

## The holiday season — Stressful times for adult children of alcoholics

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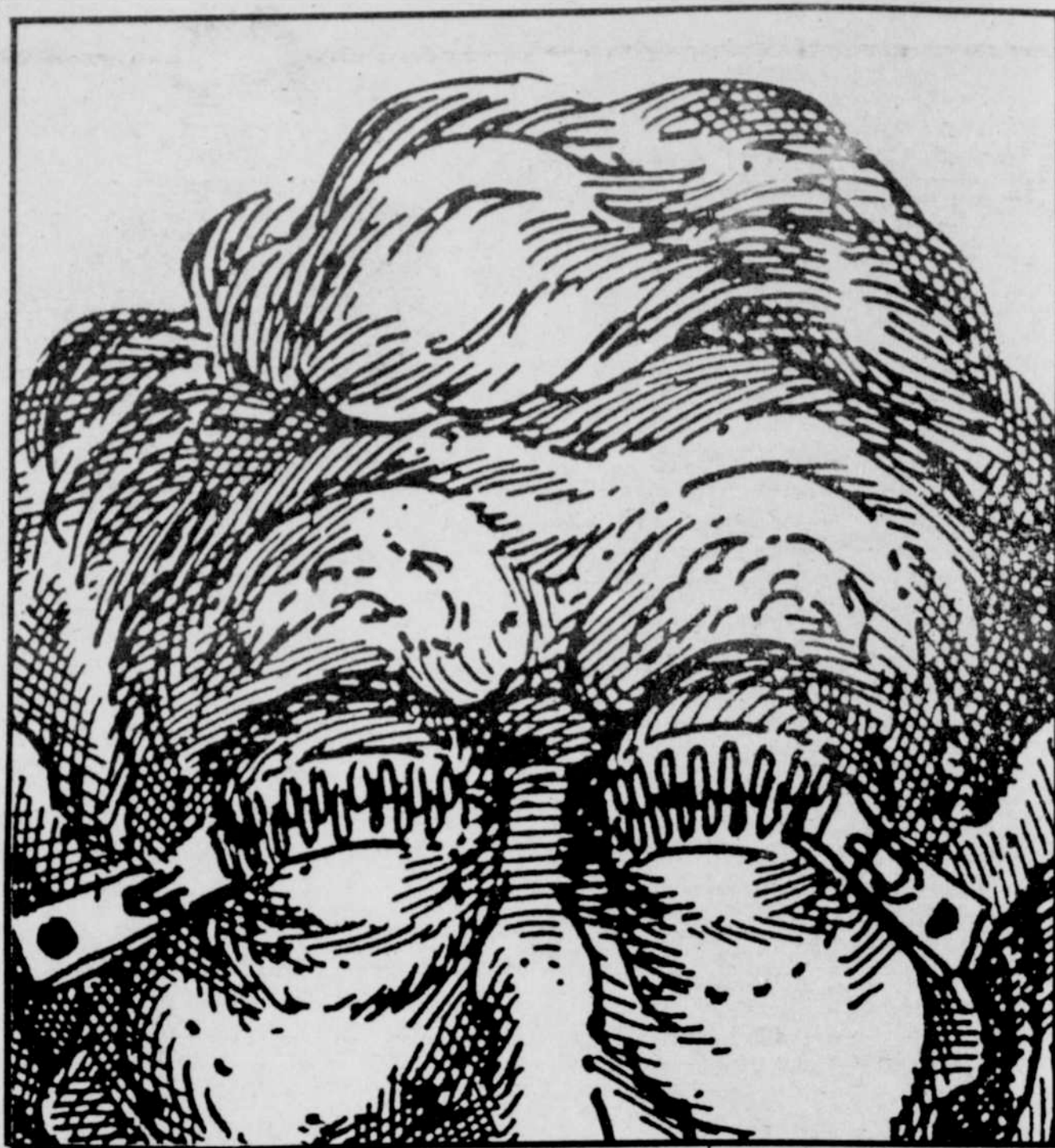
As the holiday season approaches, we are told that this is a joyful time of year, a time for celebration, for closeness of loved ones and families. For those of us whose family experiences are not close, accepting or harmonious, the holiday season can trigger anxiety and depression over what is missing. Single people without families, and gay people with homophobic families are examples of those who may become more aware of the contrast between the ideal and the actual during the two holidays. Another group of people who may feel apprehension rather than anticipation at this time of year includes the millions of Americans who grew up in alcoholic homes.

A child's life is never easy when one or both parents is an alcoholic, and for this reason alone, adult children of alcoholics often feel sad and angry when confronted with images of normal, happy families. Beyond this, the holiday season is especially traumatic in the alcoholic home because our culture encourages overindulgence in alcohol at this time. Hopes for a perfect Thanksgiving dinner are shattered when an alcoholic parent shows up drunk or not at all. Broken promises, family fights, embarrassing scenes and worry over a drunk driver on the road typify Christmas Eve. Many adult children have repressed the gruesome details of these memories, but still feel a vague uneasiness, come November. Thus, the holiday season can be a source of depression for the adult children of an al-

coholic family, but it can also be a time to reflect productively on the power which the drug alcohol has exerted in one's life.

Therapists who work with alcoholic families agree that the children develop characteristic emotional strengths and problems in the process of coping with the effects of alcohol on both alcoholic and non-alcoholic parents. Claudia Black, M.S.W., says that the basic rules in an alcoholic home are, "Don't talk, don't trust, don't feel." Alcoholic families do not allow people to discuss the real source of problems, usually alcoholism, so problems are never explored or solved among the family members. Children try to handle hurt, angry, or scared feelings on their own, both because of the family rule, and because the parents are not usually competent to solve problems. At least one of them is drunk, and the other is overburdened with problems caused by the drunk. The adults may be unpredictable, moody, rejecting, or even violent, so it is safer to keep to one's self. Adult children of alcoholics act as if they still lived in the same environment, as indeed many do. They ignore their feelings as much as possible, and believe that if something needs to be done, they will have to do it themselves.

Several family roles have been identified among children of alcoholics, which persist into adulthood. One is that of the overly responsible, highly competent person, whose childhood role usually included taking care of the family. This job included not only full parenting responsibility for other siblings, but even a role reversal with the actual parents. The parental child at age eight may have cooked and cleaned for the whole family, put a drunken father to bed, acted as marriage counselor for a depressed mother, and still received good grades at school. As adults, these people continue to be overly responsible and competent, often get into helping professions, but fear that someone will discover that their abilities are faked. Because



they took on adult jobs before they were ready to make adult decisions, they feel like frauds, even though they may be winning awards for their performances. They also are completely unaware of their own emotional needs and how to meet them, and are often exploited by self-serving, immature and irresponsible people.

Behavior in an alcoholic family is rigid, extreme, and falls into black-and-white dichotomies. Competing with the child in the goody-goody role is the irresponsible problem child who attracts negative attention. By the time this child reaches mid-adolescence, he or she has made a mess out of school, jobs, relationships, and may be in trouble with the juvenile authorities. Drugs or alcohol are almost certainly a major problem and teenage pregnancies are common. As adults, these problem children are burdened by their addictions and by their self-hate, based in feeling rejected as a child and in realistic evaluations of their own past behaviors. Unless they can change their negative self-concept, and become drug-free, they continue to be a source of pain and worry to loved ones, perhaps becoming the alcoholic parent of a new generation.

A third coping strategy found in children of alcoholics is social withdrawal, keeping a low profile. This child hopes to get some parental approval by being no burden, making no demands and having no needs. Although the parents may feel blessed by this near invisible child, he or she is generally ignored. An observer rather than a participant, the child avoids interaction with peers and so fails to learn how to make friends. By adulthood, they are socially incompetent and isolated. They seem vague or numb, with poorly defined identities, feelings or memories. Their strength is that they can be surrounded by emotional chaos and seem unaffected by it, and some capitalize on this ability by finding a disturbed or alcoholic partner with whom they can withdraw from the rest of the world.

In addition to having unique personal strengths and weaknesses, adult children of alcoholics almost always show the effects of their early experiences by continuing a close relationship to alcoholism. They are at greater risk of developing alcoholism themselves than are other people, both because of

possible heredity factors and because of a learned reliance on instant chemical solutions to problems. Over half of them become alcoholics. Those who are not alcoholic frequently find alcoholic partners, even when they are trying to avoid doing so. Having learned to relate to others in a peculiar way, they are most compatible with people whose behavior fits into the alcoholic family pattern.

Non-alcoholic partners of alcoholics usually end up in a role which alcoholism professionals call "the enabler." Although they want the alcoholic to stop drinking, they behave in ways which help the alcoholic to avoid the negative consequences of drinking, and thus enable the alcoholism to continue. For example, the enabler signs her name to the apartment lease, wanting the alcoholic to pay half the rent, but worrying that she or he will fail to come through. Sure enough, the alcoholic drinks away the money and the enabler pays the whole bill. She keeps this a secret from her friends, fearing that they will criticize her and her relationship. As this pattern becomes more pervasive and intense, the alcoholic can get worse, the enabler exhausted and depressed, and the couple completely isolated from outside help. Adult children of alcoholics learn early to suffer in secret, and do what they need to do to keep the family system going, at any cost.

Fortunately, this attitude is no longer necessary because informed, effective, professional help is finally available. Alcoholism experts now recognize that adult children of alcoholics do not necessarily recover their ability to live and love fully, just because their particular alcoholics have recovered, died or been divorced. The time has come for adult children of alcoholics to reveal themselves and break through their inhibitions about asking for help.

A good place to start is the bookstore. Excellent references are *Adult Children of Alcoholics* by Janet Woititz, *It Will Never Happen to Me* by Claudia Black, and *Another Chance* by Sharon Wegscheider. Self-help and peer-help groups are offered by Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon, and ACOA. Professional counseling for adult children of alcoholics is also readily available in the Portland area.

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