are asked by others.

Over many years we have been exposed to and involved in the work being done in the area of Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACoA). This program has not only given us an insight into our own healing, but also into the realization that people need to come to terms with many issues before they can be healed.

HARSH FAMILY LEGACIES

Approximately 30 million people in this country have an alcoholic parent. These adult children, “along with survivors of other family dysfunctions (including severe mental and physical illness, incest, physical abuse, religiosity, violence, or bitter abandonment) have had to cope with a harsh family legacy of denial, rigidity, shame, and dysfunctional rules which crush the human spirit.

As they grow up, adult children from dysfunctional families often become addicted to alcohol, drugs, food, destructive relationships, overwork, or other compulsive activities. They are also more prone to depression, anxiety, phobias, psychosomatic illnesses and other stress-related difficulties. In many aspects of their lives, adult children often have trouble dealing with trust, control, responsibility, guilt, and intimacy.

Is it any wonder that we in a healing prayer ministry are concerned about these issues? It may very well be a big part of the answer to the question, “Why isn’t everyone healed?”

We have discovered that healing prayer is an important part of this healing process. The Twelve Step Program has proven the need for our surrender to a Higher Power before we can expect healing. Healing prayer provides that contact. But more than that, healing prayer provides the *empowerment* which all of us need to walk this journey of healing. Our experience has taught us that without this empowerment, many would give up along the way and return to a less than human lifestyle.

We hope the following thoughts on the healing of the adult child of a dysfunctional family.

WHO ARE ADULT CHILDREN?

Adult children are people who have reached adult age, but who have never had their basic childhood needs met. This happened because their parents or primary caretakers were physically or emotionally incapable of meeting these human needs. Or perhaps one or both parents abandoned them, or the family of origin had such repressive rules that it was impossible that these human needs be met.

In other words, adult children are children of dysfunctional families in which children were there to meet the needs of the parents instead of the other way around.

Adult children are physically mature, but they have an “inner child” which was never allowed to grow and develop, with the result that they have been *shamed*. To cope with this shame, they had to develop survival techniques or roles which got them through childhood but now in adulthood are beginning to fall apart.

John Bradshaw has said that 58 different roles have been identified, and that new ones are discovered at every conference of ACoA. The traditional roles are described in the literature under the following four categories:

1. The Hero: The one who takes over what needs to be done in the family to keep it going. This one becomes the “Enabler,” the “Caretaker,” the “Perfectionist,” the “Saint,” the “Surrogate Spouse,” of either the mother or father.

2. The Scapegoat: This one becomes the “Problem Child,” the “Rebel,” the “Nonconformist,” the “Anti-social One.” This one acts out his/her anger at the family and is blamed for the problems in the family.

3. The Lost Child: This one withdraws from the family and becomes the “Silent One,” the “Loner.” This one gives no problem to the family, but is not involved either.

4. The Mascot: This one becomes the “Family Clown,” the “Entertainer,” the one who gives comic relief for the rest of the family.

It is important to realize that a child can take on one or more of these roles at different times. The problem with these roles is that they are simply masks--coping devices--which the child uses to protect itself against the dysfunction within the family. They do work for a while, but eventually they backfire. Then the adult child must face the shame which these roles were intended to deny.

WHAT IS A DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY?

A dysfunctional family is any family in which addictive, compulsive, abusive or violent behavior dominates; or which is so repressive with rigid rules which crush the human spirit that basic human needs cannot be met. A large percentage of the families in the U.S. are dysfunctional to some degree.

Dysfunctional families are multi-generational; that is, they reproduce themselves. Children from these families come to adulthood without basic human needs met, so they are *needy*. They need the love and strokes which they never received in childhood. They look around for another who will fill this “hole in their soul.” They seek out and draw to themselves other adult children who are looking for the same thing.

The two join in their neediness with the delusion that the other will satisfy their needs. They form a *codependent* relationship in which each one feeds off the other and in which nobody’s needs are met. However, because each needs the other, they will do anything to maintain the relationship. Codependence is what maintains dysfunctional families and propagates them to the next generation. Codependence is at the heart of the dysfunctional family.

THE HEALING OF ADULT CHILDREN

Prayer alone will not heal adult children. There are too many issues which must be faced and worked out before they can accept healing. This is a perfect example of healing as a process. Prayer will support and empower adult children through this process, but it cannot substitute for legitimate pain. Below is a program for healing adult children which is mostly taken from the work of John Bradshaw.

1. Surrender: All healing begins with the acknowledgment that we need help and the willingness to do something about it. We have to come out of hiding. As long as we keep our shame hidden, there is no possibility for healing. In order to heal our shame, we must embrace it. As the adage says, "The only way out is through."

Embracing shame involves pain. Pain is the one thing we have been trying to avoid. But we discover that denying our shame has been the cause of our compulsive, addictive, and destructive behavior. So, we have to externalize our shame and admit that we are powerless of ourselves to deal with it. We must give up trying to control our behavior and turn to a Higher Power, God, for help.

2. Socialization: Coming out of hiding means honestly sharing our feelings with significant others. It means seeing ourselves mirrored in the eyes of at least one non-shaming person who is part of our new "family of choice." We have to break the "no talk rule" and share our secrets. It means risking, but it's worth it because "we cannot heal what we do not reveal."

Any non-shaming group can do this for us. If we have an addiction ourselves, however, it's been proven that a Twelve Step Group is much more effective than just a group of friends.

3. Self-disclosure: We need to get in touch with our "inner child." There is a child within us which is starving for expression. This is the child which never had a chance to play or to express its authentic emotions. We need to get in touch with unresolved grief over the fact that this child never had a chance to develop.

We have to externalize feelings of abandonment and past shaming experiences. This is not to blame anyone or project our problems onto someone else. It's simply to uncover how we really felt so that we can release these feelings which we have stored in our body. It's allowing our true self to come out of hiding and replace the false self which we set up to protect ourselves.

4. Self-talk: We need to externalize the voices in our heads. These voices keep our shame-spirals in operation. We need to become more aware of these shaming voices so that we can replace them with new nurturing and positive voices.

We need affirmations of self-love. We have to reprogram our thinking by being more aware of who or what triggers our shame-spirals. We have to learn how to handle our mistakes and have the courage to be imperfect.

5. Spirituality: Finally, we have to learn through prayer and meditation to create an inner place of silence wherein we are centered and grounded in God. We need those times of intimacy with a Power above and beyond ourselves.

Twelve Step spirituality speaks about our "spiritual awakening," when we come into contact with this Higher Power. Experience shows that healing is impossible without this "inner guidance" and "uplifted consciousness" which takes us beyond ourselves. We need to discover the silence and the serenity within.