

ASCA NEWS -- OCTOBER 2002

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THE MORRIS CENTER *for healing from child abuse*

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From the Editor...

Welcome, readers! On Sunday, September 22nd, the Morris Center and the ASCA Board sponsored a Barbecue in Golden Gate Park for members of the ASCA Community. Although the weather was slightly chilly, the San Franciscan fog nibbling at the corners of the afternoon, the sun was shining and much merriment was to be had by the 20-25 attendees. There was good food, good conversation, and even a ferocious game of frisbee!

In this Issue...

A short powerful article by Robert S, who attends the Thursday night Berkeley meeting, which touches on inner child issues and the effects of repression that resurface in adult life.

As promised, an interview with Stu F., from the Chicago area! Finding ASCA on the web, but with no meetings in his locale, Stu took it upon himself to start two ASCA meetings. I asked Stu about his experience, what drew him to ASCA, and how he both attracts and promotes ASCA in his community. The interview proved so fruitful that it will be given in two parts, with the second part to appear in the November issue...

Little Bobby by Robert Seidler

As a child, I suffered severe emotional abuse from a raging, narcissistic woman who had no consideration for my needs. To this day, my mother suffers from a severe case of Narcissistic personality disorder, which is commonly defined as some one who is unable to make an empathetic connection with another human being -- someone who sees all things from the perspective of how they affect them alone.

She formed me into a tool, through shame and humiliation, to give her the support and love she didn't get from her birth family; she berated me constantly, making me feel like an encumbrance in her life, and used me daily as a container for her rage and unprocessed feelings.

She once told me, when discussing her clinical depression with me, "Robert, we have a history of depression in our family starting with your grandfather, who would occasionally place himself in the VA hospital when he was depressed." I don't feel that depression can be passed off as the result of an inherited chemical imbalance in the brain; although Serotonin re-uptake inhibitors like Prozac and Paxil can, in fact, quell the anxieties and feelings of helplessness that a severe depression can bring on, it's a bit like trying to rebuild a damaged engine with *Engine Rebuild Pellets* from the auto supply store: though these chemicals may take away the symptoms, they do nothing to address the core issues buried deep in the personality. My grandfather was raised by a neglecting, raging father who had no consideration for his interests and true feelings. He passed on his unprocessed anger at *his* father to the little girl that was to become my mother, and she passed it on to me. This abusive child-rearing style is a learned behavior and, without help, is passed on from generation to generation. Alice Miller says, "Experience has taught us that we have only one enduring weapon in our struggle against mental illness: the emotional discovery and emotional acceptance of the truth in the individual and unique history of our childhood".

Later in life, my repressed feelings from childhood began to surface along with the self-loathing that came from sensing that it was my fault I was so neglected and abused. This feeling of responsibility was the result of a needed suspension of a false belief that my mother was perfect, and, therefore, incapable of treating me in a way that I did not deserve. This idealization of the parent is what Robert Firestone aptly calls "the fantasy bond". Firestone says, "The primary fantasy bond is an illusion of a connection, originally an imaginary fusion or joining with the mother's body, most particularly the breast. The child must conceptualize him or herself as bad or unlovable in order to defend against the realization that the parents are inadequate. Recognition of real faults in the parent would destroy the bond, or imagined connection, and the feeling of imagined self-sufficiency." As a child, sensing my mother's complete inability to meet any of my needs for love and nurturing, I created an idealized version of her, a version that would make me feel safe so that I could survive.

Alice Miller says, and I'm paraphrasing, "it's not so much about what specifically happened to you, but more about the fact that you were never able to express the feelings surrounding the abuse". I have done a great deal of work regarding my repressed memories, sadness, and anger, by expressing these feelings in ASCA. Miller says, and I'm paraphrasing again, "in order to get beyond these directive feelings and memories one must share them in the presence of what she calls an enlightened witness"; ASCA provides that for me.

Thanks for listening. Robert Seidler

Interview with Stu F.

Jono: You have started and are the secretary of two meetings in Skokie, IL, in a relatively short period of time. This is a remarkable feat of energy and shows a real commitment to ASCA. Can you explain a bit how you came to starting these meetings and what about ASCA drew you to this program of recovery?

Stu: In May 2001 I terminated with the therapist I had been seeing for 4 years. I would really term it an “amputation” rather than a “termination”. I was absolutely enraged with him, because after 4 ½ years of treating me, all he could say was that I must be medicated. I absolutely refused -- I just stopped going and had no further contact with him.

At this point in my life, I was extremely depressed, decompensated, dysfunctional, angry and untrusting of therapy as a result. I was also extremely suicidal.

I was 48 years old, at the time, and I had been in therapy with different therapists since I was 23 -- I had been treated by both MD psychiatrists & psychoanalysts, and Ph.D. psychologists, and had never been able to function without being in a therapeutic relationship. And even then, my functioning was very decompensated. My life wasn't much fun, to say the least. I had had a psychological breakdown in 1976 and had not (and still have not) recovered functioning in many areas of life that I had before going away to college in 1971.

I knew that my emotional problems were caused by the way I was treated in my life and the deep sadness and depression I felt as a result – and not from a chemical imbalance. I knew there were very wrong things done to me when I was a kid, but none of the 8 therapists I had seen in my life EVER looked into them, and as a result, they kept treating the symptoms rather than the problem. Not one suggested I was suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, caused by childhood abuse.

I didn't know what I was going to do. I have struggled greatly with obsessing about suicide my whole life, and again, I found that I had done my best and worked the hardest that I could, to heal myself through therapy, and again it failed. I was at the end.....I was seriously thinking of suicide, again.

A few months after I amputated my therapy, I was at lunch with one of the two women who I felt safe with from my workplace. We were discussing our childhoods. She told me about some cruelty she had experienced, then I told her a few of my experiences. She said "Stuart, that sounds like severe child abuse".

BELLS WENT OFF!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

I said "you know Linda, you're right. This was not just lousy treatment, this was REAL child abuse". I had lived with the memories and effects for so many years, that I just pooh-pooh'd it. Her saying that to me was an objective observer giving me her real feedback.....and this time I took it seriously.

That night I did a search on the web for "child abuse" and "adult survivors". One of the URL links said "Adult Survivors of Child Abuse"..... EUREKA, I FOUND SOMETHING! There was actually such a thing.....I couldn't believe it.

I immediately went to the link and read the introductory stuff. I was transfixed. I couldn't believe what I was reading.....I WAS READING ABOUT ME! I began crying. FINALLY, someone or thing or group actually understood what I've been saying my whole life, that I couldn't get anyone to understand, and that no one would listen to.

I downloaded the "Survivor to Thriver" manual, printed it out and could not put it down for the next two days. It was the information I had been looking for my whole life; I was never able to put into words what had happened and to say what I needed to say to help me. ASCA.....was ASCA going to be it?

I went to the meeting link on the homepage.....and the only meetings were in California and South Africa.....just my fucking luck. :) (being that I'm in Illinois)

So I downloaded every piece of material on the ASCA website and read them several times. Everything I read on the website was superb! It was all EXTREMELY SAFE, well thought out, thorough, extremely detailed, logical. Creating a complete program of recovery, including the materials and instructions as to how to create a local organization, was incredible. Absolutely a first rate job. I showed it to my new therapist (as of October 2001), another MS psychologist, and an MD psychiatrist, all of whom thought it was a superb program of recovery.

That Friday evening (Sept. 2001), I posted a notice to a website for a community of men I belong to, to see if there were any other guys who had been the victim of child abuse (this posting was to the New Warrior website – a community of men who are dedicated to healing and transforming their lives). This was at about 9:00pm. By 10:30 pm I had received two phone calls and 6 emails. The two men who called me were crying, and the 6 who sent emails to me said they were deeply affected by hearing that I had found a program to help adult survivors.

FINALLY, I WAS NOT ALONE.

I had been alone with this suffering since I was a child, asking my therapists to help me connect with other people who had what I had, and they never would or could help me find others to share my suffering with (all 8 therapists either never diagnosed me or diagnosed me incorrectly).

With two of the people who responded we held two meetings in Nov. 2001. Then they were both unable to continue, for reasons unrelated to the ASCA program.

From Dec. 2001 until March 2002, I was left with attending 12 Step meetings and reading the ASCA manual on my own. While attending numerous 12 Step meetings (ACOA and CODA) and during my share, I would say that there was a weekly meeting forming for adults who just wish to focus on recovering from child abuse, if anyone is interested. Numerous people sought me out after the meetings.

By March 2002 I had one friend and one other Warrior who were ready to commit to coming weekly. With three of us in attendance, we held the second iteration of our first permanent ASCA meeting on Friday, April 5, 2002.

Soon other 12 Step acquaintances started to attend, along with some friends of mine, who brought their friends. Other people who knew I was forming this meeting referred people to us; 2 women found our meeting on the ASCA website. We just started getting people coming from different sources. And we were off.....

Two women could not continue on Friday nights due to work conflicts, so I started a second weekly meeting on Sunday mornings. We had two meetings going within the first three months of our efforts.

Since we created our standing Friday night meeting, we have had 16 people come to our meetings, 13 of which have come and never left. We average 8 -10 people on Friday evenings and 6-8 folks on Sunday mornings. Many of our attendees are coming to both the FRIDAY AND SUNDAY meetings.....it's GREAT!

These are terrific people who are deeply passionate about healing from the crippling effects of the abuse all of us received as vulnerable children. Every week, at every meeting, I experience a thrill as each one of our attendees walks through the door.....I feel blessed that I have met each of them, and that they are voting with their feet..... that the meetings are becoming an essential part of their lives. It's wonderful.

The meetings are going very well. We encourage everyone to share openly and honestly what's in their hearts, and that there is nothing that they can't speak about in their share. If we CAN'T speak about something we need to at OUR meetings, where CAN we speak about it?

No - to curtail speech would be a re-enactment of the initial injuries, woundings and shamings many of us experienced in our childhoods. So we welcome everyone, exactly as they are. And we honor and support them in any way we can. It is the way I have interpreted the intention of the ASCA program, and the manner in which we have enacted ASCA's philosophy in Chicago.

And it's been a blessing to all of us here. George, Jessy, Ms Morris, thank you for this wonderful program -- and for putting the entire program on the website for free downloading (truly an act of love by TMC) -- it is the cornerstone of the hopes "I" have for finally making a

life for MYSELF, after spending a lifetime of not getting what I wanted and needed to recover. I can't thank you enough. I know the other survivors here in Chicago feel the same way.

While sorting out how to proceed in my recovery last year, I called Dr. Charles Whitfield (author of "Healing the Child Within") to ask if he could suggest a therapist for me in the Chicago area. During the course of our conversation he inquired if I availed myself of ACOA. I told him not only was I attending ACOA, but I had found a fantastic, complete program of recovery explicitly for adult survivors on the web. He was very interested in it and I gave him ASCA's web address. I described a little about the program, and based on what we spoke about, he said the program sounded very interesting. I felt excited at his reaction – it felt encouraging to me that he, as an authority in the field of recovery from child abuse, had a positive reaction to what I shared with him.

Jono: What particular childhood issues do you see yourself as recovering from? How does the ASCA format -- either in form or content (or both) - help you recover?

Stu: My abuse was primarily severe emotional cruelty, with some physical abuse thrown in, just so I'd get the message.

I was severely shamed in every way by my parents and my older brother. Then they would completely deny "anything of the sort". Basically, I was imagining it.....it was all a product of my imagination.....YEAH, RIGHT.

One of the most debilitating aspects of my upbringing was the theme of my parents and brother's teaching, that being "you may have what you don't want, and you may not have what you do want". This was constantly reinforced by them in all areas of my life. It made me literally crazy, and as a result, I have never successfully functioned occupationally or within intimate relationships, amongst other areas of life.

So I have very little experience with pursuing my interests in life – I would say this is the dominant core issue I am dealing with, and the effects of having lived life in avoidance of what gives me pleasure.

But I fought to keep my inner soul alive and protect and shelter my inner child, to keep it innocent and unharmed. It was the way I survived.

Now, by using the ASCA program as well as my therapy and other recovery activities I am involved in, I finally have the safest environment I've ever had, to turn inside, heal the damage and wounds that were inflicted, and begin to create a life for myself.....a life which has never occurred. The world was never a safe place for me.

The form of ASCA's program provides me with tremendous safety. I can move through the program at whatever speed is best for me. I DO NOT have to believe in a Higher Power to work the program (a source of shame in working a 12 Step program for people who do not believe in God). The steps do not have to be worked in numeric order. The rotation of the ASCA meetings (Lead, Step, Topic), provides me with constantly varying and informative aspects of the abuse and healing process, and as a result, helps maintain a high level of interest.

The Survivor-to-Thriver manual is superb. It's very well written; it puts into words what I ACTUALLY experienced, and then discusses what it's going to take for me to recover from those experiences. It provides me with some way of proceeding through this overwhelming task of building a life for myself, at the age of 49. Additionally, there is not one scintilla of shaming in any part of the program – remarkable.

The content of the program completely encourages and empowers survivors to make and keep themselves safe, as the bedrock of the program.

In summary, the ASCA program provides me with deep compassion and understanding for the wounds I received (and have been unable to heal from, as of yet); with patient, gentle and wholesome / realistic guidance for the process it will take to facilitate my healing; and realistic encouragement for the life I might be able to create for myself – the freedom to choose how to live my life as a human being – the freedom which was never taken away from many other people – people who have been able to take for granted freedoms, entitlements and autonomy which I never had. This is my experience, so far, and the hope I have for myself in working the ASCA program.

Jono: I noticed that you incorporate some elements from 12-step programs in your meeting format -- such as telling people they are not alone and using the serenity prayer. What about these elements attracts you, and how do you think using them enhances your program of recovery?

Stu: 14 of the 16 people who have come to our meetings have been or are still active in 12 Step recovery. In the process of initiating the Chicago meetings, I just felt it would be easier to attract survivors and make the meetings less threatening, if the meetings had a few familiar elements people would be able to relate to. In describing the organization to people I would constantly be telling them that ASCA was 12 Step-like, but not exactly the same. And also that there was NO competition between the two programs, that they could easily work BOTH programs at the same time – that they complimented each other. So when they DO come, there are elements they immediately feel secure with and about.

Other modifications I made to the meeting format were elements “I” found particularly helpful and comforting at meetings “I” attended. These elements speak to “a welcoming” of people to another SAFE emotional home for themselves to do their healing work.

The Serenity Prayer is something almost everyone on the planet has heard, so it again fosters familiarity and comfort. Additionally, it is an easily memorizable piece that we can repeat to ourselves in times of trouble, which provides the ability to be self-reassuring, self-soothing and self-comforting – an essential element of ASCA’s program.

I deleted the process of offering feedback to individuals after their shares. So many of our attendees have a strong no-crosstalk 12 Step background, that commenting in any way on another person’s share was pretty uncomfortable. In addition, the process really leaves open the possibility for someone in the circle to wound someone else (inadvertently) when the person sharing has laid themselves open and vulnerable.

It seemed to us that the instructions of “no-crosstalk” and the opportunity to offer supportive comments after a share, were inconsistent and probably confusing to newcomers. So rather than risk a problem, we just felt that it was safer to delete the supportive comments process, as a part of the meeting format.

Overall, I felt these modifications added safety and reassurance to the already-safe level of the meeting format. The work is difficult enough, I just wanted to make it the most comfortable & safe home I could.

(This interview to be continued in the next issue of the ASCA News...)

In the Next Issue...

A short story by Tom Taylor about the terror of being abused nightly, in bed.

Part Two of the Interview with Stu.