

# Recovery Room

Category: Stories

written by Warren Holleman | April 1, 2011

**Warren Holleman**

We're sitting in a circle: seven women and me. Most are in their thirties and forties, and in their second, third or fourth month of sobriety. They look professional in the suits they've assembled from the donations closet of our inner-city recovery center.

I start things off by reminding everyone that this is the last day of the group. The last hour, in fact.

All eyes turn to Dorothy.

Dorothy is a proud woman, tall and tough and strong. And a former track and field star, although now she's wheelchair-bound.

She speaks in a deep, husky, monotone punctuated occasionally by dramatic earthquakes—otherwise known as spastic tremors. But in all this time, she's avoided talking about herself, fueling the suspicion that she's hiding something really interesting.

I feel tense. Dorothy was assigned to me for individual therapy, but she hasn't opened up with me, either. I tried showing her how to construct a family genogram, thinking that something tactile might resonate. She played along, but I could see she wasn't buying it.

"Five years ago," she tells us, "I got shot in the spine. Yeah."

The other women fire questions: "How did you get shot?" "How do you take care of yourself in that wheelchair?" "How do you drive that big ol' van?" "How did you raise your kids?"

With a wave of her trembling hand, Dorothy dismisses them.

"I've only got one hour. I'm gonna talk about my family genogram."

Everybody sits up in their chairs. We've never heard Dorothy say two sentences in a row.

"I came from a dysfunctional family. *DYS*-functional family. The men went to prison, and the women took care of them. You hear what I'm sayin'?"

The ladies nod.

Dorothy reaches into her bag and pulls out a sheet of paper. She struggles to unfold it, then lays it on her lap. We pull our chairs closer. Intricate diagrams, symbols and explanations. It's even color-coded. My spine tingles, my whole body shakes, and my eyes water.

"Look at this: my daddy, my Uncle Nate, my Uncle Bix. Over on my mother's side, my Uncle Sweet Pea. And these two here. I can't even remember their names. I never saw any of them anywhere but in prison. Other families had cookouts on weekends. We went to prison....

"Look down here. These are my brothers. Last Sunday I drove down to the Biggers Unit and visited Jimmy. Then I went over to the Saddler Unit to see Reg.

"This is me and my sister. My sister—see this X? That means she's dead."

Dorothy's body jerks uncontrollably in the chair for a few moments. Then she stills herself.

"My sister coughed up her lungs right on the kitchen floor. Right in front of her two children. A child shouldn't have to see his momma die like that. I had to go in there and clean that up. By myself, in this chair—my brothers were too busy doing dope and robbing people. That was my own sister's lungs I cleaned up. She had TB. TB.

"My sister was what you call the family symptom-bearer. I looked that up in the book. And Dr. Holleman says I'm the glue—the one who holds the family together."

The women try to tell Dorothy how much they admire her, but she will have none of it. She doesn't want our pity.

"Are you angry?" somebody asks.

"Huh?" Dorothy looks confused.

"You don't talk about yourself—at least not until today. I figured you were angry at the rest of us for not having to suffer the way you have."

"Why would I be angry?" Dorothy takes a moment to look each lady in the eye. "Getting shot saved my life. I was killing myself on crack. Being in a hospital six months, in total traction—I couldn't move. I couldn't do dope, neither. But that's not what I want you to help me with."

Everyone leans forward.

"What I want to know is: why my momma never gave her love to me. She never gave her love to me. Ever! My daddy and my brothers never did shit for her, and she couldn't love them enough. My sister was a dope fiend, and Momma nursed her like a baby. I was the only one, other than my momma, who could take care of herself. When I was a child, I'd go up to her and say, 'Momma, I love you.' I'd put my arms around her and try to hug her. She'd just stand there, hands at her sides, like I wasn't even there. Then she'd say: 'Oh, you go away, girl.' Or 'Girl, what is wrong with you?'

"Why..."

Dorothy struggles to complete the sentence.

"Why did she treat me that way?"

Dorothy—tough, strong Dorothy—bawls like a baby. She goes on and on, snorting and shaking in her chair. It's a scary sight—is she having a seizure? Everybody gets quiet. Except Nika, who always says the opposite of what everyone else is saying, and whose capacity for seeing the good in everything borders on the delusional.

"Oh my God!"

We all bristle. Nika's a free spirit, and she's about to spoil Dorothy's breakthrough moment.

"I know why your momma treated you that way!"

Dorothy jerks up straight. She's as alarmed as we are.

"What?"

"Your momma knew you were the one who would become the backbone of the family. Just like she was. She was making you strong."

Dorothy sits, poker-faced.

Nika continues: "She wanted to hug you and hold you, but she loved you so much she knew she had to make you strong. And she was a good momma, 'cause you ARE the backbone of your family."

Dorothy rubs her eyes with the back of a shaky hand. There are no tears; it looks like she's scratching an itch.

"Are you saying she treated me this way *because* she loved me?"

Nika smiles.

Dorothy speaks, not to the group, but to herself: "I *am* the backbone. Just like my mother..."

After a while, she emerges from her trance. Tears dripping onto her blouse, she looks around at the group, twisting her body from left to right so she can see each woman without moving her chair. She stares deep into their eyes, and now they stare back, no longer nervous about the jerks and spasms.

"Ladies, I thought I would take this to my grave."

She goes back inside herself for a moment, then says, "Of course!  
Of *course* my momma loved me."

Suddenly she seems soft and warm, satisfied and approachable. She has become one of us. Her facial expression hasn't changed, but it feels as though she's smiling with her whole body. We all just sit there and relish the moment.

But I'm still stuck on something they said a couple of minutes earlier. *Backbone. The backbone of the family.* What a metaphor! I'm dying to

underscore the profundity of Nika's insight.

Several times I start to talk, but then stop myself. This lovely metaphor will only draw attention away from what's just happened. As much as I'm tempted to join in, this is their group. For me, it's time to be still.

**About the author:**

Warren Holleman is a family therapist who worked for many years in a recovery program for homeless women. He currently serves as the director of the *Program on Faculty Health and Well-Being* at the University of Texas-MD Anderson Cancer Center, and he is also the co-editor of [\*Fundamentals of Clinical Practice\*](#), a textbook for medical students. "I grew up in eastern North Carolina, pretending not to listen to the rambling stories my father and uncles told me. Then I moved to Texas and found my way into a profession whose primary job requirement is...listening to stories. And now I enjoy telling stories—those of my elders, and those of my own—to all comers, whether they listen, pretend to listen or pretend not to."

**Story editor:**

Diane Guernsey