

2002

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Yolanda Nieves

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### Recommended Citation

Nieves, Yolanda (2002) "Mental Illness and Alcoholism: One Woman's Journey," *Diálogo*: Vol. 6 : No. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol6/iss1/9>

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## Mental Illness and Alcoholism: One Woman's Journey

### Cover Page Footnote

This article is from an earlier iteration of *Diálogo* which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."



# Mental Illness and Alcoholism

## One Woman's Journey

By Yolanda Nieves

I got the call while I was making dinner. "Your father was caught defecating and urinating in a neighbor's yard." My brother-in-law, driving home from work, had seen my father being arrested by the police. He had intervened and had driven my father home. As my brother-in-law broke the news to me, I quickly embraced the sadness that had always followed me all through my childhood. Today, however, I was able to let the sadness go. I decided not to be a victim of my father's alcoholism. This alcoholism masked his mental illness for decades. These days, I know I am codependent and that I am recovering from years of emotional and physical neglect. Yet, the worst neglect was not the kind imposed by my father, but the one I imposed on myself.

My father, born in Yauco, Puerto Rico, was orphaned at the age of four or five. Abandoned by an alcoholic father he was taken in by neighbors who used him for free labor on their coffee farm. He fled to Ponce where he lived with an older stepbrother and his wife. Like a Holocaust survivor, he never spoke of those years. It was almost as if his life started when he came to Chicago in 1954 to work as a migrant farmer in the Wisconsin farms. There he met my uncle, who introduced him to my mother. They married and worked in the booming factory industry in the Wicker Park neighborhood in Chicago. However, the childhood trauma of his mother's death, his father's abandonment, years of child labor on the coffee plantation, and difficult adolescent years without family support followed him throughout his life. It does so even today. I think he chose to drink to alleviate his trauma. He undoubtedly had a painful life. Unfortunately, as his drinking escalated it ultimately became more important than his wife, his children, his self-respect, and even his life. He gave us all up for liquor.

Two years ago I would have rushed to any particular scene where my father had gotten into trouble. My mother and I would have washed and dressed him giving him, a place to sleep and food to eat. Inside I would be weighed with shame while I played the parts of both victim and hero. Our neighbors would watch through their curtains, silently shaking their heads, pitying my family. I was also filled with resentment. Although powerless, I wanted all this to stop. My mother didn't know what to do. My father would remember none of our calamities. I remembered everything.

As a child I remember my father's steady stream of accidents. Falling down a flight of stairs because he was too drunk to see and had missed a step--this was a usual event. Wrecking cars until finally his driver's license was suspended and the timeless nights

when my mother and I dreaded him coming home or a call announcing he had died. The worse memories for me were the hallucinations he had in the middle of the night, usually after a drinking spree. The yelling, screaming, and conversations with unseen people made me think the devil lived in my house. I myself suffered from terrorizing nightmares. I'd wake up in cold sweats, unable to breathe, my body shaking.

My family stopped celebrating holidays. I shunned any birthday parties. We turned down invitations to weddings, baptisms, quinceañeras, and all the events that were and are so culturally important to families. For my father, every event was an excuse to drink. His drunken behavior ranged from slightly annoying to downright aggressive. Isolation became a state of being for me as a child. Neighbors and family stopped dropping by. We, in turn, did not visit neighbors for fear of my father ushering in another alcoholic mishap: the toppling of a neighbor's favorite vase, a rude comment, a tumble down a short flight of stairs, blood or vomit on the hosts' floor.

I developed my own addiction—eating. Afraid that my father would have spent grocery money on liquor, I hoarded food when it was available. I ate away the pain, the shame, and the loneliness. Yet, one way or another, I wasn't alone. Other families in the neighborhood were experiencing similar situations. We all knew someone who was not quite "right in the head" as we used to refer to mental illness. Alcoholism, drug abuse, and behavior disorders were definitely present in my community. We just didn't know what to call these things. We didn't want to discuss our personal anguish. No one knew to what extent these problems were present in our lives. We didn't have names for intangible illnesses. Besides, no one had any money to spend on ailments that weren't outwardly evident. There had to be blood, open wounds, burns, tumors, and other visible manifestations to spend money on a doctor.

How could we ever know if my father's alcoholism was really masking a more serious psychological illness? Our clergy were reluctant to get involved in our lives. Besides, saving the family unit, which was the usual advice regardless of the cost to the wife and children. We had a lot of neighborhood doctors that doled out plenty of prescription medicines, but rarely referred us to specialists. Self-medication and the unspoken underground distribution of prescription medicines were common among the neighbors. Children playing in the front yards were the special medical couriers that helped distribute the prescription drugs sick neighbors shared. Generously, the neighbors diagnosed each



other, and through word of mouth, would diagnose themselves and prescribed their leftover medications to each other. There was, however, no medicine for my father's diseases.

My sister, mother, and I suffered in silence. But we had to keep our self-respect, at least on the outside. Our house was spotless and ready for company that would not be welcomed. My sister and I got honors and awards at school, but no one ever showed up at the awards ceremony to cheer us on. My mother was busy with my father's hangovers. Besides, it was too risky for my sister and I to take the school notice home. Our father might show up drunk. No teacher would ever know the hell we were living. Inside we were as ill as my father was. My family's illness was called codependency. We made it possible for him to drink. We made every attempt to clean him and his reputation up. We never allowed him to take responsibility for his decision to drink. In other words, we enabled him to drink and to continue to hurt us.

It wasn't until recently, as a middle-aged adult, that a friend of mine suggested I go to therapy. She must have had a great affection for me to make this suggestion. She may have seen my controlling and manipulative behavior on the job. I decided to go to therapy. Now, after two years of therapy I have come to a place where I can touch my pain and move on.

Mental illness is sometimes masked by alcoholism and drug use. It is present in the Hispanic community as sure it is present in all communities. No one really knows the extent of these illnesses because we keep them to ourselves. The cost of this tradition of secrecy and misinformation is exorbitant. My father's mental illness and alcoholism cost him his marriage, his relationship to his children, his job, and his dignity. Worst of all it cost him his ability to perceive reality and respond to our pain. My sister and mother have had trouble with intimacy. They have an inability to bond. Both of them struggle with depression and the need to control. How will the next generation of Latinos rise up and claim their stake to wellness? Access is the key. Our community's well being depends on access to health and education. But even before this we need a collective "*concentización*." Pablo Freire, in his book **Pedagogy of the Oppressed**, spoke of a time and place where people must come to understand there is a need to change. In my case, the message of "*concentización*" came through word of mouth. Is this the place where "*concentización*" or consciousness begins? Perhaps uncovering the issues related to alcoholism and drug use and talking about it in an open forum is a beginning. Honest family dialogue, appropriate counseling in the churches or even workshops for elementary and high school students in our public and parochial schools may be a start.

I needed help. I got it four decades later. Even in its lateness, therapy changed me, made me better, and helped me get on with my life. Yet no one should have to wait decades or an entire lifetime for wellness.

My father has a court case in a couple of months. He can't remember what he did nor can he see how throughout life his actions wounded us profoundly. He has refused treatment. Very likely, he will never get the psychological therapy he needs. How will I respond when another call comes in about his illness? I don't know. I take it day by day. But I now understand it is up to each of us to decide how to live our lives. I have chosen wellness, and consciously chosen to live life no longer as a victim of my circumstances. I have become the hero of my own life.

## ISOLATION

Women cannot ignore  
the symptoms  
piped running water  
brings us  
We live in a dangerous silence  
No village of women  
surround us  
We cannot even sit silently  
together  
to be relieved of the need  
to be angry  
Nigerian women are lucky  
They have to walk to a well  
for water  
They know each other  
They sip the tears that fall from each other's cups  
understanding  
not one of them is expendable  
As the morning sky opens  
together they swallow the world  
embrace each other  
and wonder  
how do we speak to each other  
here?

## THE REGULAR WORKING WOMAN

I've got too much color  
on my skin  
and don't feel obligated  
to display my  
deep-seated emotional scars  
on your employment application  
though I may be  
temporarily displaced  
by my economic situation  
I am not in the market  
to carry out your  
perverted obligation  
to overcharge and  
undereducate  
the children of my community  
I protest your injustice  
by disobeying your economic policies  
voted into place by  
any board of directors  
as the regular working woman  
I at least  
have enough dignity  
in my pocket book  
to sit proudly on public transportation  
home.

### About the Author:

Born in Chicago's Humboldt Park community, Yolanda Nieves is of Puerto Rican descent, a writer, and an inner-city teacher in Chicago. Many of her poems highlight women's experience to survive their present situations and revive a sense of self. Writing and poetry became a path for recovery from her family's history of cultural alienation and alcoholism. She holds an M.A. in Reading from Northeastern Illinois University and a M.A. in Organizational Development from Loyola University of Chicago.