

An Alternative View...

by Ross Boutilier

A favourite book from my meagre collection is "The Opposite of Everything is True" by William Crisman. It is subtitled "Reflections on Denial in Alcoholic Families" and it hit me very hard the first time I read it. "Oh! That's why I'm a doormat. I was trained from birth to be one!" - I remember that discovery not far into its modest length.

That aside, this book allowed me to understand finally how one descends into alcoholism, how one is helped there and sustained there by well-meaning "family", how one finally hits bottom, or dies, one way or another, some time or another, and how one begins the process of crawling back from that bad place into a world much worse for all the pain the addiction has caused. As a full participant in my birth-family's swing through that hell, I've much to account for. I learned too well how to play the most guilt-worthy of the dysfunctional family roles: the enabler. Without a good wake-up call, I'm not even aware I'm playing that role. I'll spend much of my remaining life

fighting to keep that kind of damaging behaviour at bay. Thank God for recovery programs.

A fascinating diagram in Crisman's book, credited to Doyle F. Lindley in 1968, depicts the descent of the alcoholic (who does not, of course, start out as an alcoholic) to rock bottom over several years. The alcoholic's family goes along for the ride. They and their alcoholic (assuming the drinker doesn't die of the disease) must face a slow, torturous ascent out of that misery, as everyone tries to put their lives back together. This also typically takes many years. The chart shows that there are lots of ways out of trouble in the early stages provided the drinker stops drinking (which of course is not what happens in this story.)

If you've been following the ill-fortunes of GALA and its decent with its drinking project Rumours over these past years, you will suspect what I'm getting at here. I'm going to look at that descent as if it were the fall of a drunk to Skidville. The great thing about using an analogy like this is you discover how good it is just by trying it out. Here goes:

Our candidate alcoholic, just coming out, just wants to have fun. In particular, having had a rough and terribly lonely life so far, having fun in a safe space is a top priority. Having fun and drinking go hand-in-hand. Everyone does it. When others stop, though, the soon-to-be keeps going. The more, the better. So what if there are a few hangovers. So what if the ones who don't like this scene start shying away. There's always someone around who will want to party.

Our candidate alcoholic arranges life around drinking. All the other activities can be fitted in around the main course. In this way, drinking can be sustained even as the liver damage begins in earnest. The candidate is becoming dull to many, but there is a seem-

ingly endless supply of new drinking friends in any case, since the social setting promises much to people who are lonely, people who want to have a good time (though maybe not every night of the week).

Meanwhile, the alcoholic is getting great support from their wonderful family. The family picks up the pieces after a binge (or a good fight), they keep the bills paid, they create the illusion of a normal (if not happy) life. The drunk is just a problem on occasion.

This family consists of super-responsible types (the big-time enablers) who think that if the family could just be smart about it, things will work out OK. They tend to fight among themselves because they get so wrapped up in the problem they think their solution is the only one that will work. They've learned that heaping scorn on one another is an effective way of keeping control, and they use it with a vengeance.

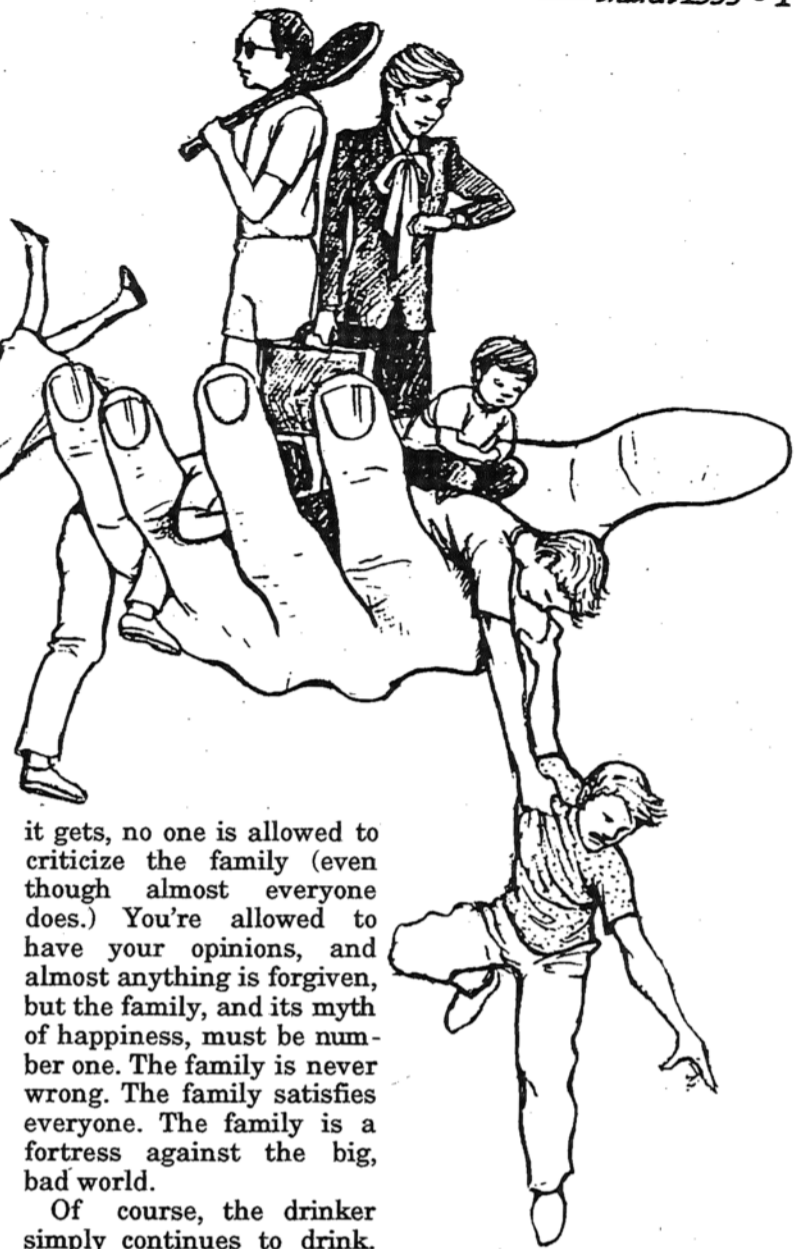
The family also has

From this child of alcoholism, a sincere thank you, Jane

rebels who just say "fuck this" and leave. Things like "I'll never step in this door again" are often said. There's also the super irresponsible ones who - God bless 'em - don't take responsibility for everything and who just want to have fun when it's fun. They, of all the family members, have the best chance of avoiding a lot of family-induced damage because they're likely to be somewhere else on a Friday night.

Finally, there are the primary care givers, the one's who just offer their unconditional love and support, who keep the situation from falling apart with amazing acts of blind loyalty and strength. They turn all the pain inward, and seem to be able to sustain anything. They suffer most of all.

The family has rules and myths. Regardless how bad



it gets, no one is allowed to criticize the family (even though almost everyone does.) You're allowed to have your opinions, and almost anything is forgiven, but the family, and its myth of happiness, must be number one. The family is never wrong. The family satisfies everyone. The family is a fortress against the big, bad world.

Of course, the drinker simply continues to drink. Rationalizations abound. A few little lies are not uncommon. The tension is rising and even small things can become big crises. The family activities become more and more a bother that interferes with the primary function - drinking. Of course, there are always pretend activities - as long as they don't cost too much.

drinker hits bottom. The drinker dies.

The people left are still an alcoholic family - they don't know any other way. They don't know where to go. There is hope, but no one can tell how the story will end, who will crawl out, when or if people will talk to one another again. Only time will tell.

In the GALA story, which this is all about, one thing is different. Of course, the drinker died and left the family in a scrap-heap, that's true. The difference is that Jane Kansas spoke the truth time and time again in her go-round as family whip-person in these last months. She must not have understood all those family rules. When she took over GALA, she said we had to think the unthinkable - maybe do the unthinkable - and we did.

She was willing to stop the drinking. She had the courage to hold the now dying and bitter drunk in her care as its last breath expired, and wept as so many of us wept at this end of things (even as others gloated and sneered). Jane has been vilified by some, but time will show that she was one of the few healthy voices in our big sad story of addiction and dependence.

From this child of alcoholism, a sincere thank you, Jane.

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