

RECOVERY ON THE FA FRONTIER

Living on the FA Frontier with no FA meetings, taught me qualities that were foreign to me - perseverance and tenacity. Without a live fellowship around me, and even more challenging, fewer fellows in the same time zone, I had to lean on my Higher Power more and be creative with my tools.

My FA journey began in California when there was one meeting in San Francisco and a couple in a town I'd never heard of, Cupertino. I knew that if I joined the program, I would have to go to 3 committed meetings a week. Note that I say "have to" rather than "get to". By nature I am a lazy food addict who dislikes driving, showing up regularly, and anything inconvenient, so the prospect of driving at least 45 minutes to almost 2 hours three times every week, was distinctly unappetizing. Later on when I knew the joy of FA recovery, and my nearest FA meetings were a plane ride away, I would have loved to have a meeting that was a mere 2 hours' drive. The thought of driving kept me from getting a sponsor for several months. I kept going to the closer San Francisco meeting and was so drawn to the recovery there that I finally relented. Going to that faraway meeting was the first of many surrenders that opened the door to recovery.

For 8 years I had the privilege of watching that little fellowship of about 40 members grow at an incredible rate. Ironically what had stalled my recovery for ages - going to the distant meetings - only lasted a few months as another meeting blossomed in San Francisco followed by an AWOL.

In those early days the longest abstinence anyone had in California was about two years. That was an inconceivable amount of time, but I wanted reassurance that this would work for the long haul. I'd spent 9 years in other 12 step programs for compulsive overeating and had never managed more than 14 months of abstinence. When I was abstinent, my next relapse was a

question of when rather than if. I was "stark raving abstinent", that is - a food addict on a food plan with no recovery. Without tools to keep me out of the food when an uncomfortable feeling arose, and no clear pathway to follow the 12 steps, I was an insatiable monster waiting to break out and wreak havoc in supermarkets, bakeries and corner stores, only to retreat to my lair with my haul to lick my wounds and my food.

Long term back to back abstinence, and the hope that one day at a time I might not have to fear relapse, was what I craved. Could I be free from the compulsion to use food addictively? I heard that promise at the FA meetings, but the fledgling fellowship was so young.

The FA speaker recordings were my lifeline. Now there are over 100 MP3 files on the website, but at that time there were about 12 cassette tapes, each one told the story of an FA member who had been abstinent for what seemed like a lifetime - 11 years, 15 years, 20 and 25 years. Those tapes became my round the clock soundtrack and I came to know them by heart. They gave me so much reassurance that abstinence was possible. While I found the Boston accent a little curious, it became the voice of hope and comfort.

After tracking down phone numbers, I built relationships with the speakers from the tapes. I wanted the recovery they had and pursued it with a determination completely lacking in any other area of my life. Some food addicts are high achievers who set out to compensate for their low self-worth. Sadly I come from the breed of food addicts rooted to the couch muttering "What's the use?"

About 6 months after joining FA, several members were making a trip to Boston to learn how to form an Intergroup. I didn't know or care what Intergroup was, but I wanted to go to meetings in Boston and meet those folks who had been abstinent for so many years.

This began a pattern of regularly going to Boston each year to build my connections with long term members. When the business conventions began, I went every year except for my honeymoon. Each trip I would ask members I wanted to get to know better, if I could stay with them before or after the convention.

It took courage to ask. When in the food, my persona was that of a loud, tough chick, not bothered by anything. I rolled my own cigarettes and got a tattoo back in the days when only prisoners and sailors had tattoos. I wanted everyone to know I was mean and don't mess with me. In recovery I discovered that I was over-sensitive, let what I thought others thought of me dictate my actions, and feared rejection. My desire to get well overcame my tendency to give up easily. When one of these relative strangers said they couldn't put me up, I asked the next person.

Being cheap is still a pretty lively character defect in me, so I have often balked at the cost of the stay at the hotel, the food plan, and traveling to the convention, especially when I lived in Scotland. Each time I resisted spending the money, I reminded myself that it was an investment that paid dividends year round. The new connections I made, the deepening relationships with those I knew, and the lessons learnt from watching long term members conduct the business sessions, would never have been possible if I had not ventured outside the comfort, convenience and economy of staying in my cozy home.

The *connection* magazine proved another valuable resource In my early days in a small FA fellowship. At that time it was a couple of double sided photocopies stapled together - not pretty, but the stories helped me learn how to stay abstinent.

By the time I left California with 8 years' of abstinence, the fellowship had become huge, but joining when it was a tiny fledgling group, gave me the tools to flourish on the FA frontier.

First I moved to rural Idaho and attended AA meetings. Amazingly another FA member moved nearby and after 6 months we started an FA meeting. We were lucky in that one newcomer started shortly thereafter, and her enthusiasm helped us through the weeks of near empty meetings. There is still a small but mighty fellowship there 9 years later. Next I lived briefly in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with a tiny fellowship and often traveled the couple hours to Cleveland, Ohio, to fill up at the bigger meetings there.

The years in Idaho and months in Pittsburgh helped wean me off meetings as my main source of strength and shifted my focus to building strong connections on my phone calls. I had built a core group of my peers who were equally passionate about growing spiritually in FA. We knew each other's personalities and stories well, so we could cut to whatever we needed to work on at that time.

I had also built strong connections with long term abstinent members. Their experience was invaluable and I plied them with questions about how they applied the program in their lives and asked for feedback on whatever life situations I was going through. This network of one on one phone calls became my main source for getting the experience, strength and hope that I needed to hear.

My next move to Glasgow, Scotland, took me off the FA map completely and was where hunger for recovery paid off. Not having a fellowship around me was not new, but being on a different time zone to my core group of FA members that I was in constant contact with, was challenging. Coupled with the fact that it took me forever to understand the UK phone system and the best way to make international phone calls, few of my American FA fellows

knew how to make an international call. I had to make it as easy as possible for them to return my calls, make sure I was available to receive their calls, turn my phone off every night so that they could call without having to figure out time zones, and be persistent. Most importantly, I had to not take it personally when they didn't call back and instead call again. I also started building connections with members who were more in my time zone, like the English and German fellowship, some folks in Sweden, Israel and, in the mornings, I could call Australia. I came to know who I could call at what time, for example there were some Boston folks who were up as early as 11am my time who I could catch often, and some Californians who had long drives home from their meetings who I could call early in my mornings. Though it took me a while to learn, I was spoilt by all the advances in technology that makes international calling so much easier.

When I first moved to the FA frontier, I asked a long term member who had moved away from fellowship, what helped her the most. She said without hesitation that service was key. I had begun drawing for the *connection* long before, but that contact with the Art Director and my involvement with the *connection* committee became increasingly important. Eventually I was encouraged to apply for the role of *connection* committee chair. Remember, I'm the lazy food addict who avoids responsibility and embraces mental loafing, so a role that involved unselfish effort and accountability without constant applause, was not appealing. As in my early recovery, grumbling and skeptical, I followed the suggestion.

I couldn't have been more surprised by the positive effect this service position would have in my life. Now I was not only involved with the *connection* committee, but learning to lead it, which often required tackling complex issues like restructuring the magazine's finances. I learnt to use my brain, find good help and delegate, how to make an agenda for and lead the *connection* conference calls, how to create an atmosphere on the calls that invited

creative thinking and problem solving, and how to work with strong personalities who sometimes disagreed. These were all foreign skills to me and learning them improved my self-esteem greatly – a real plus when you're living away from fellowship.

Being a committee chair meant that I was on the FA World Service Board too. It was a privilege to work with committed long term FA members and a great opportunity for me in an outlying area to be working with them so closely. One of my jobs was to go over several documents that I found insufferably dull, but it kept me connected to FA, and at last when I got to the part in the AWOL where it says "Just for Today I will not be a mental loafer", I could say that I had exercised my brain. That ability to pick away at something detailed and challenging has stood me in good stead many times since.

One of the biggest challenges of living on the FA Frontier was not being able to give away the recovery I had been given. A simple service that I could perform at any time was writing for the connection. It didn't matter whether the article got printed, doing the service of writing slowed me down and got me out of myself, doing something for another food addict, and reflecting on what helped me stay abstinent. I have recently moved back to my fellowship in California after 9 years away. It is sweet to be back amongst my meetings and my fellows, but I am grateful for my time on the FA Frontier. It forced me to grow in ways that I don't think I would have, in the comfort of my large FA meetings and local fellowship.

It's exciting and wildly over stimulating for this delicate food addict to be living in a big city again, surrounded by friends. Writing this article gives me the opportunity to calm down for a moment, reconnect with my Higher Power and reflect on how lucky I am to have been given a rich life free of the misery that food addiction caused, and a solution for my continuing character defects that can be as painful as abusing food.