



A Merry Go Round Named Denial

(An Alanon Publication)

Alcoholism is a tragic three act play in which there are at least 4 characters: the drinker and her family; friends; co-workers and even counselors may have a part in keeping the Merry-Go-Round turning. Alcoholism rarely appears in one person set apart from others; it seldom continues in isolation from others.

One person drinks too much and gets drunk and others react to her drinking and its consequences. The drinker responds to this reaction and drinks again. This sets up a Merry-Go-Round of blame and denial, a downward-spiral which characterizes alcoholism. Therefore, to understand alcoholism, we must look not at the alcoholic alone but view the illness as if we were sitting in the audience watching a play and observing carefully the roles of all the actors in the drama.

As the play opens we see the alcoholic as the star of the first act. She does all the acting; others react to what she does. A female between the ages of 30 and 55, she is usually smart, skillful, and often successful in her work; but her goal may be far above his ability. We see that she is sensitive, lonely and tense. She is also immature in a way that produces a real dependence. However, she may act as in an independent way in order to deny this fact. She also denies she is responsible for the results of her behavior. From this dependency and denial comes the name of the play -- A Merry-Go-Round Named Denial. For her to act in this way, others must make it possible. That is why we must observe carefully what each actor does in the play.

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The alcoholic has learned that the use of alcohol makes her feel better. To her it is a blessing, not a curse, his medication, not a poison. For a few hours it floats away her troubles; it melts away her fears, reduces her tension, removes her loneliness and solves all her problems.

The play opens with the alcoholic stating that no one can tell her what to do; she tells them. This makes it very difficult for the family to talk about drinking and its results. Even when the drinking is obviously causing serious problems, she simply will not discuss them. Talking is like a one-way street. No one seems to hear what the others are saying. On both sides, people say one thing yet do another. This is why it is necessary to see the play to understand alcoholism. To observe the alcoholic alone, to read a scientific description of the illness, or to listen to the family's tales of woe, is only a small part of the drama. The key word in alcoholism is "Denial", for again and again people do what they say they will not or deny what they have done. If we could watch the play on TV and turn off the sound, we would understand much better what was really happening.

Early in the first act the alcoholic needs a drink, so she takes one. She drinks hard and fast, not slow and easy. She may drink openly; but more likely she will conceal the amount she drinks by drinking off-stage and not in the presence of other actors in the play. This is the first part of denial: hiding the amounts she drinks. But it proves to us that she knows she is drinking too much. She drinks more than others, more often than others and, above all, it means far more to her than to others.

Drinking too much, too often, is not a matter of choice. It is the first sign of alcoholism. Repeated denial, by hiding the bottle and drinking alone, reveals how important alcohol has become in helping the alcoholic feel better. After one or two drinks she cannot stop.

After a few more we see a profound change in the alcoholic. She reveals a sense of success, well-being and self-sufficiency. She's on top of the world, and may act as if she were a little god. Now she's right and everybody else is wrong. This is very likely to happen if someone objects to her drinking.

There is no one way all alcoholics act while intoxicated; but they are not rational or sensible; they are not responsible. They are apt to ignore the rules of social conduct, sometimes even to a criminal degree, of which driving under the influence is a clear example. If a sober person acted this way, we would consider her insane.

If drinking continues long enough, the alcoholic creates a crisis, gets into trouble, ends up in a mess. This can happen in many ways, but the pattern is always the same: she is dependent and behaves as if she were independent, and drinking makes it easy to convince itself this is true. Yet the results of her drinking make her even more dependent upon others. When her self-created crisis strikes, she waits for something to happen, ignores it, walks away from it, or cries for someone to get her out of it. Alcohol, which at first gave her a sense of success and independence, has not stripped her of her mask and reveals her a helpless, dependent child.

Act II

In Act II the alcoholic does nothing but wait for and expect others to do for her. Three others in the play act out their roles and the alcoholic benefits from what they do. She does little or nothing; everything is done for her in the second act.

THE ENABLER

The first person to appear is one we might call the Enabler, a "helpful" Mr. Clean who may be impelled, by his own anxiety and guilt, to rescue his friend, the alcoholic, from her predicament. He wants to save the alcoholic from the immediate crisis and relieve her of the unbearable tension created by the situation. In reality, this person may be meeting a need of her own, rather than that of the alcoholic, although he does not realize this himself. The Enabler may be a male outside of the family, perhaps a relative; occasionally a woman plays this role.

It is also played by the so-called "helping professions" - clergyman, doctors, lawyers, social workers. Many have had little, if any, of the scientific instruction on alcohol and alcoholism, which is essential in such specialized counseling.

Lacking this knowledge, they handle the situation in the same process of learning by "correcting her own mistakes", and conditions her to believe there will always be a protector who will come to her rescue, even though the Enablers insist they will never again rescue her. They always have and the alcoholic believes they always will. Such rescue operations can be just as compulsive as drinking.

The VICTIM

The next character to come on stage may be called the Victim. This may be the boss, the employer, the foreman or supervisor, the commanding officer in military life, a business partner, or, at times, a fellow employee. The Victim is the person who is responsible for getting the work done, if the alcoholic is absent due to a hangover. Statistics in industry show that by the time drinking interferes with a woman's job, she may have been working for the same company for 10 - 15 years, and her boss has become a very real friend. Protection of the woman is a perfectly normal response; there is always the hope that this will be the last time. The alcoholic has become completely dependent on this repeated protection and cover-up by the Victim; otherwise she could not continue drinking in this fashion. She would be compelled to give up drinking or give up the job. It is the Victim who enables the alcoholic to continue her irresponsible drinking without losing her job.

The PROVOKER

The third character in this act is the key person in the play, the spouse or parent of the alcoholic, the person with whom the alcoholic lives. This is usually the husband or mother. He is a veteran at this role and has played it much longer than others in the act. He is the Provoker. He is hurt and upset by repeated drinking episodes, but he holds the family together despite all the trouble caused by drinking. In turn, he feeds back into the marriage her bitterness, resentment, fear and hurt, and so becomes the source of provocation. He controls, he tries to force the changes he wants, never gives in, but never forgets. The attitude of the alcoholic is that her failure should be acceptable, but he must never fail her! She acts with complete independence and insists she will do as he pleases, and she expects him to do exactly what she tells him to do or not to do. He must be at home when she arrives, if she arrives.

This character might also be called the Adjuster; he is constantly adjusting to the crises and trouble caused by drinking. The alcoholic blames him for everything that goes wrong with the home and the marriage. He tries everything possible to make his marriage work to prove she is wrong. He is husband and wife and housekeeper and breadwinner. Living with a woman whose illness is alcoholism, he attempts to be nurse, doctor, and counselor. He cannot play these three roles without hurting himself and his wife without adding more guilt, bitterness, resentment or hostility to the situation which is already almost unbearable. Yet the customs of our society train and condition the husband to play this role. If he does not, he finds himself going against what family and society regard as the husband's role. No matter what the alcoholic does, she ends up "at home"; this is where everyone goes when there is no other place to go.

Act two is now played out in full. The alcoholic in her helpless condition has been rescued, put back on the job, and restored as a member of the family. This clothes her in the costume of a responsible adult. As everything was done for her and not by her, her dependency is increased, and she remains a child in an adult suit. The results, effects and problems have been removed by others. They have cleaned up the entire mess made by the alcoholic. The painful results of the drinking were suffered by persons other than the drinker. This permits her to continue drinking as a way to solve her problems. In Act One the alcoholic killed all her pain and woe by getting drunk; in Act Two the trouble and painful results of drinking are removed by other people. This convinces the alcoholic that she can go on behaving in this irresponsible way.

ACT III

Act III begins in much the same manner as Act One, but something has been added by the first and second acts. The need to deny her dependence is now greater and must be expressed almost at once, and even more emphatically. The alcoholic denies she has a drinking problem, denies she is an alcoholic, denies that alcohol is causing her trouble. She refuses to acknowledge that anyone helped her - more denial. She denies she may lose her job and insists that she is the best or more skilled person at her job. Above all, she denies she has caused his family any trouble. In fact she blames her family, especially her husband, for all the fuss, nagging and problems. She may even insist that her husband is crazy, that he needs to see a psychiatrist. As the illness and conflict get worse, the wife often accuses her husband of being unfaithful, having affairs with other women, although she has no reason for these accusations.

Some alcoholics achieve the same denial by a stony silence, refusing to discuss anything related to their drinking. Others permit the family to discuss what they did wrong and what they failed to do, whether drunk or sober. The husband never forgets what his wife does. The wife may not remember what she did while intoxicated but she never forgets what her husband tells her she did or failed to do.

The real problem is that the alcoholic is well aware of the truth which she so strongly denies. She is aware of the drunkenness. She is aware of her failure. Her guilt and remorse have become unbearable; she cannot tolerate criticism or advice from others. Above all, the memory of her utter helplessness and failure at the end of the first act is more than embarrassing; it is far too painful for a person who thinks and acts as if she were a little god in her own world.

In time the family adjusts to their way of living together. The alcoholic may deny she will drink again and others in the play may vow never again to help her. The Enabler says he will never again come to her rescue. The Victim will not allow another job failure due to drinking. The Provoker, whether husband or mother, tells the alcoholic they cannot live together under these conditions.

What is said is completely different from what everyone has done and will do again. The Enabler, the Victim and the Provoker have said this before but did not carry it out. The result is that the alcoholic's sense of guilt and failure is increased; her god-like assurance that she can always do as she pleases, is challenged - and all this adds to her heavy burden of tension and loneliness.

If this mental pain is made unbearable, especially by the changed attitudes and actions of the other members of the cast, there can be only one sure way for her to remove her pain, overcome her guilt and sense of failure, and recover a sense of worth and value. However if Act Two is played out as described, it is inescapable that in Act Three the alcoholic will drink again. This is her one sure means of relieving all pain, solving all problems and achieving a sense of being all right. The memory of the immediate comfort and benefits of drinking blot out the knowledge of what will happen if she drinks. Also, always in the back of her mind is the hope that this time she can control it and get the great benefits he once did from drinking. So, what seems absolutely necessary to the alcoholic occurs - she begins to drink again.

When she takes the drink, the play does not come to an end. The curtain closes at the end of Act One and Act Two, but in Act Three the play suddenly returns to the first act without closing the curtain. It is like watching a three-reel movie which continues to run without stopping at any point. If the persons in the audience of the play remain seated long enough, and the first two acts are played out as described, all three acts will be played over and over again; and at the end of Act three, the alcoholic will drink again. As years go by the actors get older, but there is little change in the words or the action of the play.

If the first two acts are played as described, then Act three will follow in the same way. If Act One had not occurred, we would not have had the beginning of a play about alcoholism and the drama surrounding it. This makes Act Two the only one in which the tragic drama of alcoholism can be changed, the only Act in which recovery can be initiated by the decisions and actions of those other than the alcoholic. In Act Two the alcoholic has accepted everything that was done for her by others, who perform in this way by choice or because they simply cannot resist helping her. Yet this Act is the one with the real potential to break the downward spiral of alcoholism and its merry-go-round of denial. Let us see what happens when those associated with the alcoholic determine to create a change in the situation. Some alcoholics achieve the same denial by a stony silence, refusing to discuss anything related to their drinking. Others permit the family to discuss what they did wrong and what they failed to do, whether drunk or sober. The husband never forgets what his wife does. The wife may not remember what she did while intoxicated but she never forgets what her husband tells her she did or failed to do.

A planned recovery from alcoholism must begin with the persons in the second act. They must learn how people affect each other in this illness and then learn the most difficult part: that of acting in an entirely different fashion.

New roles can be learned only by turning to others who understand the play and putting into practice their insight and knowledge. If Act Two is rewritten and replayed, there is every reason to believe that the alcoholic will recover. She is locked in by her illness; others hold the key to the lock. We cannot demand that she give up drinking as a means of solving her problems, but if we unlock the door she will be free to come out.

If the alcoholic is rescued from every crisis, if the boss allows himself to be a victim again and again, and if the husband reacts as a Provoker, there is hardly a chance in ten that the alcoholic will recover. She is virtually helpless; she herself cannot break the lock. She may recover if the other actors in the play learn how to break her dependency on them by refusing to give in to it. The alcoholic cannot keep the Merry-Go-Round going unless the others ride it with her and help her keep it going.

The actors in the second act keep asking the alcoholic why she does not stop drinking and yet it is what they do or fail to do that helps the alcoholic to try again and again to solve her basic human problems by drinking. It is not true that an alcoholic cannot be helped until she wants help. It is true that there is almost no chance that the alcoholic will stop drinking as long as other people remove all the painful consequences for her. The people in the second act will find it difficult to change. It is much easier and far less painful for them to say that the alcoholic can be helped, then to go through the agony of learning to play a new role.

The Enablers and the Victim, too, must seek information, insight and understanding, if they plan to change their roles. The husband or mother must become active in a program of counseling and therapy, if she is to make a basic change in her life.

In understanding the role of the three supporting actors in the drama, we must remember that they did not learn to play these roles overnight. They play a role they think is expected of them; they have been taught to act in this way. They imagine they are helping the alcoholic and do not know they are perpetuating the illness and making it almost impossible for the alcoholic to recover.

The ENABLER

The Enabler is a person who feels he must not let the alcoholic suffer the consequences of her drinking when he can so easily prevent this by a simple rescue operation. To him it is like saving a drowning woman; it simply must be done. But this rescue mission conveys to the alcoholic what the rescuer really thinks: "You cannot make it without my help." The Enabler thus reveals a lack of faith in the alcoholic's ability to take care of herself, which is a form of judgment and condemnation.

The role of the professional Enabler - (i.e. clergyman, doctor, lawyer or social worker) - can be most destructive, if it conditions the family to reduce the crisis rather than to use it to initiate a recovery program. The family has probably known for a few years that drinking was creating serious problems, but this is not so apt to be visible to person outside of the family. When the family turns to professionals who are not adequately qualified to deal with alcoholism, before the anti-social behavior has become obvious, the family may be told that this not alcoholism and that there is nothing they can do until the drinker wants help.

When alcoholism reaches the point where it breaks outside the family and the alcoholic herself turns to such professional people, she secures a reduction of her crisis by seeking and using those persons as Enablers. This again keeps the Merry-Go-Round going. The family which was told initially that there were no signs of alcoholism is now taught that the way to deal with it is to remove the symptoms, rather than to deal realistically with the illness. The very persons who failed to identify the alcoholism in its early stages may now treat the more advanced symptoms by helping the alcoholic get back on the merry-go-round. This further conditions the family to believe that nothing can be done to cope with the alcoholism. Even when the family members attempt to secure help for themselves or the alcoholic, the professional role may be that of an Enabler, rather than leading the family and the alcoholic into a long-range program of recovery. As the Enabler is the first person on the scene, he influences the remainder of the second act because it sets the direction and movement of this part of the play. Thus the uninformed professional helps everyone get back on the Merry-Go-Round.

The Victim does not get on the Merry-Go-Round until the drinking has begun to interfere with the alcoholic's work, usually after she has been on the job for many years and a close friendship exists between the boss and the alcoholic. The boss protects his alcoholic's friend, knowing that the husband and children will suffer if the woman is fired. This is especially true if the company has no program for helping alcoholics to recover. Fellow workers also protect the alcoholic's job because this woman is their friend. Person interest and friendship cause the Victim to give the alcoholic the very "help" that increases his dependency and need for denial.

The husband is the first person who joins the alcoholic on the Merry-Go-Round. If he absorbs injustices, suffers deprivation, endures repeated embarrassments, accepts broken promises, is outwitted or undermined in every effort to cope with the drinking situation and is beaten down by the constant expression of hostility directed toward him, his own reaction is hostility, bitterness, anxiety and rage. Playing the role in this way makes the husband sick. He is not a sick man who made his wife become an alcoholic but a man who becomes part of an illness by living with it. He is put in a role which forces him to become the Provoker. He is caught between the advancing illness of alcoholism and the wall of ignorance, shame and embarrassment inflicted upon him by society. This crushes him; he needs information and counseling, not because he caused his wife's illness, but because he is being destroyed by it.

THE HUSBAND STANDS ALONE

Another reason why the husband needs help in the plan of recovery is that if he changes his role and begins to act in a new way he will discover he is standing alone. Others - friends, relations, business associates - will treat him as an actor who is deserting a play when there is no substitute to take his part. This is especially true if the husband separates from his wife, whether by choice or necessity.

Some husbands can change their roles by having talks with a counselor who has basic knowledge of alcoholism, or by attending group meetings in a local alcoholism clinic or mental health clinic. Others gain insight and security by taking part in the Al-Anon Family Group meetings. Having new friends who understand his new role, because they have lived through similar pain and agony, is very important for the husband at this time. Relatives and friends may tell him how wrong he is in trying to play a new role; he needs people who understand and can give moral support in his search for answers to the problems of alcoholism.

The basic mistake made by men who seek help for their wife's alcoholism is that they want to be told what they can do to stop the drinking, not realizing that it may take a long time to learn a new role in the alcoholic marriage. Long periods of regular weekly conferences or group meetings are often necessary before a husband begins to change his feelings and learns to act in a new, constructive way. If others in the play do not learn new roles, the husband may need to remain in the group for a period of 2-3 years before his feelings and emotions will permit a change in role.

The husband should seek help for himself to recover from his own fears, anxieties, resentments and other destructive forces at work in an alcoholic marriage. As he is able to change, this may change the drinking pattern of his wife, and in many causes such a change leads to the alcoholic's recovery.

Few wives can stand a drastic change in their husbands without making basic changes in their own lives, but this desirable change cannot be guaranteed. Many husbands seek some form of help and then drop out of a program when the problems of an alcoholic marriage are not solved in a short time.

To avoid injury to the children, the husband must seek help outside the circle of family and friends. When he plays the role of Provoker the children are placed between a sick father and a sick mother. The husband who seeks and finds help early enough can prevent much of the harm which is being passed on to the children through his reaction to his wife. If he seeks and finds help, it will protect the children in many ways and may open the door to his wife's recovery. The rate of recovery increases greatly when the husband seeks help for himself and continues to use this help.

The Moral Issue is also important. No one has a right to play God and demand that the alcoholic stop drinking. The reverse is also true. The alcoholic can only continue to act like a little god, telling everyone what to do, while doing as she pleases, if a supporting cast continues to play this role. The husband has every moral right and responsibility to refuse to act as if his wife were God Almighty whose ever wish and commandment he must obey. As a rule, he cannot tell his wife anything for she refuses to hear it. His only effective means of telling her what he means is to learn to free himself from his attempt to control and dictate what she is to do. This independence may be exercised in silence; it need not be expressed in words. Just as the real message to the husband is what the wife does and not what he says, he must learn to convey his message by acting in a new way.

Two things that may interfere with success is a long-range program for her husband. First, the wife's attitude toward the new role may range from disapproval to direct threats or violence. Second, responsibilities in the home, especially if there are young children, make it difficult for the husband to get away to go to group meetings, counseling or therapy during the day. At night, few alcoholic wives will baby-sit or pay for this service while the husband attends meetings of Al-Anon or other therapy. Nor should they be trusted with this responsibility while drinking.

If the couple married at an average age, during the pre-alcoholic stage of his illness, the husband is the first person who joins her on the Merry-Go-Round when alcoholism appears. Many years later the Enabler and the Victim start their roles. If recovery from alcoholism is to be initiated before the illness becomes acute, the husband must initiate the recovery program. Most persons today, often including the helping professionals, are unwilling to accept alcoholism as an illness until it reaches the addictive stage of chronic alcoholism. Thus the husband will find himself in a position of a pioneer in the search for help. If his minister condemns drunkenness, he is ashamed to turn to him. If her doctor fails to recognize the existence of alcoholism in the early stages, medical help and counsel for her are cut off. If conditions become unbearable and he consults a lawyer, he may talk in terms of separation or divorce as the only service he can offer. This increases his sense of failure as a husband, or terrifies him with the prospect of the anxiety and grief he would have, if he took such action. So most husbands stay on the Merry-Go-Round or get back on soon after trying to stop it or get off.

Until there are drastic changes in our cultural and social attitudes toward drinking and alcoholism, the family member who wishes to initiate a program of recovery from alcoholism must understand this can be a long and difficult process.

However, if the husband or other family member is willing to enter a weekly program of education, therapy, Al-Anon, or counseling, and work at it for a period of six months, changes usually occur, not only in his life but often in the life and action of the alcoholic. A husband cannot make a change unless he believes it to be the right and moral choice, so he must understand the nature of alcoholism.

He must also have the courage to stand against her wife's opposition to her own program of recovery. A husband cannot be expected to do what is beyond his emotional or financial capacity. However, by remaining in a program of her own, he may be able to solve problems which at first seemed to difficult.

There is no easy way to stop the merry-go-round, for it can be more painful to stop it than to keep it going. It is impossible to spell out definite rules which apply to all members of the play. Each case is different, but the framework of the play remains much the same.

The family member is able to see the Merry-Go-Round of the alcoholic, but often fails to see that he is the one who helps to keep it going. The hardest part of stopping the repeated cycles the fear that the alcoholic won't make it without such help. But what he unknowingly considers help is the very thing that permits her to continue to use alcohol as the cure-all for her problems

If a friend is call upon for help, this should be used as an opportunity to lead the alcoholic and the family into a planned program of recovery.

A professional who has alcoholics or their family members as clients or patients should learn how to cope with alcoholism. Specific literature is available through local, state, and national programs on alcoholism. Short, intensive workshops are also available for professionals who are willing to spend time and effort to acquire basic knowledge of alcoholism.

If a husband thinks his wife has a drinking problem or drinks too much too often, he should seek help and counsel immediately, evaluating the situation in order to find the programs best suited to her needs. Regardless of the kind of help the husband chooses, he should not stop after a few conferences or meetings, for changes do not occur overnight. Regular attendance should be continued, for many husbands learn it takes a long to secure the real benefit from such a program. In our present society, the husband has one basic choice - to seek help for himself or permit the illness of alcoholism to destroy him and other members of his family.