

## Cross Cultural and Multiethnic Connections

My Topic today is Cross Cultural and Multiethnic Connections. I would like to share with you an article I submitted to the A.A. Grapevine, published in the November 2017 Issue titled "Lonely, Refuge" An African American member recalls rough times growing up and how AA saved him from a long desperate road.

It was a warm summer day when I walked down the seven steps to the AA meeting in northwest Portland. I was so full of fear; I thought nothing could be worse. I gathered all my mental reserves and determination. I did not know at the time that I was again in my Higher Power's grasp. I also didn't know at the time that to give up is to win. But I was completely, utterly desperate.

My previous two years of drinking had included detox centers, hospitals, mental hospitals, and wet sleeping bags. I had punched through fear many times in my life, especially during the previous four years as a homeless alcoholic.

I was born during World War II, the first of two African American boys of working parents in Chicago. My mother died when I was 8 years old of a heart ailment, leaving my father to take care of my 4-year-old brother and me. My father would often sit and stare and sometimes cry silently, tears running down his face, while holding the two of us.

When the war ended, my father had it rough trying to find work. He was unable to support both of us. I was shuffled off to my maternal grandmother in the suburbs of a Mid-western city 300 miles to the south. I missed my brother and my dad. But I had no choice but to adjust to life in the "burbs." It was much later, after I'd been sober for many years, when I realized the impact of the loneliness and isolation I experienced in this early time of my life.

I would visit my dad every summer in Chicago and help him with different handyman jobs. I loved those times, being on a construction site or remodeling job and absorbing the sights and sounds of men using tools and working with their hands.

At various job sites, everyone talked about the impact of drinking on their lives. Some laughed about a silly episode from the night before and others were looking forward to some similar episode in the future.

After work, my dad would take me to the neighborhood bar and introduce me to the owner. Eventually, I found out that the introduction was a prerequisite to my running errands for my dad to and from the tavern to get money, whiskey and cigarettes. He'd give me a note saying what he needed and the bar owner, who recognized me, gave me whatever was on the list. Over the years, during these summer visits, I learned to write my own notes to the bar so I could get liquor and cigarettes for myself and put them on my dad's tab.

Life in the suburbs could be characterized as an improvement compared to apartment living in Chicago. My grandmother had renters on adjoining properties that she owned. Her house was frequented by elderly church members. I had space to roam and there was a creek nearby. I was enrolled in one of the best grade schools and high schools in the state of Missouri for black children, which was only three blocks away.

Despite all these apparent advantages, my loneliness was a huge pit inside that seemed to devour my heart and soul. I missed my brother and my dad terribly. I struggled through school, doing my best to hide how lonely I was. I was fearful of not fitting in. I was awkward around my peers. I didn't want to ask anyone to help me deal with my loneliness and fear. I wanted to be tough.

The stress was enormous. I always seemed to want what others had. I wanted brothers and sisters and parents who drove automobiles. That was when I asked one of my classmates if I could visit his home and hang out for a bit. I spent my school years developing various ways of adapting to social situations. I yearned to be around grownups, who seemed to be in touch with the world.

My grandparents loved me. They did their best to raise me. But my liquid courage emboldened me to emulate others who had a different lifestyle. In Chicago, with so many people in such a small area, many levels of African American

culture could be found living in the same four-story apartment building. During summer visits, I soon found out that I had to learn how to survive in a new environment, to be ready to fight. I had to think on my feet and do it quickly.

In time, punching through fear became almost instinctive. Some days I learned how to defend myself and other times I learned how to be kind and compassionate.

On one of the first summer visits, I arrived in Chicago from the suburbs. I stepped from the train wearing argyle socks with penny loafers and charcoal gray slacks. This was proper attire for the suburbs. I quickly found myself fighting with other young people who hated me for the way I was dressed. I felt embarrassment about not winning one of the fights and having to explain to my dad why I was so bloody, and my clothes were torn.

My drinking quickly progressed. In those early teen years, I paid someone to go inside the liquor store and get my bottle of cheap wine, often paying three to four times what it was worth. Then I was signing my dad's name on a slip of paper and going to the bar down the street for alcohol and cigarettes. I was depending on the courage out of a bottle to face everyday life.

I graduated from the suburban high school and immediately hitch-hiked north to work with my dad, saving my train money for alcohol and cigarettes. Within three years, I had escaped the urban lifestyle and put in two years in the military.

Later, there was a prominent government job, and then a few years after that, a prestigious blue-collar job. I continued to feel "less than" and my drinking continued as well. It was a vicious cycle I was unable to break, especially after I was laid off from my job.

It was now 1970. I told myself that I was glad to leave the rat race. I wanted to pursue the dream world of California, living alone and homeless. I could drink without the interference of the working world. After two years of hitchhiking around the country, I tried to reenter the working world, only to find out that I was unable to crawl out of the bottle long enough to even apply for a job. I was unable to do anything except survive as a homeless person securing alcohol like other street people. I spent as much time in the California redwoods as I could, but I frequently had to leave my sanctuary to hitchhike into town to score more liquor. No one seemed to drink the way I did, and the rocky Pacific Coast and towering redwoods became another lonely refuge.

Later I traveled north, eventually ending up in Oregon, where I landed in the mental hospital twice. When I tried to enter for a third time, the admitting doctor recognized my problem and refused admission. Later I landed in treatment and was introduced to AA. Even after treatment and 30 days of AA meetings, I was not entirely convinced of my alcoholism. I returned to my homeless street existence for, God willing the last time.

In the summer of 1975, I got sober. That was the beginning of a life far beyond my wildest imagination. Since that time, I have completed my college education, had three careers, two wives and three houses. Today I have the spiritual tools to punch through my fears. Today I am provided a path to staying sober through studying, reading, and following the principles of AA. I enjoy the love and caring of our members. Nearly every day, I sit in rooms of people with fears similar to my own. I learn from these people.

I retired in 2003 and continue to sponsor several men today. I'm grateful to pass on to these men what was passed on to me. I attend on average two AA meetings per day. Every day I ask for the knowledge of God's will. I am over 45 years sober now and very grateful. And I do not take the first drink – no matter what.