



IN SIGHT

for Oregon Lawyers

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

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A "FIXER" FINDS HAPPINESS

In the fall of 2004, I was a 38-year-old married litigator with two children. From the outside, my life appeared to be very successful and happy. I was a leader in my church and in my son's school. I coached my son's soccer team. I owned my own home and also some investment property. I had many friends. I was one of those women who seemed to have it all.

Deep down inside my soul, however, I felt like a fraud. I thought that if people knew the real me, they would realize that I didn't have it all "together" and wasn't the successful person I appeared to be. I was amazed whenever I received an award or accolade for something I had done. When my oldest son would tell me I was a great mom, I thought, "If he only knew." Despite my good cover, my feelings of inadequacy bubbled up toward the surface: I was overweight, I drank too much, and my marriage teetered on the brink of divorce.

For a long time, I primarily felt only two emotions: anger and sadness. I could handle the sadness; it was the anger that was causing me problems. Anger made me very uncomfortable. Yet as I entered my late 30s, anger and resentment became my predominant emotions. I knew I needed "something," but I had no idea what that was or how to ask for it. I didn't even know how to begin to figure out what I needed.

Then one morning as I was sitting at my desk, I read an article in the *In Sight* entitled "The Fixer" about adult children of dysfunctional families. The article listed over 20 different words and phrases that define the "fixer" or "family hero." Lawyers who were raised in highly stressed or problematic families, commonly labeled "dysfunctional," often played the role of the family fixer. I reviewed the list and was shocked to discover that all but two of the words and phrases described me. I sat at my

desk and wondered what to do with this information. I had been in and out of therapy several times since my sophomore year in college. What good would more therapy do?

I did nothing about it for several days, but each day I would see the article sitting on my desk. Finally, I got up the nerve and called the OAAP. I set up an appointment to talk to an attorney counselor about whether the meetings would be appropriate for me.

I did join the group, and over the course of the next 20 months my life changed. During one of our initial group sessions, we watched a videotape of a leading psychologist in this field. As she described the typical feelings and reactions of an adult child from a dysfunctional family, I felt that she knew me far better than people who had known me my entire life. I sat there stunned. It was a life-changing moment. For the first time, I realized I was not weird. In fact, I was so "normal" that a whole field of psychology is devoted to people like me. The experience was very freeing and caused me to feel true hope for the first time in my life.

In our group meetings, I learned that I was the "fixer." When I was growing up, I would stay downstairs with my divorced mom when she was in a bad mood while everyone else hid. The more my older siblings got in trouble, the better I behaved so that my mom would have at least one child to be proud of. As I got older, my helping role continued. If a friend needed something, I would drop ev-

everything I was doing to help her out. I solved other people's problems and, in the process, put all my needs and wants aside. I learned not to feel and not to ask for anything. I thought I could take care of everyone, and I could definitely take care of myself. During the 12 weeks the group met, I learned that helping others to the exclusion of getting my own needs met had made me resentful and, consequently, angry. I did not like being angry, so I drank and overate to mask my feelings.

The original group meetings came to an end, but several of us wanted to continue because we felt we had more work to do. Five of us continued to meet

over the next year and a half. The journey was difficult yet amazing. I had to look deep inside myself and examine how my family role had led to so much anger and resentment. At times I wondered whether I was up to the task, but I knew I had to work through my feelings if I was to have any chance of being a happy, functioning adult.

A year after starting the group at the OAAP, I joined Weight Watchers and lost the weight I had gained. I drank much less and began exercising regularly. I developed boundaries – I learned to say no to requests for help that I could not realistically handle. I started asking for help when I needed it. I felt the anger slip away. I came to be at peace with my parents.

It is now almost two years since I walked into that first meeting, and I am a completely different person. For the first time in my life, I am happy. Even more importantly, I am content. I still have to work on asking for things that I need, but at least now I know that I have a right to ask. I cannot recall the last time I felt resentment. I no longer feel that if people knew the real me, they wouldn't like me. I have come to accept myself for who I am. My life is not perfect, but I can accept that, too.

If you recognize yourself or someone you love in my story, I urge you to call the OAAP. This winter, a group for adult children of dysfunctional families will meet at the OAAP (see the box on page 5). It changed my life, and it can change yours, too. Don't be afraid. Make the call: 503-226-1057 or 800-321-6227.

Finally Free from Anger