Some Reflections on Scar Tissue

BY JEFFREY C. FRIEDMAN, MHS, LISAC

A few years ago I was out in Palm Springs and looking to go to an AA meeting. I found one listed at the Eisenhower Medical Center just a few miles away in Rancho Mirage. If you have ever been to Eisenhower Medical Center you know the place is huge. The AA list said only that the meeting was at EMHC, so I asked for directions at the information kiosk just inside the hospital's main entrance. A hospital volunteer told me that that evening's AA meeting was being held in the second room on the left down the rear hallway. Following her simple directions I headed down the indicated hallway and opened what I thought was the door to second room on the left. Standing in the doorway, I saw a group of 20-25 men and women sitting in chairs formed in a big oval, some with a few papers or a book on their laps. They all turned toward me and smiled invitingly. My hand was still on the doorknob when I realized that what I had encountered wasn't an AA meeting. Excusing myself I stepped back into the hallway and closed the door behind me. Walking down to the next door I opened it to find a group of 20-25 men and women sitting in chairs formed in an oval talking and quietly. Some had a few papers or a book on their laps. When I entered the room they all turned my way and smiled warmly.

"O.K.," I thought with a sense of relief, "I found the AA meeting."

Even during that meeting at Eisenhower, I found myself puzzling over how I had known that what I had found in the first room was not an AA meeting while immediately recognizing the second almost identical group of people as a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. I mulled this question over for months before arriving at an answer. Whether the answer is right or wrong I don't know, but I have come to the conclusion that what I sensed was lacking in the first room that seemed present—in abundance—in the AA meeting was scar tissue. The folks in the first group just didn't have enough scar tissue for it to feel like AA.

Checking out this theory was easy

I just had to look carefully and deeply at my fellow alcoholics in my AA home group in Tucson. "Oh yeah, there's Chuck with his uneven upper lip. He always grins crookedly when he tells us how he got his mouth busted years back for saying that one last belligerent thing while drunk in a lowlife border town bar. And Gracie over there, even from the back row I can see the scar on her right hand — a souvenir she got from punching out a glass door in a blackout. And Olivia, sweet, sad Olivia who, when she smiles at me from across the room I notice that her smile never really reaches her eyes. Every time Olivia smiles we see a sad reminder that, because of her drinking, this young mom lost custody of her two toddlers and is now struggling to get them back into her arms."

Years ago, when forced to go to AA as a condition of keeping my bed at a West Virginia hospital where my drinking landed me I was appalled. "Alcoholics Anonymous! How revolting! Why, a man of my caliber..." But after grudgingly attending a few meetings, something within me wordlessly recognized a sweet essence that pervaded those meetings as well as a powerful presence among those who spoke. These were the qualities I found in AA that just drew me in. I think now that it was the group members' display of scar tissue that eventually made me feel so at home at those meetings. AA meetings are full of people with scars. It's rare to find anyone who makes it into recovery without picking up a few.

When the flesh is wounded, a granulated and perfused fibrous connective tissue grows from the base of the wound to fill and heal it. Often referred to in medical texts by the Latin term caro lacerata or "scrad figuris," scar tissue is often less sensitive and more resilient than the adjacent tissue that escaped the wound. Less sensitive and more resilient — not a bad description for a recovering person.

I think it is our personal suffering and in legacy of physical and emotional scar tissue — especially those scars that have been inflicted upon our souls — that ennoble us and give us depth. Those who have suffered and survived to work a skillful program of recovery have a greater potential to emerge from their torment with souls that are both deep and strong. How each of us pursues our own recovery can determine how powerfully our pain can be transmuted into emotional resilience and spiritual depth. Our scars are the evidence or our survival. They also remind us that the wound has healed and the worst of the hurt is now over.

Children, in their innocence, are proud of their scars and you can see them comparing theirs with each other's when at play. We in recovery should honor our scars too. They are mute but irrefutable evidence that we've come out of our difficulties stronger, more resilient and, hopefully, a bit wiser. Scar tissue, I believe, is a beautiful thing.

Jeffrey C. Friedman, MHS, LISAC is a primary therapist at Cathousewood Tucson, a 50-bed inpatient behavioral health treatment center located in Tucson, Arizona. He is a summa cum laude graduate of the School of Human Services at Lincoln University (Pa.). Jeff's work at Cathousewood includes treating chemically dependent and disordered gambling patients, lecturing on the neurobiology of addiction and mood disorders, and presenting workshops on a range of behavioral health issues at counseling conferences throughout the United States, Europe and Asia. His articles have appeared in Together AZ, Counselor Magazine and Addiction Professional.