



## SILENCED INTO LISTENING

By Carey Sipp



I remember the room vividly. It was small, and had olive green shag carpet on the floor. It was

probably a mud porch when the house was first built. It smelled like stale cigarettes, mold, and those blue things that go in toilet-bowl tanks to keep the toilet from getting rusty.

Several times a week I would almost crawl into that room. Most of the time I was a little late, so there was no chair left and I sat on that nasty carpet.

It was in those first meetings that my pain was so great – the memories of what I saw and heard and felt growing up in an alcoholic home – that I was almost struck dumb. It was a turning point time in my life following my divorce, when I realized that my life was so totally unmanageable that I could not pile a good effort or appearance onto the fragility any more. I was so stressed, so weakened physically and emotionally, that I lost my voice for two months.

I guess it was my time to listen. The doctors said I had a virus, and that it had settled into my vocal chords. If I spoke, I could damage my voice permanently. So I kept quiet. When I got home my fingers burned to write down the stories I wanted to tell those people who shared that dank space with me. Stories came up through my dreams. They woke me up. They made me cry myself to sleep. They just kept coming. And I kept writing them.

That was 12 years ago. Since that time I took those stories of my childhood, and I added to them some observations about my starting time in recovery from being a child of an alcoholic. Ultimately, I wrote, too, about the good times I've had both alone and with my children. And I added to those stories some of the best information I'd learned in parenting classes, therapy sessions, and talks with friends who were doing a great job of rearing their children.

I need to remember what I could put my children through if I don't constantly work on following the suggestions of that first support program for friends and families of alcoholics. And as well, if I don't follow the principles of the second support group I joined: a program for people who want to stop their own drinking. I don't think I'd ever have made it to the second group were it not for the lessons of forgiveness and faith learned in the first, when I was "silenced into listening."

As if the next step always rises up to meet my sometimes scrambling feet, a friend called me in the spring of 2005 asking me to help with some parenting classes at a treatment center for women – mostly mothers – in recovery from alcohol and drug abuse. I wasn't sure what I'd do for the class, but when the time came I used what I had: those stories.

Stories bring healing to the listener, and to the storyteller. I can read those stories easily now; they don't hold the

same power over me that they once did. The people in the stories, including myself, are long-since forgiven. There are stories about the forgiveness in the book, too, along with stories about love and stability and hope.

I look at the women I am blessed to spend time with, and I see the pain they are feeling as they fight to free themselves from twisted childhoods, and drinking to forget, and struggling to make-do for their children. These are women who need so much.

While I read to them, I notice that some are laughing along with the funny parts. And some of them are crying at the sad parts. Sometimes the stories make a space for them to talk about their own experiences. Sometimes I can tell that there are some women who want to speak, but who just can't. Not yet.

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Those women remind me of myself 12 years ago, when I wasn't able to speak because some power greater than I knew it would be better for

me to be quiet and listen, and then go home and write out my pain.

My lack of voice eventually gave me a voice, and I am grateful beyond belief for the lessons learned and the opportunity to share.

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