

Different Strokes for Different Folks

Greetings to all those who read this story. I am a 67-year-old retired mental health professional who started coming to regular OA meetings in 1999 at the age of 43. I was a single working mom at that time, and was under a great deal of pressure to make ends meet. I was recently divorced and felt that I had no time to date, or even exercise. I had been a normal weight child with an overly developed appetite for food. As I grew up, periods of excessive eating often coincided with periods of depression and anxiety, and periods of undereating and excessive exercising were associated with feelings of happiness and even a mild sense of euphoria. Before entering OA, I had eating down to a science. I consciously used food to modulate my moods, and I was not ashamed to admit it. I knew exactly what to eat to bring me up, and what to eat to bring me back down when I got too high. When my emotions felt unregulated, my eating became equally unregulated. I felt like a big, out of control mess, even though I probably looked fine from the outside, and could 'pass' as a normal eater.

I was a failure to thrive infant, and in my mother's own words, I 'went wild with excitement', when food was finally introduced. For as long as I can remember, I had what my mother termed 'an iron stomach'. I could eat just about anything and in any amount without getting sick. I maintained my excessive appetite for food until I started OA where I eventually learned to moderate my eating habits so that I would not have to repeatedly restrict and over exercise in order to continue to maintain a normal weight.

I grew up in a family that promoted strong ethical values, yet overtly shunned all standardized religions. I was taught that religion was the 'opiate of the masses' and I learned to look down on those who thought that they were better than anyone else because they followed a structured set of religious beliefs. However, there was always a hidden part of me that longed to 'surrender' to some type of higher power. As a young woman, that higher power was 'romantic love'. As a divorced single mom, that higher power became 'doing the right thing at all times, and at all costs, even if it meant I would be miserable'. I took pride in the fact that I was fully supporting my only child and working long hours, as if this somehow made me a good person because I was constantly serving others. Unfortunately, this lifestyle caused me to develop an extreme level of resentment towards anyone who did not feel the need to sacrifice their health and happiness to serve others in some other way. The more I sacrificed, the more I ate, and the more I ate, the more depressed and anxious I became, until I hit a long time low right after my only child was diagnosed with Autism in 1999, which was just before I joined OA.

Traditional OA actually worked pretty well for me, until I found Secular OA, which worked even better. However, I did notice that I would often become bored whenever I attended an OA meeting that seemed overly focused on religious dogma. I would also occasionally run into OA members whom I felt were critical of me because I never wanted to have a rigid food plan, even though this was exactly what had enabled me to finally become abstinent at the age of 60. Without a rigid food plan, I had nothing that I needed to rebel against and could finally eat moderately, vs. continue to be an on again off again binger.

I discovered Secular OA on zoom during the pandemic when my OA Sponsor (a fellow non-believer), suggested that I might like it. I went to a few meetings and noticed that there seemed to be more acceptance for those who did not follow a 'rigid by the book' program of recovery. While I would probably prefer going back to face to face meetings, there are as yet no 'in person' Secular OA meetings in my part of the country.

After a short time in Secular OA, I was invited to join a Secular OA Recovery Circle. This experience has marked a turning point in my recovery. Four other women in recovery, and myself have been meeting every week for an hour for the past two years. We each take turns talking about how we are progressing in our recovery, with time to share in between speakers. These meetings have provided me with a secure sense of connection, hope and strength that miraculously has lingered between meetings. This past summer we all went on a four day retreat together in the mountains. It was the first time most of us had met each other in person. Some of the women came from far away states and drove long distances to get there. We shared four wonderful days of friendship and recovery, and strengthened the already strong bonds between the five of us.

The fact that we are all accepting of one another's approach to recovery with no pressure to behave according to a strict set of rules, helps me to feel accepted and supported. Since the retreat, I have hired a health coach to help me to better formulate the precise food and exercise program that will work best for me to achieve my goals of living a longer, healthier and happier life. I have begun to learn to be gentler with the little girl inside of me that overeats out of anger and frustration, and to use only those recovery tools that work best for me, when 'she' gets emotionally overstimulated. The more I learn to accept other people (friends and family included), the more I am able to accept all of my feelings as being safe and natural, and the less I find myself indulging in unhealthy eating behaviors.

For me, Secular OA works, not so much because it 'side steps' Religion, but because it is in general, more accepting of different approaches to the program and less rigid. I grew up learning how to think for myself and this is not something that I want to give up, or 'unlearn'. I only want to continue to learn what thoughts and behaviors are helpful to me, and what thoughts and behaviors are harming me. In my opinion, this can only be learned by a combination of introspection and trial and error. I am open to learning that I do not have all the answers, but I am not open to learning that there is only one answer that works for all people. Secular OA works best for people who tend to have inclusive and open ended learning styles. This program would probably not be suitable for those people who feel the need to be told what to do by an all knowing, all seeing authority figure. Luckily, there will always be many traditional meetings to go to, for those who feel more comfortable with the latter approach.

- Steevie P.