

LEMONADE

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[Assignment: Henry Adams, in his autobiography, claims that the most important things he learned in life he learned accidentally. Write a list for yourself of all the things you remember learning accidentally. Choose one interesting and important item from your list; make another list of all the details that flood into your mind as you recount that learning process. Then, write a narrative essay about what happened. Your purpose is twofold: to tell the story as completely as you can, and to comment on what the process has meant to you.]

"I want lemonade! I don't want milk. I have milk every night. Why does Grandma get lemonade? I thought you said that there wasn't any lemonade in the refrigerator." The sounds of this familiar bellow would ring in everyone's ears, as the grandchildren arranged themselves around the table designated for the children at Grandmother's house.

We only made the trip to Columbus, Ohio once or twice a year, usually around a holiday or birthday. The entire process of traveling to my grandparents' house was a loud one. None of us girls looked forward to being hustled into the back seat of a car for a four to six hour car ride. The majority of the times we visited my grandparents' house, we were not the only ones visiting. Due to the fact that my grandmother had five children, there are always many people present at her home. With all twelve grandchildren and their parents present, dinner time at Grandma's house was hectic. Too many Indian chiefs were giving orders and too few Indians were following them. Then the huge discussion of which grandchildren were still children arose. Who were going to be the lucky ones to receive the honor of sitting at the grown-up table? Finally, it was time to pour drinks. Without question, the Stehouwer girls always had milk poured into their glasses.

The same argument came up every time we sat down to dinner. Who held the discussion with Mother was irrelevant. The fact that the discussion took place was all that mattered. It was like a tradition. Supposedly, there was nothing but milk and soda pop to drink at Grandma's house. Well then, why did Grandma get lemonade--lemonade, Mother had told us was not in the refrigerator? I was always convinced that Grandma hid the lemonade from Mother. Once, my older sister and I even managed to pull open the heavy, refrigerator door to find the lemonade. It was not there. However, from after lunch until the time she went to bed every day, Grandma would walk around with her tall glass of lemonade filled to the brim with ice cubes. When we sat in the living room and played games in front of the television screen, all the grandchildren could hear Grandma coming with her glass of lemonade. Sometimes, quite often as a matter of fact, I was afraid she was going to spill it. Her hand was always shaking causing the ice cubes to collide with one another and the lemonade to splash out as she carried her tall glass from one room to the next. Some of the older cousins would offer to help carry Grandma's

glass, but she always refused the help. Where did she get that lemonade? And, why was I not allowed to have any? There seemed to be plenty.

It was not until years later that I would discover the answers to those questions. One year, I remember, our family had been out late the night of Grandma's birthday and we did not get home until well after 8 o'clock. Mother had promised us that we could call Grandma that day and wish her a happy birthday. When my younger sister asked if we could call her after returning home, Mommy suggested that we call her first thing in the morning. After several minutes of high pitched squeals and some very talented whining and explaining about the importance of celebrating one's birthday on the actual day, we were allowed to call. Each one of us picked up a different phone and sang "Happy Birthday" in unison. Grandma was very quiet and simply replied, "That's nice, girls. Thank you very much." After we said our goodbyes to Grandma and our good nights to Mother and Father we were rushed off to bed. The next morning when I came downstairs to see Mother, she was on the phone with Grandma again. I asked her why she needed to talk to Grandma again if we just spoke with her last night. Then I got on the phone and asked Grandma if she wanted me to sing "Happy Birthday" to her all by myself this time. I told her it probably would not sound as good as when the three of us sang the song together, but I could still sing it. She told me that she did not recall ever hearing the three of us girls sing together. I tried to explain to her that we had just sung the night before to her. She did not remember and before any further discussion could be held on the topic, Mother broke in and said that we had to run some errands. I was a very confused little girl. Why did Grandma not remember?

Still more questions were running around in my head that would remain unanswered. When I was in either third or fourth grade, some of my questions began to be addressed. Our class was studying a unit on Alcoholism. In our health textbook there was a picture of a book that looked familiar to me. The book had the words "One Day At A Time" written across the front of the cover. The little book was even blue, just like Mother's. Then I spotted words in the Health book that I had seen written on the cover of another book of Mother's. These words read *ALANON; Twelve Step Program*. This frightened me. Here we were at school, talking about a topic that confused me to begin with, and now I was encountering familiar phrases. I quickly ran home and grilled Mother about the similarities. Was she an alcoholic?

After years of being too young to understand, I was now beginning to receive answers to my questions. Where did Grandma hide the so-called lemonade all those years? She hid it in the liquor cabinet in the living room. Why did Grandma not remember us singing "Happy Birthday" to her over the phone that night? She never remembered any telephone calls she received after 8 o'clock at night. Why did Mother have books that were similar to the pictures in my health textbook? She was learning how to cope with being a child of an alcoholic. Why had Mother and Father not told me all this before now? I was not mature enough or old enough to understand.

As I look back at ways in which I was raised, it is very evident my Grandmother's addiction to alcohol played a big role in my mother's life

and continues to play a big role in my life. There are several issues my family had to work through that other families, who did not have an alcoholic amongst them, did not have to conquer. For example, living in denial is a very common trait of alcoholics that can be passed on from generation to generation. Since a child learns from her or his parents, my mother learned that one way to survive in life was to live in denial. When she was little, my mother would retreat to her room for hours on end to read books and to avoid the conflicts that were occurring downstairs in her living room. She did not care to see her drunken mother receive more beatings from her angered father. By escaping and building a wall around herself, she became safe and sheltered from this violence. This is how she survived much of her childhood. She learned from her mother's addiction to alcohol that by weaving a cocoon around herself, with her addiction to books, she would be safe. Unfortunately, this was the only way my mother was taught how to cope. Therefore, this is the way she taught her children to cope. It has taken many years of hard work and dedication to overcome the strong desire to resort to my cocoon. When I was little, I would have gotten away with not telling anyone around me why I was upset over something or how I was feeling. I would have simply been allowed to retreat to my bedroom and cry. Now we are encouraged around my house to talk about what we are feeling. My mother stresses the importance of expressing ourselves, either directly or through journal writing. She says it is vital that we sort out our feeling one way or the other. By doing this, our emotions are not allowed to bubble up inside of us for long periods of time.

Denial and building a wall around one's self are not the only unhealthy behaviors that are passed on from one alcoholic generation to another. Co-dependency is another. Co-dependency is very difficult to explain. It is when one individual feels as if he or she cannot survive without the other individual. When one in a relationship is feeling down and depressed, the other automatically feels this. It is a very sick behavior that tends to run rampant among alcoholics and their children. I can remember times when I was younger that my mother felt sad and depressed. For some odd reason, which I am not sure I quite understand, I would feel an overwhelming sadness. We were so enmeshed that it eventually drove us very far apart before things got better. Fortunately, we realized that we are both individuals with individual feelings and that we can continue to care about each other's well being without having to become depressed simply because the other is depressed.

Alcoholism does not only affect the alcoholic or even the alcoholic's immediate family but, unless the cycle is broken, the unhealthy behaviors can go on for years. Our family has chosen to realize there was a problem with the way we were conducting our lives and we are continue to grow with our new found knowledge.

Today, when I think I see my grandmother carrying a tall glass of lemonade, I know that the liquid that is in the glass is indeed lemonade. I am very proud to say that my grandmother has not had a drink of alcohol for over eight years. However, she drank for so many years that much of the damage to her body has already occurred. Although my Grandma has this disease, I have accepted it and her. I love her dearly and always will.

[Editor's Note: Telling stories well, like telling jokes well, requires that the story teller or joke teller make judicious decisions about what to tell and what not to tell, and timing is of the essence. Note how Susan recreates her experience, rather than merely retelling it to the reader, so that the reader experiences the same sort of confusion Susan experienced.]