



A Circle of Love

By Kathy Lowe Petersen

When my siblings and I were young, growing up in a small Midwestern town in the 1960's, one of our favorite activities was doing skits. We would sit in a circle for hours around an old tape recorder and improvise a story, characters, music and sound effects to create an imaginary world.

The hero of our stories - whether he was Santa Claus, Robin Hood, a cowboy or a stunt driver - was always a somewhat bungling but persuasive guy who was drunk most of the time. Calamity was always threatening: perhaps Santa's union elves were on strike, or Robin Hood couldn't shoot an arrow straight. And the hero always had a ranting wife who understood what was happening but couldn't control it. At the end of the story, the hero remained on top and looking good.

We did not realize it, but during these "circles of love" we were telling each other the story of our real family life, a story about surviving something bigger than all of us.

Each of us played a role in our daily lives. My 15-year-old sister's was to help Mom with her obsessive attempts to keep our lives in control. I was 11, and my role was to dissolve into the background until I virtually disappeared. Our seven-year-old sister became a Daddy's girl, arousing jealousy from her mother and sisters. And our one-year-old brother, who, we were told, would carry our family name to eternity, was emotionally abandoned after the cigars were passed out to celebrate his birth.

We never actually talked about what was happening in our family and in

our individual lives, for we had been taught that our family was perfect, and that we were to keep a vow of silence and isolation.

Indeed, from the exterior our family appeared to be perfect - a successful, debonair businessman providing all the finer things a family could want. But in order to maintain this facade, we were slowly losing our individual selves to prop up our father's image. Our lives were focused on making him larger than life - more valuable, more real, more alive than any of us. And even though we did it with joy, we yearned to hear "I love you" from a father who could not feel, due to the amount of alcohol he was consuming.

As the years went by and we became adults, our circle of love disbanded. But we remained united by a gut feeling that something was not quite normal in our family. Finally, my sisters and I did the unthinkable: We broke the vow of silence by asking for help from someone outside our family, a counselor at our community alcohol resource center.

Unfortunately, Dad heard about it. Never did we think our hero would become such an angry, paranoid and spiteful monster. But he did. He punished us for the rest of his life, and beyond.

After his death in 1995, I was approaching 50, and I finally began searching for the reason I felt so numb all my life. For once, my quest was not to help the family "hero" but to find help for myself. After months of intensive therapy, I began to remember the isolation, fear and abandonment of childhood and to feel them for the first time in my life. Eventually, my sisters joined me for a four-day marathon therapy session.

We don't know how it happened, and we don't ever want to forget it, but on the first evening of that session we found ourselves sitting on the floor in a circle, reliving the horrors we endured as children, and journeying together toward healing. It was truly a Circle of Love.

From that weekend emerged a commitment to help other families cope with alcoholism and break the silence about this insidious disease. Our own journey has made one thing absolutely clear to us: You cannot recover on your own from the effects of alcoholism in your family.

Your circle of love awaits you, whether it is inside yourself, among your family members or elsewhere. Best of luck on your journey...it is well worth it.

Kathy Lowe Petersen created the Lowe Family Foundation in 1997 to educate the general public about the disease of alcoholism and its effects on families. She established a series of interviews with well-known experts and individuals impacted by addiction, wrote compelling stories and published them on the foundation's website. People hungry for help and hope wrote to her from across the globe and she answered every letter offering them a way to find help where they were. Kathy and her husband retired from Washington DC to their beloved northern Michigan and settled in Petoskey in recent years.