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**Key Words:** alcoholism, recovery, Alcoholics Anonymous, AA, metaphor, *The Odyssey*, addiction, counseling

**Note from the author:** This is the final installment of a four-part series that uses Homer's *The Odyssey* as a metaphor to explain the process of recovery from alcoholism. In writing this article, I was faced with a dilemma. On one hand, there is within the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous the essential declaration that one is an "alcoholic," which serves to break down the defense mechanism of denial. However, on the other hand, referring to a person as an "alcoholic" is demeaning and thereby reduces the person to a mere label. Members of the American Psychological Association and the American Counseling Association hold such a practice in disdain. In light of this, I have endeavored to hold the use of the term "alcoholic" to a minimum while attempting to maintain the spirit of the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous.

# The Recovery Odyssey IV: The Family Afterward—Returning Home

## Abstract

In a previous installment on this topic, Joseph Campbell's *Path of the Hero* was discussed in great detail, including the aspects of separation, initiation, and return. This article focuses on the process of change that occurs when an alcoholic returns to his or her family. The changes, reactions, and feelings of family members and the recovering alcoholic will be discussed.

## The Return of the Recovering Alcoholic

In *Alcoholics Anonymous* (AA) (1976), there is an entire chapter devoted to "the family afterward," which lays out in excruciating detail the simple yet profound message that even though an alcoholic is not drinking and has returned home, the rest of his or her family can expect difficulties. While away from the family, the alcoholic consistently seeks to have needs met or supplanted by alcohol and simultaneously neglects the responsibility of taking care of the needs of his or her family. While drinking in an addictive manner, family and family members are often a mere afterthought. The sense of belonging to a family becomes lost or severely strained in the addicted individual and his or her family.

When an individual in recovery has seen the error of his or her ways, has a desire to refrain from drinking, and has returned home, a time of adjustment is needed for the family to feel like a family again. Family members have unvoiced expectations and fixed ideas about their loved one who has returned home, and may have difficulty recognizing the individual and remembering what he or she was like before becoming addicted.

While away, the spouse/partner of the alcoholic made all of the decisions. Some emotional distancing may occur as the responsibilities are given back. While these dynamics are in a state of flux, it may be difficult for the recovering individual to

attempt to rebuild a positive relationship with his or her children, abandonment issues notwithstanding

## The Return of Odysseus

The context of the "return" is viewed from the Greek ideal of an individual being unified with his or her family and getting rid of the obstacles that prevent him or her from attaining such a union. In this part of *The Odyssey*, the anger of the goddess Athena and the god Poseidon keep Odysseus, the King of Ithaca, away from his home for 20 years. In his absence, suitors who assume he is dead pursue his wife, Penelope. The suitors stay in her home, eating her food and using her supplies. The impediments in this story are the suitors (who can be paralleled to the character defects of the alcoholic), who reduce the level of proper functioning in the home by depleting supplies, resources, and energy.

The suitors press Penelope to choose one of them as a new husband, and Penelope promises to do so when she finishes sewing a shroud for Odysseus. She then cunningly remains faithful to Odysseus by sewing the shroud by day and undoing her work each night, thereby prolonging the work indefinitely.

Meanwhile, Odysseus's son, Telemachus, grows into a man and denounces the suitors, who are draining his father's reserves. They deny their guilt and blame Penelope (by denying perception, invalidating feelings, and minimizing personal responsibility). Telemachus realizes that if he stays at his home, the suitors will kill him. He prays for help by asking the goddess Athena (a higher power) for guidance as he begins a quest to find his father. This process reflects Telemachus' initial step on his own journey toward manhood. His inner desire to find his lost father prompts him to go out into the world and find himself. His exposure to worldly events while traveling to visit his father's former com-

rades-in-arms matures and strengthens him.

After 20 years, Athena takes pity on Odysseus and decides to help him get home to his family. She devises a plan for Odysseus to get past the suitors by transforming him into a beggar and sending him to an old swineherd to meet up with his son. Returning as a war hero, Telemachus is instructed by Athena to go to the swineherd's shack on his way home. Odysseus and Telemachus are finally reunited there, and together they devise a plan to kill the suitors.

Disguised as the beggar, Odysseus returns to his palace and gains the respect and confidence of Penelope, who does not recognize him. As a token of her appreciation she offers to have a nurse care for him by washing his feet. This very same nurse cared for Odysseus as a young man, and she recognizes a scar on his leg from when he was gored by a boar years earlier. Although she recognizes him by his scar, Odysseus urges her to remain silent and not reveal his true identity (to not break his anonymity as in AA) until after the suitors have been vanquished.

By this point the suitors have figured out Penelope's scheme with the shroud, and they demand she choose a husband. Penelope agrees to marry the man who can string her husband's bow and shoot it through 10 rings. All of the suitors try and fail, and so the disguised Odysseus steps forward and asks for a chance. The suitors watch in awe as the beggar strings the bow with speed and ease and shoots the arrow through all 10 rings. Odysseus then shoots the suitors. They reach for their weapons, but Telemachus has hidden them and locked all of the doors, barring their escape.

After the slaughter of the suitors Penelope still does not recognize Odysseus, as he is covered with blood and remains in his dirty clothing. She finally comes to believe

that he is her long-lost husband after he shares secrets with her that only they would know.

### **The Scar of Odysseus**

The reference to swine is repeated in *The Odyssey* with a metaphorical significance. The initial reference is with regard to Odysseus's men being transformed into pleasure-seeking pigs on Circe's island during Odysseus's 20-year detainment. The second reference involves the humble hut of the swineherd that Odysseus visits shortly after his arrival in Ithaca. The third and final reference is the nurse's recognition of Odysseus's scar from the boar attack he experienced in his youth.

The following ideas swarm into a meaningful pattern and are related to a resulting scar. Alcoholism evokes selfish, "piggish," self-indulgent behaviors that can produce wounds in others. If one were to personify this force it could easily be seen as a pig—a wild and brutish force that wounds all it touches. Odysseus was wounded by such a force as a youth. As an adult he is able to conquer the beast (residing within his men) thanks to the aid of a higher power that gives him the strength to avoid the seductive selfish pleasure on Circe's Island. Later, having lost everything, Odysseus goes to a man who guides and cares for the porcine beasts. His "return" is marked by an acknowledgment of his own "piggish" and selfish tendencies that initially battle-scarred him, a willingness to assist others who suffer from the same ailment, and the seeking of help from those who offered guidance.

### **The Scar of Alcoholism**

Individuals in recovery often follow a similar path of realization and recognize that their selfish nature leads to a wounding of themselves and others. Alcoholism is considered by some to have a genetic predisposition. Cotton (1979) indicated that children of alcoholics are 3 to 5 times more likely to become alcoholics than are the children of non-problem drinkers. Regardless of whether alcoholism is hereditary, learned, or a combination of both, the process leaves scars. One scar left with family members is selfishness. "Selfishness—

self-centeredness! ...is the root cause of all of troubles ... we step on the toes of our fellows and they retaliate" (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 1976, p.62).

This disfiguring legacy of hurt is passed on from the alcoholic to the family and back again. Although at times this may be made manifest in physical scars, there is always an emotional scar left behind by the selfish and piggish behavior of the alcoholic. Like Odysseus, recovering individuals often learn from the resulting consequences. They realize that they can help others based upon their own experiences, and that there is an ongoing need to continue their program of daily maintenance.

### **Odysseus's Family of Origin Issues**

Odysseus's grandfather, Autolycus, was a renowned thief. Autolycus gave Odysseus his name, which means "giver and receiver of pain." It seems appropriate that Odysseus, who was also described as "the man of twists and turns driven time and again off course," would be given such a name (Homer, 1997, p. 77).

### **Alcoholic Family of Origin Issues**

Much like Odysseus, alcoholics often cause their family pain, and as both direct and indirect results, bring pain upon themselves. Bowen (1978) indicated that when one family member is ill, the other family members compensate for the poor functioning of the sick person. This process is especially true for the alcoholic, whose family members act in a similar manner. Family members will often become resentful of the process and develop a deep sense of anger toward the alcoholic. In fact, *AA* (1976) states that in the process the entire family becomes ill to some extent. While the family yearns for happiness and a secure future on one hand, on the other hand there is an accumulation of compounded hurt, anger, disappointment, resentment, and fear that must be reconciled.

Upon attaining sobriety, the person in recovery begins to take a personal inventory of his or her character defects, prays to have these imperfections removed, and

makes amends to those who were harmed by his or her actions while he or she was drinking. However, *AA* (1976) urges recovering alcoholics to avoid discussing unpleasant experiences that their alcoholism caused. In addition, the person in recovery often attempts to make up for time lost by trying too hard or working feverishly. As a result, family members may once again feel abandoned, left out, or ignored. A spark of anger ignites and continues in a slow burn. Initial irritation turns into resentment and festers into an infection of the mind and soul. This process is accelerated when needs outside of family obligations precede the family's needs. When a family member eventually explodes, the recovering individual will once again experience pain.

### **Penelope—the Wife**

Without her husband present, Penelope's existence was in stasis and was represented appropriately by her working on a shroud during the day but unraveling it at night. This gesture has many symbolic implications. In Odysseus's absence she attempts to placate her suitors by telling them that after the shroud is completed she will marry—a delay that lasted for 3 years. Another interpretation of this scenario is that she could not go forward with her own life and emotional development as she grieved the loss of her husband. Whatever progress was made in daylight was reversed in darkness.

### **Spouse of the Alcoholic**

After viewing the spouse of an alcoholic, it is understandable that the relationship often appears to be dead. Within that relationship it is the non-alcoholic spouse who seems to be the only functioning member. Regardless of whether the alcoholic is currently drinking or not, he/she is not emotionally present with his or her partner. The alcoholic's spouse often feels emotionally abandoned, used, abused, and taken for granted. As the couple focuses on the development of their family, they realize that sacrifices need to be made. But the sacrifices are often one-sided. It is the non-alcoholic spouse who gives up his or her career and sacrifices his or her dreams in an

attempt to get the alcoholic partner back and to progress forward. The spouse is abandoned and left to deal with all of the alcoholic's unattended responsibilities.

As a parent, the spouse is torn in half. Sometimes playing the role of the mother and at other times the role of the father, the spouse is always trying to placate his or her children who wonder "What is wrong with my parent, and where is he or she?" The spouse's energy is dissipated as he or she is expected to assume the alcoholic's abandoned responsibilities.

### Telemachus—the Son

Just as Odysseus's wife's life was stagnant, so was the development of their son, Telemachus. He was on the verge of manhood. While there was no way that he could physically overpower the suitors for his mother's hand, he began to search for other means. He realized that his life was in danger from the suitors and he knew that he must mature quickly. The process began his own quest for the path of the hero as he separated himself from his mother. His initiation began during his search for his father, which was aided by a mentor—a disguised form of the goddess Athena. He sought out other warriors who fought alongside his father. These combatants served as models for the young Telemachus, and from them he learned the proper behavior of a mature man. His return as a hero must be preceded by his assisting his father to "clear the house" of the suitors—a process similar to the alcoholic's clearing the house of the defects of character.

Upon his return home Telemachus had matured—a process noted not only by the suitors but also by Odysseus himself. Further evidence of this is seen when Telemachus assisted his father with killing the suitors.

### Differentiation and the Child of the Alcoholic

Bowen (1978) indicated that the level of differentiation of self is the degree to which the individual has solidly held principles applied to his or her life. This is often equated with emotional maturity. Bowen indicated that when individuals reach a

higher level of differentiation than what their parents modeled, changes occur within the family structure. These changes in turn modify the emotional force between people and promote greater autonomy. Furthermore, the level of differentiation of self from one generation of the family is related to that of the preceding generation. In order to achieve a higher level of differentiation, the adolescent must gain equality with his or her parents by leaving home and returning as an adult.

### Recovery as a Family

In families that struggle with addiction, each family member must not only understand the responsibilities of the recovering alcoholic, but must also act responsibly to work out the issues of the other family members. This process can be accomplished in other 12-step programs such as Alanon, a program developed from AA. Each day, every family member must work methodically on emotional/spiritual maintenance and not harbor resentment, anger, or fear. Recovery is a family process and is contingent upon the maintenance of a spiritual program. Failure to practice the program consistently invites disaster.

### Epilogue

In the ongoing saga of Odysseus there was a fateful turn of events. As the story goes, Telegonus, son of Odysseus and Circe, begins to search for his father. He arrives in Ithaca and begins to plunder there. Ithaca is defended by Odysseus and Telemachus. The brash Telegonus fails to recognize his father, Odysseus, and kills him with a poisoned spear. Later Odysseus's wife and son forgive Telegonus when they realize who he is. After Odysseus is laid to rest, Circe marries Telemachus and Telegonus weds Penelope.

It would appear that unresolved issues from Odysseus's past came together and lead to his demise. After a time of sobriety, individuals in recovery may become complacent and neglect the daily maintenance and discipline of the AA 12 Step Program. It is at that point that an individual begins to backslide spiritually and disregard responsibilities. This process may occur not only for the person in recovery, but

also for his or her family members. For the alcoholic, a relapse may be having another drink, but for the family members of alcoholics, relapse may be marrying another alcoholic or, in the case of Odysseus's family, getting stuck with the same family dynamics or repeating patterns.

The path of recovery resembles the path of Odysseus, as it is full of twists and turns. Although the journey of recovery is fraught with difficulties and setbacks, as long as an individual has the desire to get back on the right path and seek help from a higher power, recovery is possible. Perhaps the end of Odysseus's story will serve as a haunting reminder that recovery is a never-ending process and an everlasting Odyssey.

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**Dr. Jeff Sandoz**, a prolific writer and speaker, is a Diplomate of the American Psychotherapy Association. He has written numerous articles and has presented his research at conferences throughout the nation. His television media exposure has included "Your Mental Health" and "Your Open Mind," and he has been a weekly newspaper columnist for more than 5 years in the *Opelousas Daily World*.

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