What Does ACA Recovery Look Like?

By working the Twelve Steps of ACA and by attending meetings regularly, we begin to realize that ACA recovery involves emotional sobriety*. That is what ACA recovery looks like. But what is emotional sobriety?

To understand emotional sobriety, we must first understand emotional intoxication, which is also known as para-alcoholism. Para-alcoholism represents the mannerisms and behaviors we developed by living with an alcoholic or dysfunctional parent. As children, we took on the fear and denial of the alcoholic or nondrinking parent without taking a drink.

Emotional intoxication can be characterized by obsession and unhealthy dependence. There also can be compulsion. Even without drugs and alcohol, we can be "drunk" on fear, excitement or pain. We can also be drunk on arguing, gossip, or self-imposed isolation.

In essence the Laundry List, the 14 traits of an adult child, offers a textbook example of the behaviors and attitudes that characterize an emotionally intoxicated person. We fear authority figures and judge ourselves harshly while being terrified of abandonment. Without help, we seek out others to reenact our family dynamics. We can recreate our family dysfunction at home and on the job indefinitely until we find ACA. This means that our adult relationships resemble the template relationship we developed as children to survive an alcoholic or otherwise dysfunctional home. We find others to create chaos, conflict, or unsafe relationships.

Emotional sobriety involves a changed relationship with self and others. We measure emotional sobriety by the level of honesty, mutual respect, and the acceptability of feelings in our relationships. If our relationships are still manipulative and controlling, we are not emotionally sober no matter what we tell ourselves about our recovery program. Emotional sobriety means that we are involved in changed relationships that are safe and honest. We feel a nearness to our Higher Power. We cultivate emotional sobriety through the Twelve Steps and through association with other recovering adult children.

*Emotional sobriety was formally introduced to the ACA fellowship through the Identity Papers. The 1986 paper, "Finding Wholeness Through Separation: The Paradox of Independence," shows the genesis of emotional sobriety. The possibility of emotional sobriety is created through the broadening and deepening of the Steps and Traditions.

Part I

ACA Twelve Steps

The pathway to emotional sobriety that endures time is through the Twelve Steps of ACA. This is the heart of the Adult Children of Alcoholics program. Adapted from the time-proven Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, the Twelve Steps are precision tools that work. The ACA Steps clarify and help resolve a childhood of neglect, abuse, or rejection. With more than 30 years of experience, ACA is a proven program that offers a way out of confusion. The program brings clarity and sanity in measures we always hoped for, but usually could not believe existed as we grew up in dysfunctional homes.

Since their original publication by AA in 1939, the Twelve Steps have relieved the suffering of millions of alcoholics, addicts, codependents, food addicts, sex addicts, and many more obsessive-compulsive types. The Steps, and their various adaptations, have brought sure hope and a better way of life to those who desire change. In ACA, the Twelve Steps also bring recovery to our members who were not raised with addiction in the home. Our experience shows that these ACA members internalized the same abandonment and shame as children brought up in alcoholism or other addictions.

Beginning with Step One, we address denial, which can involve simply refusing to admit that abuse or neglect occurred in our childhood. Denial also includes trivializing behavior or remarks that were obviously harmful to us. If we admit that harmful behavior occurred, we can still be in denial if we fail to acknowledge the effects of the harm in our lives. Additionally, we are practicing denial if we attempt to explain away the behavior or to offer excuses for our family. By breaking through our denial, we seek a full remembrance. We find our loss and learn our story. With help and acceptance, we recognize the false identity we had to develop to survive family dysfunction.

In ACA, we learn to focus on ourselves and find our real identity. We must be willing to work the Twelve Steps so we can grow emotionally and spiritually. These are the Steps we work to address growing up in a dysfunctional family.

1. We admitted we were powerless over the effects of alcoholism or other family dysfunction; that our lives had become unmanageable.

2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understand God.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understand God, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to others who still suffer, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

The Twelve Steps are simple but not always easy; however, they work if a person truly wants to change and can hang on while change occurs. The Steps sometimes work even if a person picks at them like a finicky child forking at a lump of unwanted spinach. Such half measures often create the personal discomfort that motivates the adult child into greater action and personal growth.

By adapting AA's Steps, ACA is adding its flavor to the Steps while keeping intact the original intent of an admission of powerlessness followed by surrender. Such surrender is followed by a review of spiritual beliefs, self-inventory, making amends, and seeking conscious contact with a Higher Power. We develop a genuine attitude to live in love and service to ourselves and others.

While ACA adapted the AA Steps with few word changes, our experience shows that the adaptation has unique considerations. Because of our inherent sense of being flawed or unlovable, the adult child must be reminded that he or she has worth. We have worth and are acceptable, regardless of mistakes made or accomplishments achieved or not achieved. As adult children we are a traumatized group of adults, who can revert to self-doubt when making errors or sensing disapproval by others. No adaptation of the Twelve Steps for adult child purposes will be fully successful unless it emphasizes self-love. We are God's children despite mistakes made. Through such affirmations and Twelve Step work, we come to believe in our self-worth. We learn to tell ourselves that we are human and have something to offer the world. We face our mistakes and the opinions of others with confidence. In ACA, we get to say who we are, instead of a drunk or dysfunctional parent saying who we are not. This is the great fact for us.

We have paid our dues with the countless cursings, threats, and subtle neglectful acts we have endured as children. We stand now as adults, not complaining, but as people seeking to feel and be. We have earned it. This is our claiming of the Twelve Steps and their rewards.

Our solution appeals to cultures across the globe. Our members practice ACA recovery in Europe, Asia, Pacific Islands, and the Middle East in addition to North and South America. We have learned that children anywhere exposed to shame and abandonment develop the same soul wound. When given an option as adults, many choose ACA's way of life. The ACA program is a proven way of life that fulfills its members emotionally and spiritually.

The term "adult child" does not mean that we live in the past or that we are infantile in our thinking and actions. The term means that we meet the demands of adult life with survival techniques learned as children. Before finding recovery, we suppressed our feelings and were overly responsible. We tried to anticipate the needs of others and meet those needs so we would not be abandoned. We tried to be flexible or supportive of others as we denied our own needs. We monitored our relationships for any sign of disapproval. We tried to be perfect so we would be loved and never left alone. Or we isolated ourselves and thought we needed no one.

As adults, we have been responsible team players or invisible loners. We are great employees, listeners, planners and party givers, but we respond to adult life with childhood survival traits that leave us feeling unsure of who we are. This is how we survived childhood, and this is how we lived as "adult children."

When faced with working ACA's Twelve Steps, some adult children feel overwhelmed and balk. Others are alarmed and believe they could be encouraged to abandon or confront their families. This is not the purpose of the ACA program. In ACA, we realize that our parents did not have the options that we have in ACA. If we were raised by relatives or grandparents, these people as well did not always have options. Our parents or relatives passed on family dysfunction. We are not minimizing the fact that many of our parents acted hostile, manipulative, or indifferent. Some dysfunctional parents were inebriated and pitiful. We balance our experiences as children with the knowledge that we have a unique chance through ACA to break the cycle of family dysfunction. Even though our families may not seek recovery, we can respect them. We set appropriate boundaries to protect ourselves. We can disentangle our lives from their lives without shutting them out completely.

We ask the adult child considering ACA to look at the program as a way of life that will unfold over time, bringing rich rewards of emotional relief and self-acceptance. There will be transformations and healing grace as well. We suggest that ACA members work the Steps one at a time, avoiding looking ahead and perhaps becoming overwhelmed. In ACA, we learn to slow down, breathe, and ask for help. The Steps work best when we surrender our self-sufficient attitudes and ask for help.

Our experience shows that the Steps are a proven way of life, yielding new meaning and a sense of purpose in one's life. We apply the Steps with willingness and honesty. In addition to addressing dependence and addiction, the Twelve Steps awaken the person to an inner strength

that comes with a true connection to his or her Higher Power. We have always had this inner strength. Even when we appeared pitiful and helpless, the strength was there helping us survive until we could find real help. The Twelve Steps bring forth this God-given strength and true choice or discernment. With the Steps and true choice, we can finally breathe deeply and feel joy.

Making a Beginning

Beginning with Step One the adult child begins to realize, perhaps for the first time, the destructive malady of growing up in an alcoholic or other dysfunctional home. In addition to shame, our families included perfectionism, rage, mental illness, sexual abuse, religious abuse, or illicit drug use. Some parents were hypochondriacs who abused prescriptions and used an endless number of ailments to control others. By working the Steps and attending meetings, we see that we are not unique and that our family is not unique as well. There are millions of people like us. In ACA, we begin to acquire the language we need to describe what happened to us in a manner that has meaning and resonance. Even adult children with years of Twelve Step experience in other programs gain a new awareness of family-of-origin issues by working the ACA Steps.

By working the Twelve Steps with a sponsor or knowledgeable counselor, the adult child realizes the denial and secrecy that were necessary to survive such an upbringing. Denial, which fosters a lack of clarity, is the glue that allows the disease of family dysfunction to thrive. Cloaked in denial, the disease is passed on to the next generation with amazing consistency. The basic language of denial is: "don't talk, don't trust, don't feel."[1]

With Step One we come out of denial and talk about what happened. We bring details to light. Many of us have smelled our parents' drunken breath. We have found hidden whisky bottles and pill bottles. We have cleaned up vomit. We have comforted a frightened brother or sister. The police have been called to our home. Our neighbors talked about our family. We avoided having friends over because we feared how our parents might act in front of them. We have made excuses for our parents, pleaded with our parents and condemned them with no real change. We have hidden illicit drugs and lied to neighbors. We have slept with our clothes on and ready to run. Some of us have thrown water on a mattress accidentally lit by a passed out mother or father. We have burned with shame after being cursed or belittled. We have listened to a parent's promises to change but have seen no lasting results. We have heard our parents curse one another regularly, swapping insults and hurtful claims. We have listened to them rehash the same blame and threats year after year. Nothing changed. We have seen our parents run up great sums of debt to buy affection or happiness. Our utilities have been cut off for nonpayment. We have lied to the collection agency for our parents. We have experienced divorce or heard talk of divorce that never came. Our siblings may have remembered things differently, but we know our own truth. We know what happened and we are breaking our silence.

[1]It Will Never Happen to Me, by Dr. Claudia Black—1981

Families without alcoholism have similar situations. These families abuse the children through the use of intellect, manipulation, or silence. We know our truth.

By working the Steps, the adult child realizes family roles that were required to approximate protection in an unsafe home. We often feared for our safety and took on roles to disarm our parents. Some of us sought to be invisible. The roles which are usually present in alcoholic and dysfunctional homes include "family hero, lost child, scapegoat, and mascot."[2] Some of the roles allowed us to be a parental favorite. As the favorite, we could temporarily dodge harmful behavior that could be shifted to a brother or sister. However, we were harmed by the process as well or when it was our turn to be abused, neglected or rejected. In addition to physical abuse, we were subjected to emotional abuse. The emotional abuse involved belittling comments or hatefulness aimed at our hearts. The abuse left no visible marks, but it is stored in our bodies just the same as slapping and hitting leave marks on the body.

In addition to creating false safety, our childhood roles had other functions. The hero child of a dysfunctional family might seek to make good grades at school. This is the honors student who shows the world that her family values education and is therefore stable. The mascot, typically the youngest of the family, serves as comic relief for dysfunctional homes that leave little room for joy. The lost or invisible child remains silent. The child knows it is not safe to speak. The lost child retreats to his or her room and remains absorbed in reading books or fantasies of living elsewhere. The scapegoat child lives out the parents' prophesy of being a bad or rotten kid. These are the roles that are almost predictable for any family in which dysfunctional parenting is present.

Such survival roles tend to have a hardy life and remain fixed in our personalities long after we have left our unhealthy homes. Adult children finding recovery learn about such dysfunctional roles. They can look at their families and see the roles in effect decades after the children have grown up and left the family. There is the 50-year-old brother still playing the hero. There is the 40-year-old sister, living out the lost child role by avoiding holiday meals and rarely calling home. This is difficult to watch once we find ACA and begin our recovery journey. The adult child in recovery gets the chance to retire his or her role with dignity. We are never too old to work an ACA program and receive its benefits.

In addition to learning about survival roles through the Twelve Steps, many adult children realize they have absorbed generational shame, abandonment, and rage only to grow up and recreate similar families or relationships. They realize they wanted to fix others. Without focused help, many ACAs spend their lives in adult relationships trying to repair their original family. Who hasn't read a story about a child with an ailing parent growing up to be a doctor in an effort to find a cure for the ailing parent? Adult children are no different. We want to heal our drunken or dysfunctional parents by acting good, silent, or by taking care of them. But the "sickness" the adult child attempts to cure in the parent is the disease of dysfunction, which we have no power over.

[2]Roles by Sharon Wegscheider

The ACA Identity Papers identify this behavior as our main problem—a mistaken belief that we could have changed our parents. Additionally, The Problem, read at ACA meetings, underscores our attempts to heal or rescue others. It states: "We confused love with pity, tending to love those we could rescue." Trying to rescue or heal our parents set the course of our lives. Many ACAs grow up believing they have failed in healing their families without realizing it was never their job to do so. As adults, many of us subconsciously attempt to heal our families in our adult relationships by disguised designs. In ACA, we realize we have no power over alcoholism and family dysfunction. We cannot change anyone but ourselves.

At the same time, some of us were so abused or belittled as children that we felt powerless to have any effect on our parents' behavior. The thought of healing or changing them never occurred to us. However, we grew up with the same loss, shame and self-hate as other adult children. Like others, we turned to control in adulthood for a sense of safety.

Without recovery, we, as adult children, intuitively find dysfunctional people and attempt to heal them or cure them based on our upbringing. We confuse love with pity and get unhealthy dependence. ACA experience shows that such behavior dooms relationships. We cannot change anyone. The only person we can change is ourselves, and an adult child rarely changes unless he or she becomes willing to learn a new way to live. The good news is this: There is another way to live.

The ACA fellowship offers hope to any adult child, who can realize he or she has hit a bottom and become willing to attend meetings, work the Twelve Steps, and seek a Higher Power of his or her understanding. There are many types of bottoms in ACA. Some of our members hit a bottom with alcoholism or addiction. Others hit a bottom in codependent relationships that can be just as addictive as drugs. For instance, some adult children become obsessed and develop a compulsion for another person that is similar to the addict's obsession and compulsion for drugs. The "withdrawal" from an addictive, codependent relationship can be just as painful, if not more painful, as an addict's withdrawal from drugs. ACA members know that codependent pain can grip a person's body with an agonizing sense of abandonment. The fear of abandonment can be so powerful that it makes breathing and concentration difficult. Fear of going insane is not uncommon. Some adult children have been struck with anxiety or panic attacks when going through a codependent separation. For many, it is too much to take without help. Codependent pain of this magnitude is actually our childhood terror of abandonment inserting itself into the break up. The intense fear of losing our spouse or partner is really our Inner Child reliving the fear of being unloved or unwanted by our family.

There are many definitions for codependence, but for our purposes, codependence means that we constantly look outside of ourselves for love, affirmation, and attention from people who cannot provide it. At the same time, we believe that we are not truly worthy of love or attention. In our view, codependence is driven by childhood fear and distorted thinking known as para-alcoholism. We choose dependent people who abandon us and lack clarity in their own

lives because it matches our childhood experiences. In ACA, we learn to love and affirm ourselves and develop relationships with people who can do the same. We learn that our feelings will not kill us. The program works for those who want it.

ACA membership is defined by a wide variety of people. There is the newcomer looking for a sponsor and learning the family rules of "don't talk, don't trust, and don't feel;" the older ACA member who has worked the Twelve Steps and who sponsors others; the ACA member who has significant experience in other Twelve Step programs, yet lacks an understanding of the Inner Child; and the adult child who has lost focus on the ACA program and needs to return to clarity through the Steps and ACA meetings.

Powerlessness versus Learned Helplessness

Many adult children struggle with the notion of powerlessness in Step One since powerlessness is all that many of us have known as children; however, the powerlessness that we describe in ACA is different than the learned helplessness we experienced as children. As children we were overrun by parents who unknowingly taught us to feel helpless or to feel less competent. Some parents accidentally undercut our learning ability and suggested we could do nothing right. Or our parents said we should try harder when we had already reached a level of above average. Some of us learned to be helpless or to give up since we could see no way to please our parents or family. Later on in life, we realized we could do things and learn, but we still had areas of learned helplessness, particularly in relationships. We either gave up or increased our attempts to control others. We could be subtle or aggressive in our attempted control.

In teaching us helplessness, our parents clouded this reality by failing to understand what they had done. They taught us to be dependent and then blamed us for being dependent. When we look at our childhood, we can see how our parents undermined our reality by telling us how we should think and feel when we objected to their treatment of us. As children, we were outmatched. Our parents projected their fears, suspicions, and sense of inferiority onto us. We were defenseless against the projections. We absorbed our parents' fear and low self-worth by thinking these feelings originated with us. Our dysfunctional parents often said: "Why can't you get this?" "I am so ashamed of you." "Why do you act like that?" "You must be the dumbest child in the world." Upon hearing such comments, we felt helpless to defend ourselves. We began to believe we could not trust our perceptions. Some of us knew we could not trust our parents as well, but we believed their words without question. We believed what they said about us was truth, when it was not.

With Step One, the adult child realizes that he or she is now an adult and that the powerlessness mentioned in the Step does not engender a denial of feelings or mean that we are helpless. Powerlessness in ACA can mean that we were not responsible for our parents' dysfunctional behavior as children or adults. It means that as adults we are not responsible for going back

and "fixing" the family unit. We are not responsible for rescuing, saving, or healing our parents or siblings who remain mired in family dysfunction. We can detach with love and begin the gradual process of learning about boundaries. We live and let live.

While some adult children confuse powerlessness for helplessness, there are others who dismiss the idea of admitting powerlessness as Step One suggests. These adult children believe they are all-knowing, all-sensing, and all-flexible. They secretly feel powerful in their ability to adapt to any situation or group of people they might encounter. These adult children make great salespeople, planners, and instructors. No situation is too challenging, and no group of people is too complex for these adult children to "conquer" with their adaptive behavior. These adult children usually see no need to ask for help in their lives, believing they are self-sufficient and beyond such a need. They feel powerful in their self-sufficient control. They tend to manipulate others for things they want, but find out they are not happy with themselves when their wants are met by others. These adult children rarely stop to think that self-sufficiency is covering up a fear of rejection which they think could come if they ask for help.

Meanwhile, to ask for help and get it might mean that someone would get to know them, and that is too risky. In such cases, self-sufficient power is really a mechanism to ensure isolation and aloneness. These adult children remain in control and are suspicious or indifferent to notions of powerlessness mentioned in Step One. They don't often trust what they hear in ACA meetings, but they adapt to remain in control.

By admitting our powerlessness over alcoholism and dysfunction, we gradually learn to trust our perceptions and feelings. Whether we are self-sufficient or clamoring about appearing helpless, we can learn to trust ourselves and ask for what we need. We let people into our lives. At the same time, the word "boundary" begins to have meaning and creates a reasonable amount of power for us. We stop giving away our power to others and feeling helpless to change. By admitting our powerlessness, we take our first step toward reclaiming personal power, which is critical for healing our fractured identities. If we are compulsively self-reliant, we take our first step toward trust and asking for help.

With Step One, we also begin to realize that we have a choice. Before coming to ACA and finding the solution to family dysfunction, adult children do not have a choice[3]. While we had the illusion of choice as adults, what we really practiced before ACA was control, which predictably fizzled into binges on food, work, sex, gambling, spending, or destructive relationships. It is not uncommon for us to have had two or more addictive or compulsive behaviors occurring at the same time. For example, we have seen adult children in active drug addiction also enmeshed in a loveless relationship while being sexually compulsive with another partner. These addictions and compulsive behaviors can be substituted for one another in addition to occurring simultaneously. Based on our experiences before ACA, we thought we had made bad choices when in reality we were condemned to repeat the same mistakes of our parents through compulsions

[3]Earnie Larsen—Feb. 26, 2005, Las Vegas talk.

or mad dreams of denial. We had no choice, but we judged ourselves without mercy for "choosing" badly.

We can re-experience powerlessness in our daily lives as we try to fix our current relationships based on old ideas of feeling helpless and hopeless. When we realize such powerlessness as an adult we step back, let go, and take a new course of action or take no action. We learn to detach with compassion and to stop trying to repair our family of origin. We also change our current behavior in our current relationships; however, the key words are "slowly" and "gradually" and come from the Twelve Promises of ACA. Promise Eleven states: "With help from our ACA support group, we will slowly release our dysfunctional behaviors." Promise Twelve states: "Gradually, with our Higher Power's help, we learn to expect the best and get it."

Unmanageability

Like powerlessness, the concept of unmanageability in Step One is often misunderstood by adult children. While some of our families were chaotic and unstable when we were children, many homes seemed manageable and productive. But we learn that productivity does not always equal a manageable, wholesome life. For many of us, what we thought was manageable or desirable in our dysfunctional homes was actually oppressive control.

The unmanageability that we speak of in Step One involves our desire to control others and ourselves while having a sense that we are not capable or effective. While we have moments of control, we usually experience painful episodes of losing control. We feel hurt when confronted by our loved ones for our controlling behavior. They act out in anger or abandonment to disrupt our attempts to control them. We may be momentarily hurt, but we usually blame others for this abandonment. We blame them for not reading our minds or not acting in a manner that we would approve. We run about attempting to control others and situations in an effort to avoid our own unmanageable lives. Control is an attempt to minimize uncertainty and to avoid our own uncomfortable feelings about the past and present. Yet, our unmanageability, fueled by our fear-based control, inevitably creates what we fear the most: abandonment.

Many adult children, whether they are a newcomer or a member who has worked another Twelve Step program, miss this subtle distinction between powerlessness and helplessness. They miss fear-based control appearing as manageability. ACA experience has shown that adult children will cling to controlling behavior and learned helplessness as long as it works for them; however, these learned behaviors can be changed with diligent Step work and regular attendance at ACA meetings.

Lastly, any discussion about ACA powerlessness and unmanageability is incomplete without the disease concept of alcoholism and family dysfunction. When alcoholism or other dysfunction is present in the family, every member of the family is affected. We are affected in body, mind, and spirit. Through the first 18 years of our lives, our families had 6,570 days to shame, belittle, ignore, criticize, or manipulate us during the most formative years of our being. That is 160,000 hours of living in dysfunction with unhealthy parenting. That is 72 seasons of sorrow stored

deeply in the tissue of our bodies. The dysfunction is encoded into our souls as the false self. To survive this long exposure to family dysfunction, our minds developed deeply entrenched roles and traits that changed the meaning of words and experiences. Some of us misremembered the damaging nature of the abuse because we depended upon our abusers for food and shelter.

As children, we did not have the option to leave our homes. If our parents slapped us, molested us, or neglected us, we had to live with them. We had to figure out a way to survive. The subconscious survival decisions we made as children involved changing the meaning of words. Because we were vulnerable, we changed the way we perceived the emotional and physical abuse. We feared for our safety or feared we had caused these things to happen. We developed stories that minimized our parents' behavior or which convinced us that we were wrong and deserved their harmful behavior. We came to believe that we deserved to be hit or criticized with brutality. We confused molestation for love because the person molesting us was a relative describing such action as love. Such confused thinking about hitting or touching fueled our denial as adults. The confusion allows many of us to say we had normal childhoods when we have lived through hell.

We never spoke of family secrets. We thought we had forgotten the abuse, but the body and mind remembered. The survival traits we lived by showed a clear path of our terror of abandonment and being shamed. During these years of family dysfunction, our Inner Child or True Self went into hiding and remained heavily fortified under addictions or dependent behavior. This is what we mean when we say the disease of family dysfunction affects us in body, mind, and spirit. The disease survives in the language of denial and is passed on to the next generation through secrets, blame, and confusion.

The disease of family dysfunction is progressive, incurable, and sometimes fatal. The disease becomes worse over time unless treated; however, the malady is often misdiagnosed, causing the adult child to seek remedies that usually fail to bring true relief. Many adult children have taken their own lives or died from complications of drug addiction or physical ailments that can be traced to childhood abuse. These are stark claims, but we have found them to be true in our experience. This is the dire nature of the family disease of dysfunction and its great reach. But there is much hope in ACA and in sharing our pain with other recovering adult children.

We urge patience and gentleness when addressing these areas of our lives. That means we take care of ourselves. We do the Step work and program work necessary to reap the benefits of the ACA Promises.

Examining Spiritual Beliefs

Moving to Steps Two and Three, many adult children are confronted with the issue of faith and a Higher Power. In our anger at our parents and God, many of us thought we had outgrown or moved past this issue in our lives. Frankly, some of us did not like this part of the

ACA program. Being told of the spiritual nature of ACA irritated some of us. We wondered about the need for spirituality in recovery. We must remember that ACA is a spiritual and not religious program. Faith and religious conviction are not requirements for ACA membership. We avoid dogmatism and theological discussions, yet, a Higher Power is a key part of the ACA way of life.

Many adult children have assigned the traits of their dysfunctional parents to God or a Higher Power. If their parents were shaming, vengeful, and inconsistent, then their God tends to be the same. Some adult children describe having a "getcha God." For them, God keeps a record of their behavior and punishes them or "gets them" for making mistakes.

There are many levels of belief among our fellowship members. There are adult children, who are atheist or agnostic, who struggle with the notion of a universal force who will hear their prayers and make a meaningful impact in their lives. Numerous adult children recall praying to God for their parental abuse to stop, but nothing seemed to change. Many of these adult children concluded the Higher Power did not exist. They thought God did not hear their prayers. For these ACA members we ask that they keep an open mind. God, as we understand God, may have bundled up all such prayers from across the world and created ACA.

Other ACAs are staunch believers who cannot seem to allow a Higher Power to work in their lives. They cannot seem to get out of the way. There are also former believers who think they cannot reclaim faith. They feel abandoned by their Higher Power. One purpose of Step Two is to introduce the idea of keeping an open mind on the possibility of a Higher Power who can restore sanity. In some cases, our Higher Power helps us create sanity or wholeness for the first time in our lives.

ACA is a spiritual program that confronts the effects of the disease of dysfunction head on. The disease affects our bodies, minds, and spirits and requires a spiritual solution for lasting impact. Knowing where our perceptions of a Higher Power originated from and if the perceptions are accurate, is critical. We must discern what we believe or do not believe if we are to work Step Two and the remainder of the Steps.

Moving into Step Three, we see the third Step is merely a decision to ask our Higher Power to help us live courageously and sanely on a daily basis. One day at a time, we recover from the disease of family dysfunction. Step Three is underpinned by the ACA Solution, which is read at the opening of most adult child meetings. The ACA Solution is that we become our "own loving parent." Becoming our own loving parent involves seeing our "biological parents as the instruments of our existence." As The Solution states: "Our actual parent is our Higher Power, whom some of us choose to call God."

Working Step Three in ACA means that we realize that our parents brought us into the world. However, we are children of God, seeking to reclaim our true nature or original selves. The Twelve Steps support this journey to the Inner Child or True Self.

Meanwhile, Step Three helps further free us from the generational shame and abuse wrought by dysfunctional parents or caregivers. By realizing that our actual parent is our Higher Power, we complete more of the separation-from-family work. This work is critical so that we can frame the past in its proper perspective while reaching for a brighter future. We gradually realize our painful past can become our greatest asset. We realize we can help others who lack hope and clarity about what happened to them as children. As we learn to tell our story in meetings and in sponsorship, we move from "hurting, to healing, to helping." By practicing Step Three we begin to stand on our own. We are clear on what we believe. We seek God's will with greater clarity. We come to believe that we really are children of God, as we understand God. We come to believe that God hears our prayers. We are less confused on what to pray about. We begin to have true choice.

Inventory Steps and Realizing Generational Abuse

In Steps Four and Five, we review in detail how we were raised. We remember the messages, situations, and feelings. We also look at how we react and think in relationships as adults. We tell our story to another person and to God, as we understand God.

Like Step One, the Fourth Step of ACA distinguishes our fellowship from other Twelve Step programs. In ACA, we inventory our family system in addition to inventorying our own behavior. Other Twelve Step fellowships tend to limit a review of family dynamics. In ACA we look at our parents' behavior, family roles, rules, messages, abuse, neglect, and how that affects us as adults. We balance the inventory of our family system with a thorough inventory of our own behavior.

Many of us peep ahead to Steps Eight and Nine and sense that we have amends to make to various people, including our parents, who have harmed us as children. Oftentimes this harm is the vulgar act of incest, physical abuse, or mental and emotional abuse by sick parents or caregivers.

It is not the purpose of the Twelve Steps of ACA to place blame on the parents or caregivers; however, the adult child also must not shield the parents during the inventory process.

Our cofounder, Tony A., believed that adult children could take a "blameless" inventory of his or her parents. That means the adult child can name the types of abuse that occurred and the role playing necessary to survive the upbringing; however, with a "blameless" inventory, the adult child also realizes the generational nature of such abuse or neglect. The parents were passing on some form of what was done to them.

In preparing to make amends to our parents, we must develop a gentler manner toward ourselves. ACA's Fourth Step stresses this process. We must balance taking responsibility for misdeeds committed as an adult with the knowledge that our mistakes probably have their origin in the abuse we endured as children. We seek balance. We don't want to use our childhood abuse as an excuse to avoid taking responsibility for our actions as adults. But we also do not want to belittle ourselves for these mistakes or abuses. Adult children can be brutally hard on

themselves for making mistakes. We condemn ourselves and rage at ourselves with ease. This serves no good purpose and only means that we have learned to abuse ourselves. No one needs to beat up an adult child. We do it to ourselves long after our parents or relatives have stopped. We need to stop this self-condemning behavior. We can take full responsibility for our actions, knowing that our childhood abuse contributed to our abuses as adults. We also know that we are not blaming anyone for our adult behavior. We are learning to love ourselves. We can do this.

Making amends to parents or caregivers is a personal choice, which should be considered with the help of a sponsor, trusted friend, or informed counselor. These issues surface in detail in Step Four along with the conditions of abuse that we endured as children. While we encourage ACA members to avoid looking ahead in the Steps, we believe it is appropriate here to plant the seeds of common sense for later Steps. For too many years adult children have been sent to make amends to abusive parents without being given greater options. This cannot continue. There are conditions of abuse to consider, which will be discussed in greater detail in this workbook. Our experience shows that there is a way to make amends to abusive or neglectful parents while protecting one's self. We can proceed courageously with this knowledge.

In Step Four, we also shatter the cardinal rules of family dysfunction. The "don't talk" rule that most of us learned as children is broken so that a self-inventory can be fully reached. Breaking this rule began in Step One with the admission of being powerless over the effects of alcoholism and family dysfunction. When we work Steps Four and Five, we also break the rules of "don't trust" and "don't feel" by listing and articulating our life story in a structured manner. We learn to trust the person to whom we tell our story. We feel the feelings that arise by sharing such information. This sharing of our story with our sponsor or informed counselor reveals destructive patterns in our adult lives while illuminating abuses from our childhood. We also begin to see our grief or stored loss lying beneath our decisions to wrong ourselves and others.

In Step Four, the adult child learns to "name" the acts of abandonment, shame, and other forms of abuse practiced by dysfunctional parents. At the same time in Step Four, the adult child lists his or her own defects of character, acts of selfishness, and blame that allowed the adult child to rationalize destructive behavior or reject real solutions.

Character Defects Versus Laundry List Traits (Common Behaviors)

In Steps Six and Seven we learn the important difference between defects of character and The Laundry List traits developed as children to endure our dysfunctional homes. The main difference is this: adult children tend to feel relief when reading the 14 traits of The Laundry List because we realize we are not unique. However, we can feel shame or dread when hearing a list of defects of character.

Our defects of character can include judgmentalness, slothfulness, and dishonesty. These defects can cause great discomfort to others and ourselves. In other cases defects of character can include what society sees as noble traits, but for us they are stumbling blocks. These defects can include perfectionism, obsessive tidiness, and appearing self-sufficient by avoiding asking others for help. Employers praise the self-starter who keeps a tidy work place and rarely asks for help.

For the most part, our defects of character are different than our Laundry List traits because the traits are rooted in the First Step. The Laundry List traits include fearing authority figures, stuffing our feelings, people-pleasing, and feeling guilty when we ask for what we need. The traits are the effects of growing up in a dysfunctional family. These common behaviors have deep roots and could easily be called survival traits. The Laundry List traits are like branches of a tree, while the defects of character are the fruit. The defects of character can be linked back to one or more traits.

We use Steps Six and Seven to remove the defects of character. However, we take a different approach for the Laundry List behaviors. We attempt to integrate them through gentleness and patience. Our traits have great value to us if we can embrace them and transform them.

Until integration occurs, the traits can cause great despair for the adult child. We seem unable to change them until we get help. The Laundry List traits represent the false self, which is convinced that it is real. The false self disbelieves recovery and the loving nature of a Higher Power. This false self once protected us, but it now has to be retired.

We must be patient with ourselves as we integrate the Laundry List traits in Steps Six and Seven. The traits are deeply anchored because they are the defense system we developed as children under difficult circumstances. We must acknowledge a certain amount of respect for the traits and for ourselves for figuring out how to survive our dysfunctional homes. As children, they were the difference between living and dying in some cases. We survived, but in ACA we want to move beyond mere survival.

The safe harbor we find in ACA meetings is the starting point for transforming our survival traits. We listen to others share how they did it. We learn that the integrated trait of people-pleasing might look like this: we do helpful things for ourselves and accept praise, instead of constantly pleasing others and pushing away compliments. By transforming our people-pleasing manner, we do not stop caring about others. However, we stop going over the line to ensure that we are never abandoned.

Many times the Laundry List survival traits will rebel and assert themselves more clearly as we begin to surrender to a new way of life; however, our experience shows that the traits can be softened if not tempered into usefulness. Some of us seem to make no real progress on changing our survival behaviors until we become entirely willing as Step Six suggests. With more than survival as our goal, we continue to lessen the strength of the traits and gradually lay them down with respect.

Making Amends

In approaching Step Eight and our amends list, we should have a more balanced perspective of what happened to us as children and what we are responsible for as adults. Without this balanced Step work in the preceding seven Steps, most adult children will take on too much responsibility for their actions as children and adults. Others will ignore the amends process and remain mired in self-pity or protracted guilt that leads to further deterioration of the body and mind. By working the amends steps, Steps Eight and Nine, we are not letting our parents off the hook for their behavior nor are we taking an attitude about our childhood abuse that would excuse or protect our own selfish behavior as adults. We do not allow fear of uncomfortable situations to block us from making amends. ACA experience shows that amends build the character and inner strength that can only be wrought by going through the process.

In making our amends lists in Step Eight, we work closely with our sponsor or counselor to determine the exact nature of our amends. We look at the concepts of forgiveness and self-forgiveness. Many adult children blame themselves for passing on their childhood abuse to their own children. We must understand that we could not have turned out differently as parents. We simply repeated what was done to us because it is all we knew. This is not an excuse but a fact. With this knowledge, we begin to entertain the possibility of self-forgiveness in Step Eight.

Self-forgiveness is an elusive concept for adult children. We ask that the adult child keep an open mind and consider that God has already forgiven the person. God is waiting for the adult child's acceptance of such a blessing. We realize that we are practicing the concept of self-forgiveness when we hear ourselves talking about being gentle with ourselves.

With such an attitude, we learn to protect our emerging Inner Child or True Self when we make amends to parents or relatives who could still be in denial about their family dysfunction. We go into such amends knowing our Inner Child is listening but also knowing we are attempting to correct our damaging behavior as adults. We know we have made mistakes based on bad information from childhood. But we are focusing on our behavior and our need to change. We don't make excuses for our behavior; yet, self-forgiveness gives us a gentler view of who we are and what we are trying to change in our lives. We nurture our Inner Child by forgiving ourselves and turning over our parents and children to God, as we understand God.

Some incest victims have struggled with forgiving an offending parent or caregiver. We urge these adult children to speak with other ACA members to find a solution that works for them. Some parents are so dangerous and sick that the adult child must avoid them to remain safe and sane. Surely we would think twice about asking an incest victim to make amends to a perpetrator father, mother, or other relative. The actual amends may be to protect ourselves and know we have done nothing wrong.

At the same time, many other abused adult children believe that the healing process for them cannot be complete until they forgive their worst offenders. The process is not always simple, but it is possible to forgive a sick parent and find peace of mind. Forgiveness does not mean that the parent's behavior was proper or excusable. It means we learn to live freer lives by discharging old trauma in a safe manner.

In Step Nine, there are a variety of amends for a variety of people and relationships. Some amends require a simple apology while others will require changed behavior that can only occur over time and with Step work, meeting attendance, and the help of a Higher Power. In some amends, we must pay back money we have stolen or squandered. Other amends are "living amends" which will require us to leave people alone. Amends to a deceased parent or friend can involve writing that person a letter. We read the letter out loud to our sponsor or ourselves. We can usually find a way to make an amends if we pray and seek guidance.

Daily Inventory, Meditation, and Awakening

In Steps Ten, Eleven, and Twelve, we learn to continue our self-inventory process, pray and meditate, and carry the message of hope to adult children while practicing the principles of the Steps in our daily lives. ACA is a program for continued personal growth. The Twelve Steps call the adult child to live the ACA program with a range of feelings and self-confidence. ACA is a design for living that works.

In Step Ten, the adult child learns to appropriately inventory thoughts, actions, and motives with an honesty and gentleness that was not present in our families of origin. Step Ten is where many adult children learn to balance their responses to situations. We confront our black-and-white thinking and realize we have choices. We learn to say "no." We can ask for what we need. We become actors rather than reactors.

Most adult children learned to take their own inventory long before they arrived at ACA. However, these negative inventories were usually nothing more than our critical inner parent judging us harshly. Many adult children doubt themselves, criticize themselves, and feel inadequate without much prompting. Steps leading up to Step Ten can expose the toxic shame and abandonment we endured as children and teens. The shame gave us a negative orientation to the outward and inner world. In our minds, we developed the deeply grooved, self-shaming messages that lived on long after we left our homes. For instance, who could have his house burglarized and feel at fault for the burglary? An adult child. Who could feel guilty for asking someone blocking a doorway to move? An adult child. Step Ten helps us address any negative messages held over from previous Step work.

Step Ten does not mean we will never criticize our behavior again or never apologize for obvious wrongs on our part. However, with Step Ten we hopefully will learn to judge ourselves less harshly and forgive ourselves more readily. With such an attitude, we learn the difference between condemning ourselves unjustly and identifying areas to improve. We see how we took on too much responsibility for others' thoughts and actions. That's what we did as children

when we filled in the unspoken sentences that fell on the floor when our parents argued or criticized with an unreasonable manner. We were children taking on too much blame for dysfunction that was not our responsibility. In Step Ten, we unhook from the behavior of others. We learn to focus on our own thoughts and actions with balance and self-love.

In Step Eleven, we learn that spirituality is not reserved for those of the clergy or those of religious teaching or temperament. God, as we understand God, is available to all. We seek through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with a Higher Power. We seek the power we need to live in freedom each day. It has been said that a life of prayer and meditation leads to a life of mental stability or emotional maturity. In ACA, we believe this to be true. The power we find in Step Eleven is the true power from our True Parent, God as we understand God.

There are many methods to meditation and many fine books on the subject. In ACA, we have learned to keep it simple. Many of our members find a quiet place in the morning to meditate, but any time will do. We usually sit in a relaxed, upright position for 10 minutes to an hour. The time varies for each member. Some members, at the beginning of the meditation, take several deep breaths and exhale slowly, repeating an affirming message in their minds. As we concentrate on our breathing and on self-love or serenity, we feel a closer connection with our Higher Power. We feel relaxed and safe. Practice is the key to meditation. Make a start and continue to try.

In Step Twelve, the adult child begins to realize the value of his or her personal story. This realization is one of the key elements of undergoing a spiritual awakening and psychic change that brings integration to our fragmented lives. Our stories are often painful. Common logic would suggest forgetting the past, but our experience speaks otherwise. We are survivors with a voice. We are learning to live with self-love and grace. We have found the value in our stories, and we feel motivated to pass on hope to the still-suffering adult child. By working the Twelve Steps, we come to believe that our story has great spiritual value. We don't live in the past, but we know where we come from and how to find clarity and meaning in life. By the time we reach Step Twelve, we know about the negative messages we have confronted and changed. We also recognize self-forgiveness. We feel more sure of ourselves. In ACA, the adult child finds his or her voice.

In carrying the message of hope in the Twelfth Step, our story is the identification tool that allows us to connect with other adult children and bring hope like no one else can. Something marvelous happens when one adult child talks to another adult child, sharing experience, strength, and hope. Both are helped, and the message of recovery experiences a heartbeat.

By carrying the message of recovery through Step Twelve, the adult child confirms his or her commitment to the recovery process and passes on what was freely given to him or her. When we give back, we help ourselves in addition to helping someone else.

Part II

Twelve Steps of Adult Children

The following pages offer an in-depth section, which can serve as a study chapter for ACA meetings or a Twelve Step booklet for the ACA member. The workbook is designed to be read again and again at Step-study meetings. The workbook offers a detailed guide on writing and working ACA's Twelve Steps. With some modification the section can be used by a group of adult children to work the Twelve Steps together over a 12-week to 16-week period. By working the steps in a group setting, you can expect an exciting journey as you allow others into your life and talk openly about your family of origin. This is a risk worth taking. In the group setting, you can also expect differences of opinion, which can be worked out with the principles of honesty, acceptance and unity. These principles keep the Step group safe and focused on the Twelve Step work at hand.*

In addition to workbook items, this section also offers in-depth writing based on ACA principles and experience garnered from a 30-year period. The section includes about 35 shares of ACA members recorded voluntarily at meetings, retreats and by invitation during a 10-year period. Transcribed mostly from tape recordings, the shares represent an array of ACA Twelve Step experience.

The common behaviors mentioned in this workbook are known as the Laundry List traits. The Laundry List is a list of 14 characteristics of an adult child. (The traits are listed in the front of the workbook). ACA founder Tony A. wrote the traits in 1978. The Laundry List serves as the language for The Problem, which is read at the beginning of many ACA meetings. Jack E. is credited with placing the traits in narrative form known as The Problem.

* **Note:** While this workbook can be used as the main piece of literature for an ACA group, some adult children also meet informally and work the Twelve Steps in a group setting outside a regular ACA meeting. If this occurs, each group member should make a verbal pledge to commit to the number of weeks needed to work the Twelve Steps in this setting. Some of these groups ask the members to sign a simple pledge of commitment, however, this is optional. A verbal pledge to show up each week and work the ACA Twelve Steps is a minimal requirement to ensure continuity and the greatest success of these groups.

These groups are not a replacement for regular attendance at ACA meetings. These groups can enhance a person's ACA program, which requires meeting attendance, sharing about childhood experiences, working the Steps, sponsorship, and seeking a Higher Power.

Additionally, these groups should adhere to or attempt to adhere to the principles and traditions of ACA groups. Each participant should agree to practice honesty and courtesy in addition to helping keep the group safe. The principle of anonymity should be honored as well. We avoid gossiping or talking about a person's story to another person. In ACA, we focus on ourselves and live and let live.

STEP ONE

We admitted we were powerless over the effects of alcoholism or other family dysfunction, that our lives had become unmanageable.

Someone Finally Wrote It Down

The first time I read the common behaviors of an adult child, I felt like a bell that had been fetched up and rang hard. I was calm on the outside, but I was vibrating on the inside. I could not believe what I was reading. I remember looking over my shoulder to see if someone had been reading my mail and had planted this stuff somehow.

I may have rubbed my fingers on the page, trying to feel the words because they seemed so real. The words of judging myself without mercy and being a people-pleaser were describing my thinking and behaving in a language that was clear. I could not deny it. I was cursed harshly and subjected to violence as a kid. I was never listened to. Now, someone who I had never met had written down how I thought and felt without meeting me. Until I found ACA, I had spent my whole life condemning myself and feeling no good. I took drugs and acted out in disgusting ways, feeling lost. I read the traits for the first time 20 years ago. I have been hooked on ACA ever since. The traits and the Twelve Steps have given me a new life and self-love.

My Body Is Remembering What Happened

It took me awhile to understand what I was hearing in ACA meetings. The common behaviors (14 traits) meant a lot, and I got them quickly. But all the talk about being shamed and abandoned seemed to go over my head for many months if not years. I could recall the mechanics of my abuse, which involved hearing my father call my mother vulgar names and being attacked by my father when I was four years old. I even saw blood and teeth fly when my violent dad knocked out men with clubs and pop bottles. But the feelings associated with these events did not register for the longest time. I was so numbed out and so shut down that I could not connect the terror that I must have felt with the recalling of the memory.

I got help from a counselor who would slow me down when I recounted a violent episode in my home. It was the difference in telling the story rapidly without feeling and thinking about it as I talked. She said I had post-traumatic stress disorder. I was skeptical, but I knew my memories were violent and not normal. I had a high tolerance level to seeing violence and not feeling. I also got help from another source: movies. I began to notice feelings and tension in my body if a violent movie scene would occur. I don't watch violence, but the few scenes I would see, even on TV, began to trigger what I had not felt in a long time. It happened on God's schedule. I was not ready for this when I came here, but my body is telling me what happened, and I can handle it.

The Gift Of The Twelve Steps

A friend of mine stopped coming to ACA meetings because he thought the Twelve Steps were a continuation of the dysfunctional family system. To him the Twelve Steps were just a list of things to do to get approval and behave acceptably according to someone else's standards. But Alcoholics Anonymous didn't start out with the Steps when AA was founded in 1935. The written Steps came after the first meetings in an attempt to offer suggestions, not rules, of the recovery process.

Someone asked the first one hundred sober alcoholics in AA what they did differently that finally broke the deadly hold of alcoholism, a disease that had defied all medical and religious remedies throughout the ages. The group said they discussed the evolutionary process of their recovery, and then AA cofounder Bill W. documented the process used to obtain sobriety. That was the beginning of the suggested Twelve Steps. In reviewing my own recovery process in Adult Children of Alcoholics, I now see how my Higher Power guided me in working the Steps. The gift of the Twelve Steps resulted in my emotional and spiritual sobriety.

There Is Nothing Noble In The Struggle

I have been in situations where the outcome would have been better if I just said, "I can't do that." Instead I took on the impossible, failed, and beat myself up for it. I would go without recreation, sleep, and food to keep myself focused on the task at hand. Relentlessly, I considered different perspectives until I found a way to get the job done.

This depleted the energy I needed to survive.

I began to withdraw from my family and friends. One day I was sitting on the carpet in my home office looking at piles of paper. I couldn't organize the papers or find the ones I needed. I couldn't get off the floor. I could only cry. I thought my life would never get better, and I wanted to die.

My therapist said, "When you learn you can't do it, then you've got a chance. So far you keep finding more energy to keep trying. The best thing for you to do is to fall apart, realize your life is unmanageable, and understand that you can't do it all."

When my life got as bad as it could possibly get, I started coming to ACA. I discovered I had taken Step One by saying, "I can't do this anymore. I quit." My life got better from that moment on. I had hit a bottom.

While giving all you can is admirable, I have learned in ACA that it's better for me to know my capabilities and limitations. When I can't do something, I need to just let go. When I see my friends struggling now, I don't try to fix their lives for them. When they hit their "bottom" they will let go and reach out for help as I did. I have finally discovered there is nothing noble in the struggle. I surrender.

I Couldn't Do It Alone Anymore

I grew up in what I thought was a normal household. My mother started to work when I entered first grade. With our parents working, my two sisters and I were expected to care for the house. About that time I remember not wanting to go to school and not wanting to leave the house. When I was at school I wanted to go home during my lunchtime to make sure that everything was all right. I thought, "If I do more, my parents will care more about me. I will be good enough to be loved." But I never felt I was good enough.

When I grew up, I became a teacher. As one of the more responsible teachers at the school, I was given extra duties and problem children. For a long time I handled the additional responsibilities. My life revolved around school and home ownership. I was important for what I did. I was my job.

When I realized I could not keep handling the stress, I spoke up at school. I was ignored or told I was "doing a fine job."

I began having panic attacks. When I began tutoring children after school and conferring with parents on report cards, I experienced chest pains and saw my doctor. The following night, I had a huge panic attack and went over to my boyfriend's house.

I visited my therapist and said, "I can't do it anymore." He asked me what "it" was. I didn't know. On the drive home it suddenly occurred to me that "it" was life. I could not go on anymore. My life had become unmanageable. Nothing was fun for me. I saw no future. I needed help just taking care of myself and getting meals.

The rehabilitation evaluator I went to suggested I attend an ACA meeting, even though alcoholism wasn't a problem in my family. I went to a meeting anyway. It was too soon for me to go to meetings because I was in such poor shape. I picked up some literature and recognized myself in the 14 characteristics (The Problem). If there was help anywhere, I thought, maybe it was in this ACA program. I started attending meetings regularly. I have been very grateful ever since for this program.

I Told God How Powerless I Felt

On my last weekly visit to my parents' house, my mother hadn't been pleased to see me. The people-pleasing, approval seeker she used to know was gone. Any hope that I might meet her needs was also gone. She was sulky, shaming, and negative. Perhaps she was hoping that I would give in and try to fix her.

Many years ago I had planned on having kids to fix me and meet my needs, so I could have a sense of wholeness and self-respect, too. My children would have a lust for life that would lift me to realms of happiness rarely experienced by humans. I had planned on being admired by ranks of the "prestigious sane."

My mother must have seen me as a boring cold fish that day. I felt sad and trapped but I chose not to fix her. I told God how powerless I felt, and I began repeating the Serenity Prayer. Suddenly my mother lightened up, and with the opportunity to be happy, joyous, and free, so did I. Sanity replaced insanity. Clarity emerged. The next day I fully understood what had happened. I thanked my

Higher Power for the miracle. I realized my past attempts at fixing my mother drained me of my precious energy and demoralized my spirit. I no longer believe I can fix her. I did not cause my mother's discontent.

Step One Summary

These shares represent the basic spiritual principles of ACA's First Step—powerlessness, unmanageability, surrender, and letting go. Step One requires that we admit that our family is dysfunctional and the dysfunction affects our thinking and behavior as adults. We must admit that we are powerless over the effects of growing up in a dysfunctional home. Our lives are unmanageable regardless of appearances of self-sufficiency. Social standing or compulsive self-reliance does not equal recovery. We must realize that will power or self-determination is no match for the effects of growing up in a sick family. We cannot figure it out on our own. We need help. We must shatter the illusion that we can reason out a painless solution.

The shares also represent the critical separation-from-family work, which is necessary to gain clarity about our lives. Separating from our families means setting healthy boundaries and removing ourselves from abusive situations and family crises, which are common for dysfunctional homes. Many times adult children struggle in their ACA program because they cannot seem to break ties with destructive or manipulative relatives. We cannot grow and find our true inner selves as long as we engage in family dysfunction that is draining and unhealthy.

Separating from our dysfunctional family is a healthy act of defiance. By doing so, we are challenging the authority of the family lie. We are making a statement that we will no longer be loyal to denial and dysfunctional family roles. This can seem frightening, but we have the support of our ACA group.

Many adult children separate from their families with love not abandonment. They need time away to focus on themselves and to disconnect from the gravitational pull of a dysfunctional home. At an appropriate time, we review the relationship we want to have with our families. We will choose to avoid some family members because they are draining or abusive. Other relatives will accept us and encourage us on our new path even though they may not understand or be willing to walk this way with us. ACA can improve our relationship with our families with the knowledge that we do not have to participate in their dysfunction. We are free to live our own lives.

Hitting Bottom

ACA recovery begins when the adult child gives up, asks for help, and then accepts the help offered. Some adult children call giving up "hitting a bottom."

Hitting a bottom can occur before the adult child attends his first meeting or it can occur after arriving here and beginning the Twelve Step process of recovery. Some ACA members reach a bottom after years in recovery. Hitting a bottom can involve losing everything and becoming homeless, or it can be a feeling of extreme suffocation brought on by our obsessive need to control others. Some ACA bottoms can be a chronic sense of aloneness in which the adult child never feels joy and never really connects with others in a meaningful manner. Many adult children have become literally paralyzed in recovery because of their inability to let go and trust themselves or others.

Other bottoms can involve a compulsion or obsession for another person. The obsession is so maddening that we think we will go insane unless we have this person in our lives. While we are focusing on another person, the pain we are feeling is actually the abandonment rupture from our childhood. Our compulsion for another person is the refeeling of the original rupture from our parents shaming us or abandoning us as children. The soul wound does not get better with pills, drugs, sex, or other forms of diversion. If we survive this compulsion, we tend to repeat it in the next relationship unless we ask for help and accept it. ACA's Steps get at this wound and heal it with a Higher Power's grace.

All bottoms have meaning, and all bottoms can be a starting point for a new way of life. There is hope. Healing is possible.

Surrender means we become willing to do whatever it takes to recover and find peace and serenity in our lives. We admit complete defeat and give up notions that we can "fix" or control someone else. We become willing to attend meetings, work the Twelve Steps, and break through the denial of family dysfunction. Amazingly, an estimated 50 percent of adult children of alcoholics deny or cannot recognize alcoholism among their families. By growing up in a dysfunctional home we become desensitized to the effects of alcoholism, abusive behavior, and lack of trust.

Recovery from the effects of an alcoholic and dysfunctional upbringing is a process, not an event. We need to be patient with ourselves. We need to be honest about our own behavior and the thinking we developed while growing up in our family of origin. If you find yourself in an ACA meeting, it probably means you are here for a reason. You probably are not the only person in your family experiencing difficulties in relationships, on the job, or in other areas of your life. Your family is not the only family that struggles with denial and silently broken hearts. We have found that family dysfunction is a disease the affects every member of the family. In the individual it affects the body, mind, and spirit. The disease of family dysfunction is pervasive and resilient. The disease is progressive. Our relationships become more violent, controlling, or isolating, depending on which path we take. Our "addictiveness" to work, sex, spending, eating, not eating, drugs, and gambling progresses as well, depending on our path.

Moreover, the disease is generational, which means the traits and thoughts you have at this moment have been passed down from generations hence. Relief from the disease occurs when we do Step work, attend Twelve Step meetings, and seek a Higher Power's guidance. By admitting we are powerless over the effects of family dysfunction and that our lives have become unmanageable, we are ready to move onto Step Two.

Making a Start

When possible, we recommend that you attend 60 meetings in 90 days, get a sponsor, and make a start. For adult children with addiction issues, we recommend that you attend Twelve Step meetings to address those issues as well. While ACA is often the only program for many adult children, ACA is not a replacement for addicts working a program in Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, or Cocaine Anonymous.

We also recommend choosing a sponsor. A sponsor is someone in ACA, who attends meetings, works an active ACA program, and is willing to be available in assisting you in your program. The sponsor will not work your program for you, but he or she can offer support, hope and clarity. We strongly suggest getting a sponsor early on. Do not go it alone. Our experience shows that you cannot recover in isolation.

WORKBOOK SECTION STEP ONE: We admitted we were powerless...

For the workbook items ahead, you will need support and self-honesty. It is suggested that you get a sponsor or spiritual advisor as well before proceeding. Many adult children also seek out a knowledgeable counselor to offer added emotional support as they begin the exciting work of ACA Twelve Step work. We also offer a word of caution here. Some of the issues raised by ACA step work and attendance at meetings can raise disturbing memories of some of the most atrocious abuse. This could require professional help to be dealt with safely and effectively. We encourage adult children with these issues to seek extra help with their program. In ACA, we do not recommend a particular style or method of counseling; however, in choosing a knowledgeable counselor, you have the right to ask the therapist if he or she is familiar with ACA or the Twelve Steps. (See Chapter 16 in the ACA Fellowship Text for more information on finding a knowledgeable counselor). Many counselors are familiar with the Twelve Step process while others show a willingness to learn. We recommend visiting with at least three counselors before making a decision. Many therapists will answer your questions on the telephone so this saves time and money.

You will also need a copy of The Laundry List (Problem) and The Solution for the workbook section. Welcome to a new way of life through the ACA Twelve Steps.

Working Step One in ACA

Many adult children find it helpful to answer specific questions about their alcoholic or dysfunctional upbringing. By doing so we begin to see our denial and the role it played in our family structure. For the adult child, denial can mean that we misremember or "forget" segments of our childhood. We have seen adult children describe their childhoods as "loving" or "insignificant" when in reality the childhood was filled with neglect or horrific acts of mental, emotional, and sexual abuse. Researchers have discovered that many adult children suffer from "trauma bonding" (*The Betrayal Bond* by Patrick Carnes, Ph.D., 1997). Trauma bond means that children and adults often form a bond with perpetrating parents, pedophile priests or within a codependent relationship based on a violation of trust by the abuser. While this concept has been controversial in some circles, many of our members have found meaning and peace with their memories by applying this concept.

When parents are abusive, the theory states that the child is forced to bond to that parent because the child is dependent on the adult for survival. The child must deny or develop a distorted remembrance of the abuse, which is often beatings, incest, or lacerating cursings. As an adult, the person says he or she has "gaps" in childhood memory or the person "forgets" or misremembers the abuse. In many cases the adult will defend or show loyalty to their main abusers or perpetrator. Before receiving professional help, we have seen many adult children describe an abusive parent as loving and caring when in reality the parent was neglectful and shaming. At the same time, not all gaps in childhood memories are indicative of sexual abuse or childhood trauma. Professional help and common sense are needed in this area. While we want to recover and live in freedom we do not want to wrongly indicate a behavior that may not have happened. Some memories we will never recover fully but healing can occur regardless of whether we recover a memory extant or not.

Blindness to anger within themselves and their parents is one of the most common forms of denial that we see among adult children. We have seen new ACA members express surprise or shock at the suggestion that they might inwardly be angry or that their parents could have been angry. New ACA members often say: "I don't have an angry feeling in me. I am an upbeat person, who never gets angry."

Adult children have difficulty recognizing anger in their parents because of the high level of abuse the adult became comfortable with as a child. Parents who screamed at or threatened the adult child are recalled as parents who could be irritated but never harsh or mean. Parents who were quietly angry are recalled as controlled or loving but rarely shaming or hateful.

Adult children also have difficulty recognizing enmeshment. Enmeshment is a lack of boundaries among family members or between a parent and child. Enmeshed children become enmeshed adults, who live their lives at the direction of a parent or parents. They call the parent daily, plan vacations around the parent's schedule, dutifully watch after the parent, and feel powerless to refuse the parent's wants and demands. The enmeshed adult child often describes the relationship as loving and close when in reality it is stifling and controlling.

In ACA we get to properly name what happened to us without fear of reprisal. As long as we are in denial about what happened in our childhood, we fail to see the effects of family alcoholism or dysfunction in our lives today. The effects are in our thinking and behaving.

We also have no real choice in our lives as long as denial persists. While in denial we practiced rigid control which made us think we were making choices; however true choice is more than control, which leads to codependence, isolation or self-hate.

There are no right or wrong answers to the Step One questions you are about to answer. The ACA program only asks that you be honest in your answers to achieve the greatest personal growth. In addition to the adult raised in an addicted home, these questions also address the adult child raised in homes without addiction. Since our founding in 1978, we have identified additional family types that create adult children who find ACA and identify with the program. These adult children recover from dependence and connect with their Inner Child in ACA. The questions represent primary family types that include: alcoholic/addict parent; hypochondriac parent; sexually abusive parent; militaristic or rigid parent; emotionally ill parent; and perfectionistic parent. There is overlap among these styles of parenting. There are more family types which can include adult children from divorced homes and foster homes. There is also the dysfunctionally religious home. The first six questions will help you identify the parenting style you faced as a child.

Step One Questions:

1) Who was the alcoholic or addicted parent in my family?

2) Who was the hypochondriac parent or person in my family?

3) Who was the sexually abusive parent or person in my family?

4) Who was the militaristic, rigidly harsh parent or person in my family?

5) Who was the emotionally ill parent or person in my family?

6) Who was the perfectionistic parent or person in my family?

Note: You may use a notebook if more space is needed to answer the following questions. If you are using this workbook in a group setting outside a regular ACA meeting, try to answer the questions before the next session of the meeting.

Powerlessness:

1) How is powerlessness different than helplessness?

2) Do I understand that the effects of family dysfunction mentioned in Step One are the Laundry List traits?

3) List three effects of growing up in an alcoholic, addicted, or dysfunctional home. (Hint: any of the 14 common ACA traits).

4) What was my role growing up in my dysfunctional home: lost child, hero, scapegoat, and rescuer? Other _____.

5) How many of the common ACA traits of an adult child do I identify with in the Laundry List/Problem?

6) What does "don't talk, don't trust, don't feel" mean?

7) Am I powerless over the effects of growing up in an addicted or dysfunctional family?

8) Do I use food, sex, drugs, alcohol, work, gambling or some other addictive behavior to an extreme? Am I powerless over these activities? (Give an example of powerlessness).

9) Do I think I can change my parents or significant other by acting right, saying the right thing, or being perfect?

10) Do I think I caused my parent's addiction and dysfunction and I have the power to change it or control it?

11) Have I acted like a victim and acted helpless when in reality I was manipulating others to get what I thought I needed? Have I been rescued? (List an example).

12) Have I been driven by a compulsion or obsession for another person that over powers me and causes me to deny my own needs or take care of myself? (If so, detail how you denied your own needs).

Unmanageable:

1) What is my definition of being unmanageable or having an unmanageable life?

2) Do I think I can still control people, places, and things by acting right, perfect, or otherwise?

3) Do I think I have power over other people and can control their actions and thoughts?

4) Am I letting the thoughts, feelings and actions of others have power over me? (List an example if applicable).

5) Do I allow the feelings or possible reaction of others to control me or to determine my behavior and choices? (List an example).

6) What does it mean to be codependent?

7) Have my relationships created chaos, abuse, or predictable turmoil in my life? (List an example).

8) Has my behavior and thinking affected my job performance or my ability to relate to others?

9) What is my ACA "bottom" or bottoming out? Have I hit my bottom?

10) Has an obsession for another person, drugs, gambling, food or sex made my life unmanageable? How?

11) Is my manageable life actually controlling behavior, which I have mislabeled? (List an example).

12) Am I in denial about my controlling behavior?

13) Can I recover alone?

14) Do I relate to other adult children in meetings? How?

Denial:

1) Was I forced to depend upon an abusive or neglectful parent for food and shelter?

2) Did I ignore my feelings of shame, fear and neglect to survive my childhood?

3) Did I monitor my parents' feelings or moods to determine how I should feel? Was I only happy when my parents were happy and sad when they were sad? (List an example).

4) Am I honest about how my parents treated me when I was growing up? Did I fear one parent or both parents?

5) Did I fight with my brothers or sisters? Did I resent them? Did I protect them?

6) Do I say I am close to brothers or sisters but rarely visit them or talk to them?

7) Am I afraid to talk about my past because my siblings will challenge me or try to undermine my memories? They have told me to "Get over it."

8) Do I minimize my parents' behavior by saying "That was in the past. What is done is done." Or, "I don't look back. It does no good."

Step One Spiritual Principles: Powerlessness and Surrender:

1) What am I powerless over in Step One?

2) What does surrender mean to me?

3) If I surrender does that mean I will have no choices?

4) Am I willing to admit my family is dysfunctional?

5) Am I willing to admit I am powerless over the effects of growing up in a dysfunctional home and that my life is unmanageable?

Get into action: Call your sponsor, an ACA friend or counselor and discuss this section.