

Remembering Al

Al was my first client as a beginning social work intern. He was an alcoholic, and he taught me many things. I was sent, somewhat unwillingly, to an unfamiliar town to intern in a county-sponsored substance abuse treatment program for four months. I had never worked with substance abusers before and hadn't yet in my young life known anybody with an alcohol or other drug problem. I was ripe for a great learning experience, and Al provided it.

Al was assigned to me as a client when he first entered the detoxification facility. I was a middle-class white woman in my early 20s, and he was a white man who looked ancient to me but was probably only in his late 50s. He was extremely intoxicated when I met him that first night, but very polite nonetheless, and seemed embarrassed to be seen in his current situation. I was impressed by his courtly manners, because he wasn't what my stereotypes of an alcoholic had led me to expect.

Al had a great story to tell a person such as myself who was new to taking psychosocial histories. He said he was a college graduate and had been an engineer for many years in a neighboring state. He had a family, a sister who would take him in if he could only get to where she lived. He just couldn't remember her telephone number or her married name, but he was sure he could find her house if he was in the area. Most important, he had a safe deposit box containing quite a lot of money, but the box was in a bank in the town where his sister lived, and he needed cash

to get there. When I naively asked why he didn't just have someone get the cash and send it to him, he patiently explained, as if to a child, that the bank wouldn't release the box to anyone but him.

He explained that his life had just somehow gone astray. He had lost his job, through no fault of his own, and his wife had kicked him out; she was a misunderstanding bitch. His kids had turned their backs on him, because they had been poisoned by their mother. He spoke eloquently of a fascinating life. He seemed to be a victim of circumstance, who had turned to alcohol completely by accident and was bewildered by where the journey had taken him.

I believed him. I believed every word the man said for nearly four months. The agency didn't have money to send him back to his family, and he had none of his own, so he stayed on with us. Al became my personal project and I worked very hard to "save" him. I saw him every day while he was in the detoxification center. He seemed to be very motivated to get his life back together, and I regarded myself as the agent of his return to sobriety. He played his part in this process admirably. He told me over and over how much I was helping him.

It was wonderful for him to have someone understanding to talk with who believed his story, fantastic as it was. Other people hadn't seen the real person underneath the out-of-control drinker. He felt that he had a chance now to succeed, thanks to me. He laid it on thick, and I lapped it up. I had a need to be

helpful, and he needed to be helped. Al and I moved together very well in our dance.

My supervisor and other agency staff warned me not to be gullible, not to believe everything a client told me. After all, these seasoned workers said, most of our clients live on the streets, and they become con men to survive. By the time they got to us, they were pretty far down in their slide from middle-class to skid row. Because of the nature of the program as a county service center, we rarely received clients who were still very attached to conventional society. Mostly the detoxification center served as a way-station for people to gather their strength, dry out before the next binge, and reconsider the idea of arresting their slide. Most of them would be dead before long, my colleagues told me, because alcoholism is a killer disease. Every now and then someone "dried out" and stayed sober, really changing their lives, but nearly all of the clients were too far gone to do more than verbally express their desire to change. I needed to understand the reality of the situation, the staff told me, so I wouldn't be too disappointed when Al disappeared to get drunk.

I listened politely to their warnings, but privately I thought the staff to be burned out, and it was no wonder that the clients didn't recover, given this cynicism. I thought that I, with my youth and good intentions, armed with my new social work knowledge, could beat the odds. Maybe I couldn't "save" every client who came through detox, but I was convinced that I could

"save" Al.

I got Al admitted into our halfway house facility following detoxification, and he was exceedingly grateful to have such a nice place to live. He was still physically weak, but he said he was determined to stay away from alcohol and to recover from this terrible disease that had claimed him for many years. He enthusiastically participated in group therapy, AA meetings, and other program components, and he even tried to play volley-ball, although he was no natural athlete and years of drinking had wrecked his coordination. I continued to see him daily for individual therapy. Mostly I listened to his stories.

For a few months things appeared to be going very well with Al. Most of my other clients had joined the revolving door, entering detoxification for a few days and then leaving, only to return within a couple of weeks. They were always sheepish about seeing me again, drunk, after having only days before proclaimed their fervent desire never to touch another drop. After a while I caught on that this was a game we all played together; my part was to fill out forms and offer talk therapy, while the clients told me what they thought I wanted to hear as they spent several days recovering from a seriously debilitating episode of uncontrolled drinking. The truth was, they wanted to quit but couldn't, and the resources at my disposal were inadequate to help them resist the overwhelming compulsion that had them in its grip. All we at the center could really offer them was "three hots and a cot," as well as some human caring, and hope that

something someone would say or do would stop the seemingly inevitable slide toward death.

I could accept this frustrating reality with all of my clients except Al. I wanted Al to be the exception. Together we built elaborate plans to get him back to his money and his family, and to keep him sober, even to get him another job. Finally, after months of effort, I found an organization that would buy him a bus ticket to the neighboring state, and I dropped him off at the bus station. I thought he was gone for good, and I felt great about my ability to "save" at least one person.

My months at the substance abuse treatment program were at an end. I had evolved from thinking I could "save" all of my clients to thinking I could only "save" a few of them. I had gained an appreciation for the goodness in the souls of my clients, who seemed always ready to offer a helping hand to someone else but who had next to no insight into their own conditions. I had attended funerals for several of them, and had watched as a couple became sober and shakily entered a new phase of life. I had learned how valuable Alcoholics Anonymous and its unconditional support can be to many people. And I better understood the allure of the dark side of alcoholism, how the bottle became the best friend of most of my clients. I had developed a few tools in working with alcoholics, but I knew I still had much to learn, and I felt optimistic about my developing skills.

On my way out of town, with my car packed, I stopped at the detoxification center to say goodbye to the staff who had become my good friends during the past months. When I walked in, I was absolutely stricken to find that Al had been admitted a few hours earlier. He was drunk, obnoxious and overbearing. As I stared at him, aghast at seeing him again in this condition, and with such a different personality than I had experienced before, he came over to me with his hand out for a handshake.

"Hello, I'm Sam. And who are you?"

"Al, don't you remember me? I'm Diane, and I worked with you for months."

"Diane, no, I don't remember a Diane. You must have mistaken me for someone else. My name is Sam."

The other staff didn't know how to comfort me in my distress, but they confirmed that he definitely was the person I had known as Al. This new personality, Sam, had an entirely different story, not at all similar to the one told to me when he was Al. I drove away, numbed and in shock at the difference in the man and the reality of my failure, shaking my head in dismay.

I never saw Al, or Sam, or whoever he was, again. I presume he is dead, because he was far into his addiction when I met him and he probably didn't have long to live even then. The few months that he stayed sober at the treatment center were probably a good respite from drinking, but were likely not enough to stop the deterioration. In talking with my supervisor, we agreed that he probably had organic brain syndrome as a result of

chronic alcoholism, and it was difficult to tell which, if either, of these personalities was indicative of the real person.

I was devastated. Al's return to drinking meant that I had failed completely in my mission to "save" him, to return him to society as a productive member. What had all of my hard work meant, then, to these clients I couldn't save? Was I really cut out to be a social worker, if I couldn't even save one person?

It took years to recognize and internalize the learning from this experience, and from Al. In many ways, Al was a comfortable person for me to work with, because he was somewhat similar to me and to my family. He spoke well, and I believe that he could have been a college graduate. He might even have been an engineer at one time. His eloquent use of language and his obvious middle-class background were things I could relate to, and I clung to them as evidence that he was worthy of being "saved". I think my prejudice was that he was more worthy of my efforts to "save" him than many of the other clients who were of different races, with blue-collar backgrounds, were less articulate, and most of all, didn't tell me what I wanted to hear.

I don't think I ever had the slightest idea of who Al was as a person. I doubt if even he knew. He had been on the streets for many years, I think, and he knew how to read people and tell them what they wanted to hear. This was his gift in exchange for a place to stay for a while, hot food, and safety. It seemed to

be a worthy exchange, because it made me feel useful and needed.

It didn't ultimately help him, though, nor did it ultimately aid me to develop my helping skills. So our interpersonal dance, although comfortable for both of us, was at best a waste of time.

The harsh reality that I finally came to understand is that I can't "save" anybody. On this essentially spiritual level, we are all responsible for saving ourselves. Other people can be there for support and guidance, but the ultimate responsibility is ours alone. Al punctured my god-complex and helped me to realize the limits of my influence.

In my ensuing years in the field, I came to believe that the clients at this detoxification center were the most challenging I would meet. Their losses were already so great and the addiction so strong that any social worker's chances for making a significant difference in their lives were slim. My colleagues had understood better than I the value of human caring, of providing a respite from drinking, of nourishing the body with good food and rest, and of offering at least a vision for a different way of life. They were willing to settle for this contribution, and they respected the clients as unique individuals, without needing to see a change to enhance their own image as effective social workers.

I remember Al fondly, after nearly 20 years. He was a loving, caring person who was caught in the throes of a terrible disease process and who did the best he could in very difficult circumstances. He certainly had the gift of gab, entertaining me

with wonderful stories, and he stayed sober for nearly four months. In the end, the addiction recalled him, but I hope that those four months helped him to last longer than he would have otherwise.

Because of Al, I learned not to take it personally when a client relapsed. Relapse isn't about me and my failure to "save", it's a reality of the disease or condition of addiction.

Realizing the limits of my power helped me to accept clients wherever they were and it allowed me to focus on shoring up their own sense of power to help themselves.

Al taught me a lot about myself and my blind spots. Because of him, I began to learn about humility. He helped me to distinguish boundaries, the difference between myself and somebody else. He also helped me to understand that, when somebody's story seems too good to be true, it probably isn't true. What I should be focusing on instead is why the person feels a need to tell me such a fantastic story. I certainly don't need to automatically reject whatever a person tells me, but I don't need to accept it, either. I can walk a middle road, remembering that part of the addiction process for many people involves telling other people what they want to hear. I became much more effective when I learned to confront unlikely stories while making it safe for clients to examine the truth. Working with alcoholics was a constant barometer of my own need to be needed, and helped me to keep my priorities straight.

Eventually I moved on to other areas of the social work

profession, although I truly enjoyed my years in the addictions field. Now that most of my work is with MSW students, I often have opportunities to remind myself of the lessons I first learned with Al, and to pass them on to other naive students who want to "save" the world.

Al provided me with a hard but very effective learning experience, and I smile now when I think of him. I am especially grateful that I was around long enough to see more than one aspect of his addiction. Even though I was shocked and dismayed to see him drunk again after all my hard work, that was the best part of the lesson. What if I had been allowed to think that I had successfully "saved" him?

I suspect that I grew a great deal more from our experiences together than he did. Wherever he is, I thank him.