

## Cindy's Story

"Is there anything healthy in freezer pops, Mommy?"

"Let's see. No, it just has some chemicals and color and water."

"Are chemicals good for you?"

"No. But they sure do taste good."

I had schooled my doe-eyed 4-year old daughter and her 7-year old brother to be concerned about healthy food, so why was I handing them freezer pops? With this scene in our kitchen I flashed back to all the "chemicals" I'd ingested in 20 years of active alcoholism: cocaine, speed, LSD, pot, and, of course, all varieties of alcohol. The word "chemical" is heavy laden with meaning for me.

I realized what "chemicals" meant to me was completely different from what it meant to my children. Or was it? A line from rehab danced across my mental screen like headlines on Times Square, "A drug is a drug is a drug."

In relative terms, the really good news I learned early in therapy was that I was a much worse alcoholic than chemical abuser, which really helped me focus on recovery in the context of AA. My sobriety date, September 29<sup>th</sup>, 1993, is counted from the date of my release from a 24 hour detox. I'd been committed. Then there was a five-day detox program. And then there was AA. The only time I'd heard of AA before I joined was when I was 11 years old. My mom was crying and said, "I might be an alcoholic. I might have to go to AA." At that point, I didn't even know what those two A's stood for.

It took me 30 days to find my home group. It took 30 days to decide I wanted to do the program. My motivation to stay in AA was sheer loathing. I was still fuming at the woman who became the BWCM (bitch who committed me) and I wanted to prove her wrong. She really hurt my feelings committing me after a five-minute interview. Didn't she know my whole life was about not feeling wanted?

When I first got sober, there were immediate problems to solve. The only work life I knew was bartending. That had to go. I ended up cashiering in a grocery store. What a shock it was to see people buying so much food. I grew up in a house with no groceries. Watching people shop regularly, I felt like I was from a different planet. My only recollection of grocery stores was my mother crying when she had to write the check. As a child I learned that the best gift I could give my mother was to eat less. Actually, she shuddered any time she had to write a check after my father abandoned us.

From her point of view it was pointless to bring home fresh food like fruit because my brothers would just eat it all up. A bunch of bananas in one sitting. A whole bag of oranges, gone. What was the point of buying food? My childhood memory of meals was hot dogs and spaghetti and a neighbor who fed us when there wasn't any food at our house. My brother just remembers starving. Whatever we had, we ate when we pleased, off paper plates. There was no standing on ceremony, no family table.

My father came back into the picture as mysteriously as he'd left, after about two and a half years. I was eight years old. A couple times a month, we'd go to his nice, middle class house and eat off real plates with napkins and actual silverware. I was required to eat what was put before me. In his new place, we had to sit up straight and behave. It wasn't respect but fear that straightened my back. My brother remembers it more positively; sitting up straight was a small price to pay for getting enough to eat.

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It was too late for me to learn my table manners or smile while eating Dad's special Texas style spaghetti. But it was right on time to learn about liquor. Dad had one kind of glass for his Manhattans, another for his wine, and something more delicate for his cordials. It mattered very much how the glasses looked. Of course when the weekend was over, it was back to Mom's where I was lucky to get a can of soup. I've searched my memory, I just can't remember any cooking. Even when my mother got a descent job, family dinner didn't start happening.

When I got to AA the world opened its arms to me. I was welcome. What was that about! I told strangers I'm an alcoholic and they said, "You're in the right place." I was treated with love and respect for being who I was, an alcoholic. I shall remain forever grateful for that sense of belonging. When my mother died, my AA friends were there. When I had a baby, my AA friends were there. They welcomed me depressed, anxious, angry and defiant. No matter what was going on, AA friends were there, the family I never had even though I had relatives.

Around my sixth year of sobriety -- with a baby and a three-year old -- I went on a quest in therapy: four years of marriage counseling, conventional talk therapy, three years of psychodrama groups, inner child work, and gestalt therapy. I was in search of relief from all that had surfaced, depression, anxiety, marital issues. I'd had a horrible post partum depression with the first baby and nearly died delivering the second. Having two children didn't help dealing with the wreckage of the years past, needless to say. And here I was trying to raise children with my ex-drinking partner of 10 years. We'd had the perfect relationship until we stopped drinking: I worked nights; he worked days. It worked out really well because the only time we fought was when we were together. Imagine what happened when we tried to parent as a couple!

In my 10th year of sobriety, I signed up for a three-year training to be a body psychotherapist. I still didn't realize I had a body. I learned how to read with great precision all the habitual patterns, resistances, and disconnects that resided in my body. Two years into the training I met the founder of Suppers for Sobriety, Dor. I overheard her saying she was going to help alcoholics. "I'm an alcoholic, what are you going to do for us?" She gave me her stump speech. She said that the missing link in our recovery culture was the physical body. She said that no where in conventional treatment or AA was there a focus on restoring bodies and brains. She was right. Now connected to my body as a body psychotherapist I had a heightened capacity to observe what was taking place in my body without an understanding of why I suffered chronic depression and anxiety to begin with. In all my years of training to observe and articulate my experience in the Gestalt tradition, I had *still* left my body behind. Somehow I had missed the bit about bodies being made out of something. My thinkin' didn't stink any more, but Oh My God the hoops I had been jumping through to produce positive thoughts from a depressed brain. What Dor was proposing was including the physical body in the recovery equation through good nutrition and restoring family tables. "When is this going to be a book?" "When can I start working the program?"

I volunteered to be the first person to work the new program. I couldn't imagine how I was going to stop eating and drinking the things I'd been using to self-medicate anxiety and depression, and I hadn't realized I had a prejudice that healthy food must taste awful. What a shock to eat in Dor's kitchen and learn healthy food was actually delicious! We set up a pilot with some of my AA friends. After 10 weeks, I was enjoying the taste of good food but still completely resistant to learning how to cook it.

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It's hard to describe what was going on inside me that kept me involved. At some level I knew this was it for me. I had never included care of the physical body in my recovery equation. Nobody talked like that. I had no history of having groceries in the house, let alone cooking. My food identity hinged on chocolate and coffee. In my head I believed the research that told me depression and anxiety were the logical conclusion of eating how I ate. But experts and research were no match for my growling attachment to my eating habits. There was even a name for it, "appetite foolishness".

Pain is a great motivator, but it doesn't necessarily lead you to specific solutions. Anxiety screams "Do something" without instructing you what to do. Books provide all the information most people need to cure themselves of anxiety or depression, but how would someone know *which* is the right book for him or her? And how would you turn your ship around when everybody else is eating that way and mood altering junk food leaps out at you from every corner?

As I started to realize that I didn't know what I didn't know, I was flooded with panic and resistance. And then my epiphany came in a bowl of chili.

Counter to everything I feel like doing first thing in the morning, I decided to try some breakfast chili to see if there was anything to this theory about setting yourself up for a better mood all day by starting with protein. The effect was immediate. A bowl of turkey chili shielded me from the spinning and ranting that normally followed the prized first cup of coffee that got me out of bed in the morning. Just this change alone had rippling benefits throughout the family, but I didn't stop there. Chronic depression and anxiety did not lift until I dealt with all of the underlying causes: I had to reduce sugar intake and stop drinking coffee; I had to eat protein at breakfast; I had to take Omega 3 capsules to replenish my starving brain, tryptophan to help the insomnia, and nutrients to support my exhausted adrenal glands. With these changes, my negativity vaporized, along with the hot flashes. Even when I didn't sleep well, a bad night didn't destroy me anymore. Thirty three years of chronic depression finally resolved when I got help interpreting the signals my body was sending.

It's hard for me to tell you that something I love as much as I love AA has a shortcoming. Those first years in the program were profoundly life changing. But it was not to be that I would learn that I have a body in the context of 12 step work. It took many years of seeking in other places to make this discovery. In my 13<sup>th</sup> year of sobriety, I realized what I had been doing was throwing program and therapy at a depressed brain. I've been working the Suppers program for several years and still the most profound single improvement came when I had my epiphany in a bowl of chili. At Suppers we call breakfast a form of nutritional harm reduction, a way to use food to reduce the consequences of the overly processed Western diet. In my case, the logical miracle that happened when I cleaned up my diet was freedom from the chronic depression and anxiety that had plagued me my entire adult life.

In AA it's first about not drinking and then about finding your purpose beyond just not drinking. Same thing in Suppers. Early on I wasn't ready to give up the things like food that I used to manipulate how I felt. I had never imagined my life without anxiety. Now, anxiety comes when it's supposed to. I get anxious when it's a real emotion because of something that is going on. I am no longer constitutionally anxious because of poor nutritional status. My body is now better designed for sense of purpose.

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With my own health problems clearly heading in the right direction, I had a lot more energy and wherewithal to focus on my family. I was, after all, raising two children of an alcoholic who had already developed a taste for the chemicals in freezer pops.

It was tricky bringing my children into this. Imposing a cold turkey approach to all their favorite foods was not an option. I had to pick my battles with them and my husband too. In his case, it took feeding him Suppers food at every opportunity and getting him to attend some Suppers meetings. At one of them he heard a woman a story that sounded similar to his experience. Her anxious depression turned around when she started eating according to the recommendations for people with blood type O. There were scientific arguments for eating according to blood type that really appealed to him so that was the door we entered through when we started making changes in our household. Thank God we all had the same blood type! The restriction of gluten grains, coffee, sugars, and dairy foods turned out to be exactly what I needed to reverse the anxious depression that plagued me my entire adult life.

We made small changes, slowly, over time. First we replaced favorite treats with the health food store variety. We started reading labels. We tried the foods that were supposed to be stabilizing for us O's. We snuck in more vegetables wherever we could. Sometimes we bought organic, but we didn't make ourselves crazy about it. We paid more attention to the habits of family friends who run a wheat-free kitchen. Eventually we reduced even the health food store treats as our taste buds and preferences leaned more towards wholesome meals.

From a mother's point of view, it was a small miracle to watch the incidence of meltdowns decrease. Mood swings made sense in the context of the kids' day; they didn't strike out of the blue after a handful of jelly beans or when my daughter had to wait too long before eating. Ultimately our model of nutritional harm reduction took form as we baby stepped the transition into single, whole, fresh foods.

Today I have children who read labels and see connections between what they eat and how they feel. They love referring to the blood type book to see if foods they enjoy are listed among those beneficial for O's. But we could never have made these changes just following the directions in books. We had to see it, try it, do it, play with it in the context of the Suppers support system. It took two years to turn the family ship around. Taking baby steps of nutritional harm reduction, we kept everybody on board. And now, when my daughter wants to know if something is healthy the questions run more like this:

"Are peaches good for O's, Mommy?"