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A grateful heart is the grace of a second chance

John, a member of Al-Anon | Nov. 19, 2013 Soul Seeing

"Piglet noticed that even though he had a Very Small Heart, it could hold a rather large amount of Gratitude." -- A.A. Milne, Winnie-the-Pooh

Ten years after the crisis that sent my brother to alcoholism treatment and me to Al-Anon, I rarely miss my weekly Al-Anon Steps and Traditions group meeting. Come Thanksgiving, my brother will mark 10 years of sobriety, and I will mark 10 years of learning, over and over again, that my heart has more room for gratitude than I ever knew.

Gratitude never worked in me the way I learned it was supposed to growing up. What I read about virtue just made me nervous: If we are "brought up in fine habits," Aristotle wrote, our virtues will take deep root and thenceforth shine forth as "firm and constant." If only we choose our parents well (and are born the right race and gender) we will be among the "great-souled men" (sic) showing others how to live.

Alas, both my soul and heart have always felt rather small, like Piglet's. My gratitude has not been firm and constant. But a deep sense of gratitude has come over me from time to time these last 10 years -- more often than not when I've been sitting in an Al-Anon meeting.

I remember distinctly my second meeting, at the alcoholism treatment center shortly after my brother entered treatment there. A handful of his siblings, his wife and their not yet 2-year-old daughter all joined my brother for lunch and the meeting. The leader read to us that Al-Anon is a fellowship of relatives and friends of alcoholics who share their experience, strength and hope in order to solve their common problems.

My brother's head was down and I fidgeted in my chair. Then we heard the voice of the woman leader calling to my niece, who was toddling around in the circle of gathered people. My niece walked over to the woman, who took her in her arms and announced to the group, "How lucky this girl is -- she's going to grow up in a house of recovery!" My heart calmed and my brain stopped racing. That, in my experience, is how gratitude feels when it comes -- a slowing, resting and opening. This bodily sense did not remain long that day, or any other day, but it has its effects. I went out from the treatment center a little less anxious, less shut down, with my heart a little more open.

Later, I experienced this almost every time a man named Jim spoke at my regular Al-Anon meeting. He had been to hell and back -- through his own alcoholism and his wife's, through a depression that hospitalized him repeatedly for electroconvulsive therapy. The crises had ended some years before I met Jim. Yet there he was each week, beginning his sharing at meetings with this phrase: "An attitude of gratitude, and gratitude is my attitude."

I hadn't noticed before meeting him in Al-Anon that Jim was an usher in the church I attended. His smile as I walked into church those days opened the eye of my soul, an experience of grace if I have ever had one. He's been dead now six or seven years, but I can still hear his voice and see his smile. And as I do, my heart opens again.

There are others at that Al-Anon meeting: Richard, whose now ex-wife became so lost in alcohol she had become a danger not only to herself and Richard, but also to their only daughter. Richard's health is not great, and he works two jobs to support himself and his daughter, now in college. He begins his sharing at meetings with the same line every time: "I'm Richard; I'm still here and I'm grateful."

And there is Sylvia, who comes from a religious home -- she's a "preacher's kid" -- in which there was abuse of all kinds (physical, emotional, sexual), all fueled by alcoholism. She lost a sibling to suicide a few years ago and she often gets anxious, but I watch at meetings and sometimes see the rest and openness of gratitude come over her. She says Al-Anon is why she is alive.

I sat down with my brother the other day to ask him about gratitude, and here's what he said: "When I was first in recovery, I tried to learn to be grateful. I'd think, 'I forgot to pray... I have to work more at being grateful.' But a few years ago it came to me that I just don't like who I am when I am not grateful -- making my case against people and nursing resentments. When I am not grateful, I fall into what AA calls 'self-inflicted misery.' Gratitude is not about finding a litany of things to be grateful for anymore. It's just my best option for living."

Isn't it interesting that none of the people I've met over the last 10 years in Al-Anon came to their gratitude the way Aristotle said it should happen? That gets me thinking: Maybe no one fits Aristotle's version of the moral life, and maybe Al-Anon is calming me enough to give up on trying. Maybe University of Notre Dame moral theologian Jean Porter was talking about all of us when she wrote that those "whose virtues are due to infusion [of God's grace] may well experience more distress in leading the good life, and exhibit more actual imperfection, than the person who possesses the acquired virtues" -- that is, Aristotle's virtues.

Maybe no one ever "acquired" gratitude by being well-brought-up. Maybe we have all been graced into it as a second chance.

Such has been my experience of gratitude in Al-Anon -- a slowing that comes upon me from time to time and allows me to open my small heart and live from a more loving posture than I knew was possible. With a little luck (or grace), I will be there in Al-Anon for 10 more years and beyond, seeing where this gratitude can take me.

[John is the pseudonym of an American theologian. Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon ask their members to remain anonymous in public, saying in their "12th tradition": "Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles above personalities."]

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