



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 his 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 his 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. He does all the acting; others react to what he does. A male between the ages of 30 and 55, he is usually smart, skillful, and often successful in his work; but his goal may be far above his ability. We see that he is sensitive, lonely and tense. He is also immature in a way that produces a real dependence. However, he may act in an independent way in order to deny this fact. He also denies he is responsible for the results of his behavior. From this dependency and denial comes the name of the play -- A Merry-Go-Round Named Denial. For him 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 him feel better. To him it is a blessing, not a curse... his medication, not a poison. For a few hours it floats away his troubles; it melts away his fears, reduces his tension, removes his loneliness and solves all his problems.

The play opens with the alcoholic stating that no one can tell him what to do; he 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, he 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 do 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 he takes one. He drinks hard and fast, not slow and easy. He may drink openly; but more likely he will conceal the amount he 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 he drinks. But it proves to us that he knows he is drinking too much. He drinks more than others, more often than others and, above all, it means far more to him 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 he cannot stop.

After a few more drinks we see a profound change in the alcoholic. He reveals a sense of success, well-being and self-sufficiency. He's on top of the world, and may act as if he were a little god. Now he's right and everybody else is wrong. This is very likely to happen if someone objects to his 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 him 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: he is dependent who behaves as if he were independent, and drinking makes it easy to convince him this is true. Yet the results of his drinking make him even more dependent upon others. When his self-created crisis strikes, he waits for something to happen, ignores it, walks away from it, or cries for someone to get him out of it. Alcohol, which at first gave him a sense of success and independence, has now stripped him of his mask and reveals him a helpless, dependent child.

Act II

In Act II the alcoholic does nothing but wait for and expect others to do for him. Three others in the play act out their roles and the alcoholic benefits from what they do. He does little or nothing; everything is done for him 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 compelled, by his own anxiety and guilt, to rescue his friend, the alcoholic, from his predicament. He wants to save the alcoholic from the immediate crisis and relieve him of the unbearable tension created by the situation. In reality, this person may be meeting a need of his 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 his own mistakes", and conditions him to believe there will always be a protector who will come to his rescue, even though the Enablers insist they will never again rescue him. 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 man's job, he may have been working for the same company for 10 - 15 years, and his boss has become a very real friend. Protection of the man 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 he could not continue drinking in this fashion. He would be compelled to give up drinking or give up the job. It is the Victim who enables the alcoholic to continue his irresponsible drinking without losing his 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 wife or mother. She is a veteran at this role and has played it much longer than others in the act. She is the Provoker. She is hurt and upset by repeated drinking episodes, but she holds the family together despite all

the trouble caused by drinking. In turn, she feeds back into the marriage her bitterness, resentment, fear and hurt, and so becomes the source of provocation. She controls, she tries to force the changes she wants, never gives in, but never forgets. The attitude of the alcoholic is that his failure should be acceptable, but she must never fail him! He acts with complete independence and insists he will do as he pleases, and he expects her to do exactly what he tells her to do or not to do. She must be at home when he arrives, if he arrives.

This character might also be called the Adjuster; she is constantly adjusting to the crises and trouble caused by drinking. The alcoholic blames her for everything that goes wrong with the home and the marriage. She tries everything possible to make her marriage work to prove he is wrong. She is wife and housekeeper and may, in addition, feel compelled to earn part of the bread. Living with a man whose illness is alcoholism, she attempts to be nurse, doctor, and counselor. She cannot play these three roles without hurting herself and her husband 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 wife to play this role. If she does not, she finds herself going against what family and society regard as the wife's role. No matter what the alcoholic does, he 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 his helpless condition has been rescued, put back on the job, and restored as a member of the family. This clothes him in the costume of a responsible adult. As everything was done for him and not by him, his dependency is increased, and he 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 him to continue drinking as a way to solve his problems. In Act One the alcoholic killed all his 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 he 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 his dependence is now greater and must be expressed almost at once, and even more emphatically. The alcoholic denies he has a drinking problem, denies he is an alcoholic, denies that alcohol is causing him trouble. He refuses to acknowledge that anyone helped him - more denial. He denies he may lose his job and insists that he is the best or more skilled person at his job. Above all, he denies he has caused his family any trouble. In fact he blames his family, especially his wife, for all the fuss, nagging and problems. He may even insist that his wife is crazy, that she needs to see a psychiatrist. As the illness and conflict get worse, the husband often accuses his wife of being unfaithful, having affairs with other men, although he 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 wife never forgets what her husband does. The husband may not remember what he did while intoxicated but he never forgets what his wife tells him he did or failed to do.

The real problem is that the alcoholic is well aware of the truth which he so strongly denies. He is aware of the drunkenness. He is aware of his failure. His guilt and remorse have become unbearable; he cannot tolerate criticism or advice from others. Above all, the memory of his 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 he were a little god in his own world.

In time the family adjusts to their way of living together. The alcoholic may deny he will drink again and others in the play may vow never again to help him. The Enabler says he will never again come to his rescue. The Victim will not allow another job failure due to drinking. The Provoker, whether wife or mother, tells the alcoholic that 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; his god-like assurance that he can always do as he pleases, is challenged - and all this adds to his 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 him to remove his pain, overcome his 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 his 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 blots out the knowledge of what will happen if he drinks. Also, always in the back of his mind is the hope that this time he can control it and get the great benefits he once did from drinking. So, what seems absolutely necessary to the alcoholic occurs - he begins to drink again.

When he 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. That 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 him by others, who perform in this way by choice or because they simply cannot resist helping him. 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 wife never forgets what her husband does. The husband may not remember what he did while intoxicated but he never forgets what his wife tells him he 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. He is locked in by his illness; others hold the key to the lock. We cannot demand that he give up drinking as a means of solving his problems, but if we unlock the door he 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 wife reacts as a Provoker, there is hardly a chance in ten that the alcoholic will recover. He is virtually helpless; he himself cannot break the lock. He may recover if the other actors in the play learn how to break his 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 him and help him keep it going. The actors in the second act keep asking the alcoholic why he 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 his basic human problems by drinking. It is not true that an alcoholic cannot be helped until he 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 him. 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 cannot be helped, than 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 wife 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 his drinking when he can so easily prevent this by a simple rescue operation. To him it is like saving a drowning man; 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 himself, 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 persons 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 is 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 himself turns to such professional people, he secures a reduction of his 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 he has been on the job for many years and a close friendship exists between the boss and the alcoholic. The boss protects his alcoholic friend, knowing that the wife and children will suffer if the man 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 man 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 wife is the first person who joins the alcoholic on the Merry-Go-Round. If she 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 her, her own reaction is hostility, bitterness, anxiety and rage. Playing the role in this way makes the wife sick. She is not a sick woman who made her husband become an alcoholic but a woman who becomes part of an illness by living with it. She is put in a role which forces her to become the Provoker. She is caught between the advancing illness of alcoholism and the wall of ignorance, shame and embarrassment inflicted upon her by society. This crushes her; she needs information and counseling, not because she caused her husband's illness, but because she is being destroyed by it.

THE WIFE STANDS ALONE

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

Some wives 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 her new role, because they have lived through similar pain and agony, is very important for the wife at this time. Relatives and friends may tell her how wrong she is in trying to play a new role; she needs people who understand and can give moral support in her search for answers to the problems of alcoholism.

The basic mistake made by women who seek help for their husbands' 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 wife begins to change her feelings and learns to act in a new, constructive way. If others in the play do not learn new roles, the wife may need to remain in the group for a period of 2-3 years before her feelings and emotions will permit a change in role.

The wife should seek help for herself to recover from her own fears, anxieties, resentments and other destructive forces at work in an alcoholic marriage. As she is able to change, this may change the drinking pattern of her husband, and in many cases such a change leads to the alcoholic's recovery. Few husbands can stand a drastic change in their wives without making basic changes in their own lives, but this desirable change cannot be guaranteed. Many wives 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 wife must seek help outside the circle of family and friends. When she plays the role of Provoker the children are placed between a sick father and a sick mother. The wife who seeks and finds help early enough can prevent much of the harm which is being passed on to the children through her reaction to her husband. If she seeks and finds help, it will protect the children in many ways and may open the door to her husband's recovery. The rate of recovery increases greatly when the wife seeks help for herself 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 he pleases, if a supporting cast continues to play this role. The wife has every moral right and responsibility to refuse to act as if her husband were God Almighty whose every wish and commandment she must obey. As a rule, she cannot tell her husband anything for he refuses to hear it. Her only effective means of telling him what she means is to learn to free herself 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 wife is what the husband does and not what he says, she must learn to convey her message by acting in a new way.

Two things may interfere with success in a long-range program for his wife. First, the husband'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 wife to get away to go to group meetings, counseling or therapy during the day. At night, few alcoholic husbands will baby-sit or pay for this service while the wife 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 wife is the first person who joins him 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 wife 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 wife will find herself in a position of a pioneer in the search for help. If her minister condemns drunkenness, she 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 she consults a lawyer, he may talk in terms of separation or divorce as the only service he can offer. This increases her sense of failure as a wife, or terrifies her with the prospect of the anxiety and grief she would have, if she took such action. So most wives 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 wife 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 her life but often in the life and action of the alcoholic. A wife cannot make a change unless she believes it to be the right and moral choice, so she must understand the nature of alcoholism. She must also have the courage to stand against her husband's opposition to her own program of recovery. A wife cannot be expected to do what is beyond her emotional or financial capacity. However, by remaining in a

program of her own, she may be able to solve problems which at first seemed too 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 she is the one who helps to keep it going. The hardest part of stopping the repeated cycle is the fear that the alcoholic won't make it without such help. But what she unknowingly considers help is the very thing that permits him to continue to use alcohol as the cure-all for his problems

If a friend is called 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 wife thinks her husband has a drinking problem or drinks too much too often, she 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 wife chooses, she should not stop after a few conferences or meetings, for changes do not occur overnight. Regular attendance should be continued, for many wives learn it takes a long time to secure the real benefit from such a program. In our present society, the wife has one basic choice - to seek help for herself or permit the illness of alcoholism to destroy her and other members of her family.