

# Touching Home: Understanding the Impact of Addiction

By

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The only person with an addiction I knew of when I was a kid was Herald, a war veteran who lived about a half mile from our cabin, down a dusty dirt road – no running water, no electricity. He would pass by our place every afternoon on his mile-long pilgrimage to the country store to buy another bottle of red Gallo wine. He paid with the proceeds of his carefully meted out veteran's check that came without fail, general delivery, to the local post office. He was usually friendly and almost always incoherent.

We didn't think about changing Herald. The year was 1949, and we knew nothing of self-help groups or peer support. We didn't talk about "denial" or "enabling" in those days, and "intervention" had certainly not occurred to anyone in our neck of the woods. We lived on the edge of a logging camp, and while it was a community in the truest sense, people didn't question the life-style choices of each other. It hadn't occurred to me that addiction would ever be a part of my life, or anyone else in my family for that matter. Addictions were something that happened to old men who lived alone and got checks from the government in the mail.

My next close encounter with addiction came much closer to home and this time shook me to the core. It happened during a trip to visit my paternal grandparents whom I hadn't seen for over eight years. I had scratched together enough money to fly into the town closest to where they had lived for the past 30 years. My Aunt Edna, who had agreed to pick me up at the air strip, arrived right on time in her rattle-trap station wagon. We had a two-hour drive ahead of us and we spent the first half of it catching up on all the news about people we both knew. The second hour was quiet as we silently digested the news we'd exchanged. When we reached the edge of town, Aunt Edna slowed down a little and cleared her throat three times. I listened up.

"There's something I should probably tell you about your father." She said without changing her expression or looking in my direction. "I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this.....I'm sorry you have to find this out, but...he's a drunk. He's a skid row drunk!" Somehow, she had been able to keep this secret for a long time, but now that the door was opened, she rolled out a series of tragic stories about the man who was my father. A man I had wondered about for most of my 24 years. When we finally pulled up in front of her house, she turned off the ignition, but continued with the stories for another hour. I don't remember most of what she said.

While she was rolling out story after story of my father's failed attempts at life, I was lost in my own world, recalibrating the fantasies I'd made up about him in the absence of having any real information. I had stitched together a few fragments, mostly glowing comments from my grandmother, about how brilliant and creative my father was; what a marvelous photographer he was; what an important role he played in the war documenting events in pictures; and how successful he was with his new wife and worst of all, his new daughter.

Now I realized the fabric I'd woven from the short pieces of thread I'd gathered from my grandmother was in shreds. I had lost the coverlet I had used to shield me from the unknown. Looking past the dangling threads, I could see a different picture, and it looked a lot like the memory I had of Herald -- an old man who lived alone... disconnected from himself and everything else, and received a check from the government. With many failed attempts to get his life together, he was an embarrassment to himself and others, overwhelmed by shame and guilt. It wasn't a pretty picture.

I hadn't seen my father for over 20 years. My last memory of him was watching him walk backward -- away from our front doorstep when I was four years old. My mother's tearful voice was barely audible, but she was clearly giving him the message to go away and never ever come back. He must have done something terribly wrong.

I returned home from my visit with Aunt Edna, which included a few hours of polite conversation with my grandparents, but couldn't shake the stories about my father. So began my search for the questions and answers about addiction. I began to attend the local AA group in my hometown, desperately explaining my recent experience and asking questions about what it all meant and what I should do. I was a young woman in rooms full of seasoned recovering alcoholics. Technically, I wasn't supposed to be there since I myself was not an alcoholic. None-the-less, they took me in and let me stay. I was wide-eyed and speechless as I listened to their stories of lost lives and redemption.

After a few meetings, they suggested I attend the Al Anon meetings, where I heard stories from family members -- the other side of the equation -- that left me equally wide-eyed and speechless.

I eventually met my father a couple of years later, and we had some interesting visits over a period of six or eight years. Most of these times he was in varying degrees of intoxication, but I loved him anyway. He talked often about his numerous attempts to stop drinking. Several times he tried going to AA meeting twice a day for months at a time. He would eventually succumb to the ravages of addiction again and take himself back to the veteran's hospital to dry out. Each time the cycles of sobriety grew shorter, until he finally gave up. He died of alcoholism when he was 65 years old in a veteran's hospital. While I would like to think that his life had some purpose, I think for the most part it was a tragic waste of the brilliance and creativity that only my grandmother saw in him.

*That, of course, is the devil's bargain of addiction: a short-term good feeling in exchange for the steady meltdown of one's life.*  
~Daniel Goldman

