

Alcoholics Anonymous Recovery Stories

Area 93 District 22
Response to “Call for Stories”
5th Edition of A.A. Big Book



CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
PREFACE - By Bonnie N.	ii
FOREWORD – By Ralph P.	iii
PERSONAL STORIES	
Part I	
<i>District 22</i>	
1 BLINDSIDED AT FORTY By Patrikya K., Paso Robles, California	1
2 GOD PUT HIS THUMBPRINT ON HER LIFE By Sandy S., Oceano, California	7
3 FAMILY BEGINNINGS By Leonard L., Arroyo Grande, California	12
4 DIFFERENT, BUT NOT ALONE By Bonnie N., Shell Beach, California	17
5 NOTHING SHORT OF A MIRACLE By Mark C., Morro Bay and Cathedral City, California	22
Part II	
<i>Other Districts and International</i>	
1 EARTH SCHOOL By Ralph P., Germantown, Maryland	27
2 AM I BEING HEARD By Francine M., Phoenix, Arizona	33
3 A LIFELONG JOURNEY By Gloria B., District Heights, Maryland	39
4 ANYWHERE . . . BUT HERE By Jodi B., Bullhead City, Arizona	44
5 ROCKY ROAD By Anne W., Augusta, Maine	46
6 SHINING THE LIGHT ON MY SHAME By Stephanie C., Rockville, Maryland	50
7 PRICELESS TIP By Bridget B., Los Angeles, California	56
8 LETTING IN THE LIGHT By Robert J., United Kingdom	58

PREFACE
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND DEDICATION

This booklet of recovery stories is Area 93, District 22's response to the General Service trustees' Literature Committee's "Call for Stories", for the upcoming Fifth edition of the book Alcoholics Anonymous.

I was serving District 22 as its District Committee Member. I wanted to write and submit my own story, but I needed help with an outline to get started. I knew I was not alone! I knew there were others like me who would benefit from a writing group. That was the start of our writer's workshop, and what a beautiful journey it has been.

The rest of the story of the workshop will follow in this book's Foreword, written by one of the two facilitators of the workshop, Ralph P., a writer by trade, who joined us by Zoom from Maryland. His mentorship and encouragement to all of the participants has been invaluable.

Our other facilitator was Patrikya K. (PK), a literature instructor from San Luis Obispo. She helped me and others by reviewing our drafts and giving us "good orderly direction" on how to proceed.

Our District's Archivist, Leonard L., has been gathering group stories and submitting them to our district's archives page. After our group members sent their stories to the General Service Literature Committee for consideration to be included in the Fifth edition, we thought, why not share those stories on our own archives page? With Leonard's help, we have been able to do that.

To put the book together in an organized, attractive package and to post it on our website, we happily accepted the help of Judy G., our District's Technology Chair and Nameless Newsletter Editor.

I especially want to thank all of the participants in the writing workshop. Without you, my vision would have been a dream that did not come true. I thank God it did. I read every story in this booklet as it was submitted. Every beautiful one of them made me laugh and made me cry. Sometimes at the same time! I am in awe of the honesty and humility shown from these writers.

I very much wanted to submit my own story because I personally knew someone who had their story selected for the Fourth edition, which came out in 2001. Her name was Wendy C. We had served as a GSRs in Sunnyvale California when she sent her story in. We kept in touch with each other after she and her husband Mark moved to Spokane, Washington. What a lovely surprise it was when we heard the news that her story was chosen. In the last twenty-some years, I always smile when I hear her story read at a Big Book meeting.

It was a sad morning last year when I found out that Wendy had died at the age of 58. But she had died with over 41 years of sobriety and her memory will live in my heart the rest of my days. Her story will always remain a part of A.A. history. This booklet is dedicated to her memory.

I believe we all have a story to tell. Whether or not it gets selected for the upcoming Fifth edition Big Book, it can still be passed on to others. After all, that is what we do; we pass it on.

~Bonnie N., Shell Beach, CA, Dec. 2022

FOREWORD

By Ralph P.

Every single day, one alcoholic shares with another alcoholic or potential alcoholic – *what it was like, what happened and what it's like now*. This simple expression of experience, strength and hope allows the recovered alcoholic storyteller to remember their own story as well as help carry the message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

Since the first edition of the “Big Book” was published in 1939, there have been three additional editions published including the most recent fourth edition, which was published in 2001. The first 164 pages of the text, the Doctor’s Opinion, and the Appendices, have been left mostly unchanged. But the personal stories section has changed. Stories were removed and rearranged, new stories added with each new edition with the hope of keeping these written stories as a vital source of information to inform the reader how the A.A. member found a new way of living without alcohol.

In 2021, the time had come for a new edition to our beloved Big Book. During that year, The General Service Conference, in response to the General Service Conference Advisory Action requesting the development of a new edition of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, recommended that a “Fifth edition of the Big Book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, be developed including an update of stories to better reflect the current membership.”

On April 8, 2022, Deborah K., the chair for the General Service trustees’ Literature Committee, sent out a memo to all General Service Conference Members, seeking recovery stories from members of our fellowship for possible inclusion in the Fifth Edition, which “are from a broad cross-section of our local communities, all stories are of value.” The submission deadline was October 31, 2022.

The clock was ticking and while there may have been countless members in our fellowship who began to write their stories alone, Bonnie N., DCM for District 22 in San Luis Obispo, and longtime active member of our fellowship, had a wonderful and practical idea to bring fellow alcoholics together in an interactive, hybrid format (in person and online) to workshop their stories before the submission deadline.

Bonnie’s vision and purpose was to provide guidance on the submission guidelines (which stated the length of the stories be 3500 words, double-spaced, and in 12 pt. font) and to provide an opportunity for our members to connect through the writing and reading of our own personal journeys before we got sober with A.A. and our way of life now within sobriety.

It would be each attendee’s responsibility to write their own story as it happened. Only the individual A.A. member can write their own A.A. story, but the collaborative constructive feedback in the spirit of an editorial board or editorial committee would give each attendee an opportunity to submit their best written draft for consideration by the Literature Committee.

As a result of Bonnie’s amazing efforts as well as tremendous support from Judy G., the writing workshop was announced in the late summer of 2022 and took place in person in San Luis Obispo at the Alano club on September 24, 2022 while being simultaneously broadcasted online via zoom to attendees from the U.S. in Area 03

(Arizona), Area 28 (Maine), Area 29 (Maryland), Area 05 (Southern Calif), Area 09 (Mid-Southern Calif.), Area 72 (Western Washington), Area 92 (Eastern Washington) and Area 93 (Central Calif., which includes District 22, San Luis Obispo), as well as members from the United Kingdom.

Facilitated by Patrikya K. of San Luis Obispo, CA and Ralph P. of Germantown, MD, the hybrid event had twenty-six attendees. During the workshop, attendees read some of the written personal stories in their formative stages. Workshop attendees listened to a touching talk by Mark C. of Spokane, Washington, about his late wife, Wendy, who had a personal story in the 4th edition, titled *My Chance to Live*, and Rudy M., Area 93 Alternate Delegate, reported the progress of the Spanish 4th edition Big Book, which has a story deadline of December 15, 2022. Workshop attendees were provided general suggestions on how to write clear and concise written material as well as resources on writing styles and reference materials from earlier editions of the Big Book.

Subsequent online workshop sessions followed leading up to the submission deadline for personal stories to the A.A. Literature Committee. And while the number of attendees was less than the initial workshop, these smaller sessions provided constructive feedback, encouragement, and warm fellowship as each member worked hard to condense a lifetime's worth of ups and downs before recovery and after they were introduced to A.A. into roughly twelve pages of text. Several of the writers found it beneficial to split into pairs for peer editing.

Not an easy task, but when the submission deadline arrived on October 31, 2022, several of the workshop attendees had submitted their stories online to the Literature Committee for consideration to be included into the 5th Edition of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

But the journey for our workshop attendees did not end there. In November 2022, Bonnie N., Judy G., and District 22 Archivist, Leonard L., requested any attendee who wanted to submit their personal story, to do so by the end of the month to be included in an online booklet for the Area 93, District 22 Archives.

The stories within these pages are from members of our fellowship who have found a solution to their drinking problem with the help of A.A. and wish to share their journey with the reader.

In the spirit of the 11th tradition of anonymity, only the A.A. member's first name, last initial, and hometown are being printed along with their personal story.

This booklet can be viewed at <https://d22aa.org/archives/>

At the time of this book's publication, it is not known if any of the stories within these pages will be included in the 5th edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous*. Only time will tell, but we do believe each story has significant value and serves our primary purpose by doing what we do every single day within our fellowship in A.A. meeting rooms: sharing our story with the hope that the alcoholic who still suffers will come join us as we trudge the Road of Happy Destiny.

May God bless you and keep you—until then.

PART I
District 22

Stories written by members of Area 93 District 22

San Luis Obispo County

(1)

BLINDSIDED AT FORTY

Written by
Patrikya K.
San Luis Obispo, California

This woman asked “How could I be an alcoholic? I didn’t even start drinking until I turned 40!”

When I rather naively but purposely picked up a drink at age 40, I unknowingly stepped into a gyre already spinning out of control—while I hadn’t had a drink until then, the disease of alcoholism was furiously ramping up intensity. Just like throwing a lit match on fuel-doused charcoal, adding alcohol to my body would bring the flames of disaster to life.

Who wouldn’t want to grow up in an idyllic part of California in one of the most scenic areas of the United States? The child of non-alcoholic parents (who at this present writing, have been married for over 65 years), I’d never seen my parents drink alcohol. Sure, dad had A beer in the fridge for what seemed like years. That same can of *Brew 102* occupied our refrigerator for countless summers. When I curiously asked Dad what it was, he told me “Sometimes people like a cold drink after mowing the lawn on a hot day.” But there that can sat--for years. Decades later, I asked my folks why they never drank during my childhood. “We were raising four children; alcohol was a luxury we couldn’t afford!” was their response. Obviously, they aren’t alcoholics! They were far too responsible and selfless!

But even without alcohol in our home, I gravitated to sugar. In fact, by age 4, I would periodically sneak into my grandparents’ kitchen, pry open the fridge door, and gobble heaping white spoonfuls of C & H sugar. One day, my grandfather walked into the kitchen and caught me in the act. With a condescending tone of voice, he asked me if I was eating sugar straight from the sugar bowl. As if by instinct, I lied and said NO I hadn’t done that--a foreshadowing of my future of sneaking drinks and lying about it right to the person’s face! I had taught myself to gaslight before I even started kindergarten!

Even though I was a devoted sugar-sneak, I was also an extremely nervous and fearful little girl --the second of 4 children. I wallowed in self-pity at any chance; I felt deprived and secretly wished I’d been born an only child so that all the attention and resources could be lavished upon ME. From a tender age, I would hide behind my dad’s recliner and pout, arms crossed and bottom lip out, when things didn’t go my way—which was often. Dad said, “Someday, a little birdie is going to drop a doo-doo on your lip.” I suppose that was his way of calling me out on my annoying expressions of self-pity. Ironically, self-pity would blossom into a character flaw I would excel in during my drinking years: pouting and blaming others for my lack of satisfaction in life.

Motivated by fear rather than achievement, I was an obedient student and made efforts to please my teachers and my parents during my early educational years. My love of reading

flourished, and I lost myself in fiction to experience a bigger world –but mostly to avoid feeling uninvited by the popular kids. Because I was a reclusive reader—a reading addict, really-- my mom entered me in a contest sponsored by our local Library: “Read 100 Books over the Summer.” Well, I loved reading and inhaled books, so this challenge wasn’t too daunting for me. But when Mom took me in to collect my reward, the Librarian accused her of lying for me! I recall feeling safe and proud as Mom came to my defense and refuted the Librarian’s accusations. That would be one of the last times my parents could feel proud of my natural accomplishments.

By the time I finished my freshmen year in High School, I’d been introduced to beer—Mickey’s Big Mouth, actually. I only tried drinking a few times during those teen years; each experiment brought major consequences, including suspension from school for being drunk at my first dance. Another time, I over-drank and got myself and my girlfriends kicked out of a movie theater for my belligerent drunken behavior. Instead of looking closely at those wrecking ball incidents and my part in them, I determined that alcohol was for losers if that’s what it did to people. It never dawned on me that my friends didn’t over-consume, didn’t act like idiots, and didn’t cause harm to themselves and others!

Fortunately, I inched my way through high school and graduated without any future plans at all. I’d like to blame that on my parents, who worked their same careers until retirement, but I think I really expected the world to drop a plan in my lap without any real effort on my part! After all, I was *special*. I deserved it! Surprisingly, I was utterly dumbfounded by life’s complexity and how I was supposed to fit-in let alone thrive. But by the time I turned 20, I was pregnant and married to my past high school boyfriend—a sassy bad boy. But much to my chagrin, my new bad-boy husband soon became a *born-again* believer and our life turned toward fundamentalist practices. Drinking or drugging had absolutely NO place in our faith practice, our friend group, or in our family lifestyle in general. This foundation would mark a period of voluntary 20-plus years of abstinence, which would not serve as a defense when I began drinking regularly at age forty.

We proceeded to have 3 children within 4.5 years. Stress and Motherhood brought renewed nervousness and feelings of insecurity; I wondered why people thought parenting was rewarding! So much work for So little accolades! As the kids gained independence, I found that if I wanted to enjoy my family, I had to control them. If I had to control them, I couldn’t enjoy them. Once again, this pattern of thinking would repeat during my downfall with alcohol. My marriage would last well over 20 years but would not survive the blunt force of alcoholism.

After my 20 yr. sober marriage imploded and we separated, I moved into my own apartment--alone. For whatever reason, I felt ill-equipped for life once again. I had no idea who I was or what I believed. I felt tremendous guilt for the way my marital problems impacted our teen children. Then it struck me: people sometimes drink to take the edge off or to take the sting out of the day. Why couldn’t I do that? So, I started drinking ALONE that night on purpose at age 40.

It was an instant love affair! In tabloid terms, it was a torrid romance. While I believed I’d discovered a magical elixir and friend for life, I had no idea that every day would become

Groundhogs' Day--repeatedly. In a sense, I'd been *sober* for over 20 years, but the disease was apparently gaining strength all that time. Just add white zinfandel and, voila, instant chaos!

I immediately began suffering consequences from my drinking. Cascading poor choices put me in dangerous places with sketchy people. I assumed I was just naïve because I'd lived a small life in a protective little community and a faith-centered now-defunct marriage. I also thought "Hell, I need to have a life—even if half of it is lived in a blackout or just plain dangerous!" From day one, I was unable to control my drinking! I drank for the effect and for the release from everything from boredom to avoiding the pain of my ongoing separation and subsequent divorce. Alcohol did for me what I could not do for myself! Finally, I had found the miraculous courage to make crazy and pointless decisions! Little did I know that numbing the bad stuff in my life would invariably also numb the good feelings.

Over the next 10 years, every hair-brained idea and dangerous decision was formulated and fueled by alcohol. At first, it was endless shenanigans that I could use my *sober-wits* to survive. But within a few years, I had ruined glittery galas, spent anyone's money who crossed my path, keyed the cars of my old boyfriends, and embarrassed every single member of my family with my crudeness—verbal cannonballs that I claimed were just me finally *finding my voice*! I didn't see alcohol as a problem; it was still serving a function for me—or so I believed. What other substance could give me the kind of power and relief I now needed? With each compounded dilemma, I would drink to figure out how to solve my life's problems.

But worse than those past debacles was knowing I was destined to create **more**—whether I wanted to or not. I realized I *had* to drink; it was beyond *wanting* to. But a creepy inner voice kept heckling me: "If you didn't start drinking 'til you were 40, how could you be an alcoholic?" From that point for at least a thousand days, I swore I was not going to drink the next day. Unbeknownst to me, I had crossed some invisible line; I could not NOT drink. When I experienced that revelation, I knew it was time to crack the code. I tried even harder to control and manage my drinking!

My myriad attempts at putting boundaries on my drinking proved unsuccessful. My therapist suggested I wear a rubber band on my wrist when out drinking so that I could snap it and startle myself back to my senses. By drink 2, I'd thrown the elastic on the floor, and it was game on. Next, I bought a metal lock, put the booze in a box, and gave the key to *him* to police me. Or I would vehemently swear to myself I wouldn't drink after I finished one bottle of wine. To ensure against driving to the liquor store later, I threw my car keys out into an open field. THAT would stop me! But with the desperation of a rescue worker, I would frantically search that field, in pitch dark, at 11 o'clock at night using a flashlight! Each day, it seemed, brought new lows and new levels of shame. I couldn't figure out how I had achieved numerous ambitious goals based on self-determination, will-power, and grit but could NOT stop drinking after one drink.

After my first ambulance trip as a fall-down drunk, my sister suggested I check into a 5-day rehab to get all the way sober and become *normal* again. All that did was make me feel well enough to think I had successfully hit a re-set button. After 2 months of sobriety (and a dozen mtgs of AA for "him"), I decided I wasn't really an alcoholic after all. Let's celebrate!

Every situation called for a drink. And a drink meant drunk. Blackouts. And then the real spiral began. The disease had progressed rapidly day by day—no, hour by hour—and I still had no clue I was doomed to keep digging my hole deeper.

Lying LIAR: that was my identity. Hiding bottles, hiding my drinking, lying about unremembered things, saying I'm sorry so many times it became humiliating to even form the words on my lips. I knew something had changed in my thinking. I felt mentally fragile but failed to see the impact of my drinking and its associated dangerous behavior on myself and the people around me. I couldn't control my emotions or my decisions without a drink. Little did I know, my bottom was rising faster than I could lower my standards to accommodate it! Then, something bizarre occurred: at the end, I could drink 2 bottles and not get so much as a buzz or one glass and go into a blackout!

This new dilemma put my beloved isolation at risk. Since I began as a solo drinker, I aimed for that privacy. It was the way I could stay safe from the house-of-mirrors life I had allowed to form around me. The insanity was the worst part of all! One evening, I wanted to drink alone but *he* was home, so I left and went to a local hotel. Already a bit drunk, I asked the front desk person if they rented any rooms that could be locked from the *outside*. Perplexed, the clerk asked, "So you want a room that locks from the outside? I've never heard of such a thing." My logic was that somehow, I could get locked in the room and be unable to escape during a blackout. I just wanted to be alone and drink without any consequences whatsoever!

Another time, after a particularly bad night of drinking and drama, I decided to find out what was wrong with me. So, on my way to work at my college teaching job the next morning, I stopped by a mental health hospital. I knocked on the locked front door. A staff member cracked it open and, with a perplexed look, asked what I wanted. I told him I needed someone to tell me whether I was insane or not. Wasn't there some sort of test they could administer to score me as sane or insane? Apparently, this isn't typical mental health hospital protocol. The person asked me why I thought I might not be sane. I responded, "I am mentally fragile like an eggshell. I drink every single day—even when I don't want to." Staff member says, "Sounds like you might need to try AA instead of coming to a mental hospital." Of course, that sounded far too simple and far too horrifying at the same time!

There were almost no good days anymore. He and I finally split after my 2nd trip to the hospital in an ambulance drunk. He had had enough and in total exasperation declared, "PK, you were once an Asset; now you're nothing but a Liability." For some reason, I understood the spreadsheet version of me! It stung like mad! So, I left with my tail between my legs and moved in with my sister, who created contingencies: mainly go to AA meetings and don't drink. And I did that—for almost 4 months. I heard alcoholics talking excitedly, and I felt safe at AA. Coffee and donuts and people cussing and telling their amazing stories—that was the noisy norm in those rooms.

The laughter and the sense of hope kept me coming back more than did my commitment to my sister. As suggested, I got a sponsor but never called her unless I knew she was in a situation where she was unable to answer the phone. In meetings, I saw people who had didn't drink anymore. Some with a lot of years and others with only 24 hours of sobriety.

Surely, I was qualified to be part of this group! But I'd determined these people were the weak exceptions. I reasoned they hadn't earned several advanced degrees; they didn't come from good homes; they didn't have the sensible job I had. No. I determined that I would exist untethered in AA to accommodate my non-joiner stance. My sponsor was my sponsor in name only. Little did I know, I would soon pay dearly for that self-aggrandizing!

One day, after a meeting, Donna, my sponsor-whom-I-never-called, put her arm around me and cautioned: "PK, honey, I'm worried about you. Without having worked the steps, you're without a spiritual defense against the first drink." I was totally caught off guard and mumbled to myself smugly, "she doesn't even know me!" But she *knew* alcoholics, and she understood alcoholism.

Not surprisingly, within 10 days, I drank again. It was that pitiful dark vengeful drinking—the kind where I'm in a ratty pink robe, lighting cigarettes off my sister's gas stove, and guzzling wine while she was out with friends. That night ended with law enforcement being summoned to my sister's house to deal with me as a drunk in public.

Luckily for me (of course, I didn't see it as lucky then), the next morning, my sister insisted that I leave immediately; she even helped me pack my car. I sobbed and put on my best pitiful sorrowful look and pleaded with her, ultimately asking her where I should go. She answered curtly, "I'm not sure, but that's not my problem. You broke our agreement, and you're leaving—oh, and I called Mom and Dad, and you're not going there!" Boom! Game over.

I had to leave Ell's but hadn't a clue where to go. So, I checked into a non-descript cheap hotel. The room was stark; surely, this wasn't a hotel for an adventurer on a vacation. It was a basic shelter with electricity and hot water. I rehearsed my future with the tiny towels – towels so rough I wouldn't wash my car with them. This would be but a pleasant memory when I live in a cardboard box under the overpass. I'm not entirely sure what happened, mentally, but for 2 days and nights, I paced and tossed and turned and cried and paced some more. It was my long night of the soul. Maybe those people in AA were right. Maybe mine was a disease and not just incurable bad behavior. Surely, the progression of the disease must be what was happening to me.

Suddenly, I recalled the Big Book phrase about "No human power can save us," and I understood the dilemma. Immediately, I called Donna, who'd cautioned me just a few days earlier and said, "Donna, I drank." And she said, "I'll meet you at the nooner and then let's start working the steps." We met at her house after the meeting to begin the steps. That day, I was born into the family of AA. I had finally accepted the reality about the disease of alcoholism. I was tired of feeling insane. I surrendered. I haven't had a drink since.

It was a relief to know I was out of ideas—that I'd been beaten, as they say, into a state of reasonableness. I had seen that there was no way out—that NO HUMAN POWER could save me. That set me up perfectly to REALLY accept a Higher Power. I did whatever was suggested to me. I had surrendered. I spent that first Thanksgiving at an AA meeting place; I knew how to act in AA, and I knew it would be a sober event. I also attended my first wedding sober and my first dance sober—both at my own Son's Wedding! Making amends to those I had harmed has nurtured humility—a quality I never thought I could experience. After a long

painful stretch of living like an anchor being drug, bumping across the bottom of the ocean, nothing feels quite as rewarding as re-joining humanity with my eyes facing forward instead of at the ground.

If AA didn't offer a substantially better option than booze, I'd still be drinking! Through the twelve steps and meetings, AA has taught me the skills to navigate life with this disease while enjoying peace of mind! Since ours is a disease of isolation, the fellowship and meetings help me feel connected and not alone (even though I live alone and prefer it). The hope I first felt in the rooms of AA continues to energize me daily; meetings are the bright spot of my day.

I communicate regularly with my sponsor and work the Steps with her—one Step for each of the twelve months—and have done so for over a decade. We're both always shocked at how much we see with each *pass* through the literature! I am a sponsor myself and secretary meetings. I continue to read the big book and seek my higher power. AA has given me the stability and sense of purpose my heart always craved but could never achieve on my own power.

Through the years, I've often wondered "What would it take to make me drink?" Well, I recently lost a cherished little dog—one which began her life with me as a drunk but lived most of her life with the sober me. The loss was excruciating; I have never heard such haunted sounds come out of my body—for days. But I did what I'd learned from watching others in AA: pray, call your sponsor, go to meetings. And I did not have to drink over it. As a result of the twelve steps and a god of my own understanding, my relationships with family are mostly restored—some with a little more road wear than others.

AA has made this idyllic life possible. I get so much more than I ever thought I deserved.

(2)

GOD PUT HIS THUMBPRINT ON HER LIFE

Written by
Sandy S.
Oceano, California

At 33 she walked into her first A.A. meeting, wanting to die. Now she cherishes her life.

I was born in the early 1950's, living in a little house in Pasadena, California. My father later confided in me that I was a "mistake." They already had a son, and my parents' marriage was already troubled, so I was born into an unhappy home. My parents were religious, and probably stayed together for that reason. They very rarely drank, and my father warned me several times against drinking throughout my youth because alcoholism ran in both sides of our family.

My earliest memories are of my two-years-older big brother beating me. He hated me for being born and robbing him of our parents' undivided love, money, and attention. He probably blamed me for our parents' unhappiness too. Other than that, I had a happy early childhood away from my brother. At age six, I was put in a private Christian school.

At the age of seven, a visiting preacher at our school said we would live a life filled with sadness and pain, but if we accepted Jesus into our hearts we would go to Heaven and be with Jesus when we died. I wanted to die right away! When thinking of all that pain and suffering ahead, a deep depression settled on me like sinking into quicksand. The harder I struggled to climb back out again, the deeper I sank. A few days later was my first botched suicide attempt. My parents took me to the Pasadena Police Station where the officer told me suicide is illegal and made me promise never to try it again. He must have thought my parents were nuts. Depression continued untreated into my teens.

I was an over-achiever, getting straight A's and excelling as an all-around gymnast. I was a "good girl" back then. This was probably another reason for my less-scholastic brother to resent me. At age 13 my mother came home unexpectedly and caught him repeatedly slamming my head into the hard wood kitchen floor. That night my father finally put a lock on my door. The early beatings by my brother probably started my "victim mentality," feeling worthy of abuse.

In my teens I began a pattern of finding men to use and abuse me. Victims and abusers, drawn to each other like magnets. My first drink at age 16 was around ten ounces of vodka mixed with two ounces of a soft drink. I fell down two flights of stairs and threw up in a basement sink. But I didn't crave more yet. The vodka was provided by my first love. My second suicide attempt followed that first ill-fated romance.

While at a prestigious Los Angeles university, I studied hard and worked part-time. This was a heady time for Women's Liberation. Women were marching on Washington, D.C. for the Equal Rights Amendment, demanding equal pay for equal work. I imagined a future for myself as a well-paid successful businesswoman, but I'd never researched the job market. My degree in psychology was practically worthless. After graduation I could only find clerical work. Thank God I could type.

A few years later, I worked with a man from Nebraska who invited me to drink in a bar after work. He was fun, drinking was fun, and we did this every weekday. I could tell he was an alcoholic, drinking to excess every time. Within about two weeks, I could no longer have just one or two drinks myself. I went from being a casual drinker to being an alcoholic in just two weeks! Of course, I didn't realize that at the time.

Later he asked me to marry him. We were both in dead-end jobs, but I said "Yes" fearing no one else would ever ask. Because I got married, my parents declined to contribute to my further education, so at age 22 my life's dream of a successful career in Psychology slipped away.

After marriage, we both drank a lot every day consuming massive amounts of alcohol. He introduced me to several drugs, but King Alcohol was it for me. After a few months he told me that I needed to start packing us up, because we had to move to his new job in Lincoln, Nebraska. I felt I had no choice but to obey my husband. The Midwest winters and profound loneliness were horrible for this California girl. He had lots of good old friends back at his home in Nebraska; I had none. I started drinking alone in earnest while he partied with his friends. I missed my dear father and friends so much, finding comfort in the bottle.

We would next follow his career to Dubuque, Iowa. His radio announcing career thrived. His company hired me to sell advertising. I often chose my customers who drank to take to lunch so I could drink with them. I could still work after two lunchtime drinks back then. Every night I came straight home after work to pour myself a huge glass of vodka with a splash of *whatever* before even taking my shoes off. Our marriage suffered from my severe depression and progressing alcoholism. I was *not* a happy drunk!

I discovered martinis in a bar one winter's night after work. My work colleague said they were wonderful drinks. Boy was he right. Wow! I got so drunk, so fast. That night was a "white out" snowstorm in which you can barely see, so I left the headlights of my white car turned off on the way home so the police wouldn't see me. That was my best thinking while driving dead drunk. I was 29 years old. My alcoholism had progressed very far, very quickly. Still, I would drink for four more years.

I started making up rules to try to control my drinking. The first "no drinks during work hours" rule kept me sober enough to work in the afternoon. The "noon rule" meant I couldn't drink before noon on weekends. Finally, the "stop drinking at 5 p.m. on Sundays" rule meant I could be somewhat clear-headed for work Monday mornings. After a few years, my husband started dating his favorite barmaid and told me he wanted a divorce. He said he married a sweet young thing who turned into an alcoholic monster. He was right.

Fourteen months later, I married my second husband, the love of my life. But he grew tired of coming home to a drunken wife every night and began dating a co-worker. I realized our marriage was failing when he packed an overnight bag to go spend the night with her. I suffered horribly that someone I loved so deeply was willing to throw me away. I can't blame him, really. My disease was accelerating so quickly.

After the divorce, I moved home to live with my parents. My mother was quite sick with cancer, so I was able to help them a bit. But my mind was so saturated with booze that I was never truly clear-headed. I was only able to get a menial clerical job.

In a final effort at control, I would sneak three half-pints of 80-proof vodka into my girlhood bedroom in a briefcase every night. Each was in its own paper bag, so the bottles wouldn't make a clinking sound when I walked. This was not enough vodka to make me feel

good, but it kept withdrawal at bay. It was so very difficult to hide the drinking from my parents. I was terrified I might spill a drink and leave the carpet stinking of vodka.

Once I went to a small shop where the owner had posted an article on his bulletin board about alcohol's effects on the body. There was a photo of a normal brain, pink with deep fissures and bright veins. Next to it was an alcoholic's brain, looking like gray mush with vague lines where the ridges had nearly disappeared. There was also a photo of a normal heart next to an alcoholic's heart. Huge at nearly twice the size, it showed the strain drinking had caused. Those images had a deep impact on me.

One night my boss asked me to work late, and by 9 p.m. withdrawal began in earnest. Sweat streamed out of my scalp and down my face. My body felt like it was burning up despite the air conditioning. I started trembling, then shaking. My boss's instructions turned from words into sounds without meaning. I was terrified. I somehow managed to mumble to my boss that I was sick and had to leave.

That was on a Thursday. God put His "thumbprint" on my life that night and gave me the certainty that alcohol was destroying my mind. God's "thumbprint" is how I feel about my Higher Power's profound effect on me at turning points in my life. I *knew* I had to quit drinking. I also knew to call AA from the many public service announcements that ran on late-night TV. I said the alcoholic's prayer: "Please God, help me!"

I wanted to go through withdrawal over the weekend, but drank on Friday, the date of my last drink (please, God). Summoning all my courage on Saturday morning, I called AA's Central Office in Los Angeles. The kind lady said a woman would call me back. That woman asked me if I had any alcohol in the house. Well, *of course* I did! She said to pour it out. Imagine that. I was so muddled that I had kept my half-full liter of vodka in the house when I supposedly wanted to quit.

The AA woman and a young man drove me to my first AA meeting in San Gabriel, California, held outside under a huge old oak tree in a beautiful church courtyard. God's second "thumbprint" was placed on my life right then: I felt sparkling energy like electricity flow from the top of my head down through my whole body. This was a profound spiritual experience to me. Someone at that first meeting said I never had to drink again, even if I wanted to - and I believed them. Then all I remember is sweating and shaking in withdrawal that began at my first AA meeting. Blessedly, everyone pretended not to notice.

My sobriety date is July 25, 1986. I fell in love with AA right from the start. I didn't have to be pushed to work the Steps. I was so eager to get better. They said to do 90 meetings in 90 days, which seemed a very tall order. It turned out to be easy as I made AA friends. I won't say it was easy to not drink, but it was nothing like the former struggle to continue drinking.

In my first year I learned that AA does for us *slowly* what alcohol did for us *quickly*, at least at first: It made us feel comfortable, at ease with other people, *normal*. And we chased that feeling for years after it was no longer possible. Our best friend became our worst enemy.

A speaker at a meeting said that recovery is not a *sprint*; it's a *marathon* that goes on and on and on until, hopefully, we die sober. To me, that's where the "Road of Happy Destiny" leads. I learned that if I'll *drink* over anything, I'll drink over *anything*. Nothing, not anything, would be a legitimate reason to throw my sobriety away and take that first drink.

My beloved first Sponsor, Jean, kept me close during those early years. She told me over and over "*Don't drink, no matter what!*" We met on weekend afternoons to talk, read AA books, work on Steps, go shopping, and do jigsaw puzzles. She was the perfect person to

sponsor me. She got me into Steps 10-12 right away. She told me that even a newcomer can try to set right their current mistakes. They can start to meditate and pray. They can be of service to their AA groups.

For 12 Step service, she had me take commitments to make coffee, bring cookies, be a greeter, wash mugs and ashtrays, and commit to being at the same meetings every week. With each new commitment I felt more "a part of." Other AA women drew me into their sisterhood, with fun outings and coffee after meetings. Those *meetings after the meetings* were so helpful. It was so much better than those lonely nights with booze as my only companion.

Doing Steps 4 and 5 didn't leave me feeling exhilarated. Instead, I felt very guilty when first looking clearly at the damage I had done to my husbands, parents, friends, and employers. With my mother dying of cancer, I did my Step 9 amends with her. We had been angry with each other since my early teens. After confessing my alcoholism to her, all I could truthfully say was "I'm sorry I wasn't the daughter you wanted." She burst into tears and said, "I'm sorry I wasn't the mother you wanted." We cried and hugged each other for quite a while. Years of mutual hostility were healed before she passed.

My Sponsor Jean was such an incredibly wise woman. No matter what life issue I brought to her, she had the perfect answer or the perfect suggestion for me to take it to God. I was so lucky to find her. It was finishing my 9th Step amends that brought me peace of mind for the first time in memory. My years of daily drinking were like a half-remembered dream. My newly sober life was taking shape. I went to meetings once or twice every day with safety from alcohol in the embrace of the fellowship.

As my mom lay dying on July 25th, 1987, my brother brought a bottle of Courvoisier cognac to our parents' house. The bottle was about half-full, with the sun gleaming through its caramel color, calling to me to drink. That would take the edge off her dying. No one would know. I knew I had to get out of there, despite my father's desire for me to stay. I left my dying mother and drove back to that first AA meeting place to take my first AA birthday cake. When I got home, my dad called to say my mother died a few hours after I left.

She died when I was 35, and my father died when I was 40. Jean went with me to their funerals. My brother sued me after each death for a bigger share of their estate than they had left him. I was devastated. I had lost my mom, lost my dad, and then lost my only remaining family member to greed. I threw myself into the program to deal with it.

My father's Revocable Trust disinherited my brother, who sued me to break the Trust. The Superior, Bankruptcy, and Appeal court cases went on for years. Years one through ten of sobriety were *very* difficult for me. My Sponsor listened patiently to all the horrible things my wealthy brother and his wife did to me. Though they were both successful real estate brokers, they found shabby clothing somewhere and came to court looking like they were destitute. I guess they fooled the judge. My brother was so cruel. He even tried to have my home chained shut with all my belongings and my two cats trapped inside, to be sold at a Sheriff's sale. The judge gave my brother and the attorneys all the money my father had worked so hard to save for me throughout his life. I lost my beautiful home and nearly all my money, but I didn't drink. God and AA protected me.

It was hard starting over from scratch financially. I did manage to get a job in finance at a good company in Pasadena. The next five years were filled with work and AA meetings. There were several AA members where I worked, and we leaned on each other at times.

There was an AA club nearby that held noon meetings, where I could find relief from the pressures of life and work.

At year 20 of sobriety, I was transferred to my company's office in Central California. I had always wanted to retire there. My family had taken us on camping trips there every summer when I was a girl. When I had the chance to live and work there, I jumped at the chance to move. Feeling confident in sobriety, I hadn't gone to meetings for quite a while, and never in my new city.

One day driving to my new job I passed a local winery with a "Wine Tasting" sign. It crossed my mind that wine tasting would be fun to do and wondered whether bottles would be cheaper by the case. It had happened in an instant. I had thought about wine as if it was as harmless as soda pop. That put the fear of drink into me. I couldn't believe how quickly that thought had happened. From hearing the stories of relapses in AA meetings, I knew how slippery my sobriety had become.

Then God put his "thumbprint" on my life again. That very morning, I had looked for a faster commute. While driving the new way home I saw a small sign with the AA symbol. I pulled into the driveway just five minutes before the 5:30 p.m. meeting. I was home. I started going to meetings with my new group at least six times per week and started back into service right away. I soon felt safe again "in the middle of the herd." My life settled back into comfortable sobriety, so simple and calm.

After several years I was able to save enough to retire. I don't need much these days. I live two miles from the ocean in a little home that I love. I no longer allow abusive people in my life. I've been blessed with reasonably good health as I approach my 70th belly button birthday. These aches and pains come from being old and alive. I'm full of gratitude, with a quiet mind and a happy heart.

I believe the "Big Book" and *Twelve and Twelve* were divinely inspired. Alcoholism is a deadly, progressive disease. I've seen it kill too many of us. It breaks my heart when someone just can't, or won't, cling to recovery. I know the Steps are hard. But they're so much easier than following the destructive path of active alcoholism. Why toss back the AA life preserver to drown in an ocean of alcohol?

At 33 years old as I walked into my first AA meeting, I wanted to die but didn't have the courage to pull the trigger. I believed in God but thought he hated me. Today I know that God loves me. I call my God "The Divine Creator of the Universe." With God's Grace I've been continuously sober for 36 years since my first AA meeting. I've just done the work of recovery to the best of my ability. Progress, not perfection.

A wonderful new Sponsor has come into my life and she's guiding me through the Steps again. I know that no matter what happens to me, God, my Sponsor, and my AA friends will get me through it. Today I have a simple and contented life worth living. Thank you, God, for your "thumbprints" on my life.

(3)

FAMILY BEGINNINGS

Written by
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He was raised in a normal family where there was very little drinking; he wondered how or why he became an alcoholic?

I grew up in what I believe was a normal household. I had both parents, two older sisters and a dog. On special events, my parents would have an occasional drink, but I never saw any drunkenness.

My father, when he was 41, signed up with the United States Naval Construction Battalion. America had just declared War on Japan following their bombing of Pearl Harbor. We were also going to be fighting Germany, as they were allied with Japan. America needed to construct a system of landing fields in the Pacific so we could get our bombers close enough to attack Japan and protect our Pacific Fleet from their airplanes. I was not quite three when he left and six when he came home. His family came from Germany and as a young man, he had already served in World War One on a ship toward the end of that conflict. I think he may have been motivated to show he was an American and did not sympathize with what Germany was doing. Serving the United States is what he thought was expected of him.

In High School I began to think about my future, what did I want it to look like and what was expected of me. I was looking forward to; College, marriage, a house with two or three kids and maybe a white picket fence. I knew military service was expected as it was compulsory at the time. I decided to get the military part taken care of first.

During my Junior year of High School, I signed up for a program that had two years of active military duty starting right after graduation. The active duty was followed with four more years of a military reserve program. My active duty was also with a Naval Construction Battalion and at that time, my unit was stationed in Guam. I was sent there to join them. I did not drink while I was in High School. I had heard stories of others drinking, but no one I knew used alcohol and was unaware of what alcohol might do or the effect it could have on someone. One night I was sitting on my bunk reading and someone, walking by, asked me to go with him to the "club" for a drink. I told him I was not old enough to drink, He said something like, no one will care about that here. Come on, a little drinking never hurt anyone. He told me the Club was a nice place that I would enjoy it and they served popcorn. This appealed to me as my only addiction up to this point was popcorn.

I went with him that night. I did enjoy it and had a great time. The next evening, I went back by myself. The Club became a place I frequently went alone. The Navy had a bus you could take around the Island to various night clubs where I also went solo. There was entertainment at these clubs which I was enjoying with others, so it was not quite drinking

alone. I also joined a bowling league where we were drinking as a team. My basic thought was to simply explore ways I could get plowed. I devoted all my free time to this. I never did any sightseeing, or anything cultural. In retrospect I think *what a waste*. But at that time, drinking had become my newfound activity.

The next year my battalion was rotated to Alaska. They needed someone to stay behind at the Naval Shipyard and supply station in the San Francisco area of California. My task, working with others, was to ensure our needed construction materials were being sent in an orderly fashion to Alaska. It is a puzzle to me why I was chosen for that duty but there I was. It was considered a temporary assignment, so they gave me per diem to house and feed myself. This meant more money for me to spend. If I wore my uniform, my fake ID usually worked allowing me to purchase alcohol. My refrigerator was kept stocked with beer and rotisserie chicken, light on the chicken. I had now become a daily drinker getting at least a buzz every day. I enjoyed my time in San Francisco. Dating, movies a play or two, but mostly the museums. I learned during this period that alcohol and a meaningful life coexisted and were good partners.

My two-year tour of active duty was up, I went home and enrolled in college. I was going to become an Architect. I liked the classes and enjoyed the Collage experience, but it soon became apparent that I was not a good student. I was making my own beer now and still drinking every day. I never believed it was hindering me in any way and I was comfortable with it. However, the college experience was just not working for me. I ended up getting an AA degree in engineering at a Junior Collage as they were then known.

During this time, while attending school, I had obtained a job with an Engineering and Surveying firm which I thoroughly enjoyed. I married, abandoned the idea of further college, and began preparing for a career in Land Surveying. I completed a required internship, qualified for, passed my State Licensing exam, and started my own business. I am now drinking throughout the day. I do not need to have a drink in my hand but feel a little more comfortable if I know where one can readily be had.

Life was good, I had two great girls, a house with a privet hedge. The business was growing but the marriage was waning. My father died and I felt I did not need to keep up the pretense of my marriage. We tried counseling which was unsuccessful, and we divorced. About this same time our economy was in a recession. I gave my employees notice and closed the business. After a few years, one of my former employees who had taken a good surveying position with a large corporation told me that it was not a comfortable, or enjoyable, working environment. Too much structure. She wanted to start a new business with just the two of us, low key, no employees which we did. Two years later we are married and operating this business in a home we had purchased. My drinking was becoming more intense. I have adapted to a larger quantity of alcohol and believe I am managing it well but recognize there are times when I have had too much.

Ten years pass and finds the country in another economic downturn. Both my wife and I were experiencing problems. Her father died following a long battle with cancer, she had a mental break down and the ulcer I had been working on became critical and finally ruptures. She ends up with a Psychiatrist, and I end up in a hospital. The Doctor tells me I need to stop

drinking because he might not be able to save me the next time. My wife tells me she cannot live with my drinking anymore. I needed to stop drinking or we needed to get a divorce. Having nothing to drink for 10 days at this point, I was sober, and it was an easy decision. I said of course, no problem, I didn't need any more alcohol and would stop drinking.

I noticed my new sober life was not so bad. I had more clarity. The sunrises had more color. The birds had better songs and my relationships were more comfortable. I did not know anything about Alcoholics Anonymous, why should I. I had previously had a drinking problem, but I was not an Alcoholic. I am fifty-five years old now and life is pretty darn good.

Another ten years go by and we were at an event for my wife who had started fixing up old houses. She had just finished remodeling one she thought would be her last project. Her contractor put on a "surprise" BBQ which also coincided with my 65th Birthday. A sort of retirement for us both. I was handed a beer to celebrate, I said thanks, but I don't drink. He said one beer never hurt anyone. I reasoned he was correct, after all I was not an alcoholic. I had proven I could quit if I wanted, no problem. Well, I had two beers that night and the next morning I stopped at a liquor store and bought two six packs. No popcorn this time. I was hooked and much worse. My drinking "problem" was back with a vengeance and it had a lot of catching up to do.

In the six years that followed that *one beer never hurt anyone*, I got two DUI's and my wife had moved out of our house. She said she did not want to watch me die, which she assumed would happen quicker than obtaining a divorce. Following my second DUI and my release from jail, I was too ashamed to call anyone for a ride back into town. I did not have enough money for a taxi back into town either. I rightly determined I would have to walk. It was a long walk. I had plenty of time to think about my life. I figured that if I told my wife I was going to AA meetings and had stopped drinking, she would move back into the house. All would be good again. I did not have to quit forever, just learn how to control my drinking. Everything would be OK. I could do that couldn't I? Just stop for a while?

The next day I went and sat in a corner of the nearest AA meeting room. I did not say a word. The next day and the next, the same thing. When I went home, I did not drink. I kept postponing it saying instead of a beer, I will do something else first. Clean out the junk drawer, check the mail something else, anything else, in lieu of a drink just then. A kind of game. First, I had a day without taking a drink then another, soon a whole week. How did that happen. I noticed that I had more energy, the birds were singing again, I could probably stay sober for a while. It was during this period I began to pray. I believe that everything is connected to an energy. I see this energy expressed as different colored waves going through space. I began praying, *Please allow me to become one with this energy. To be in synchronization or in harmony with these universal forces and not counter to them.* A sort of guide toward doing the next right thing. To flow with this energy instead of quarreling with it.

I had a job about thirty miles inland from our coastal community where it was mountainous. I had been hiking those hot hills all day. I finished what I needed to do and was ready to head home. I was thirsty and exhausted. When I got down to the highway, I had two choices. Turn right and travel only a few miles to a liquor store I knew was there. Just

something cool and relaxing on the ride home, OR, left for the half hour drive back to town. I was able to postpone the liquor store and headed back to home. As I was getting closer to town, I realized I had nothing to eat at home, and needed to stop at a grocery store. I also realized I would probably enjoy some beer to go with my meal. Now I am at the store, in the parking lot, I sat there and said I do not want to buy liquor, but I know I will, I just know. I stepped out of my truck and looked up into the sky and said *please let me get through the store without buying any liquor, please let me get through the store without buying any alcohol.* I said this with feeling.

I went into the market and loaded all of what I thought I needed in my bag. On my way to the cashier, I realized I had passed the liquor without even seeing it. There had been no temptation, I had not even noticed it! I began to cry. I am standing in front of this woman checking out my stuff with tears running down my cheeks. I can see this stricken look on her face, she is not sure what is happening, but it is clearly making her nervous. I told her not to worry, I'm OK, I am just happy. I have not wanted or thought I needed a drink, since that moment.

As a result of that experience, I developed another prayer, another kind of mantra that I repeat. *Thank you for allowing me to accept the fact that I am an alcoholic, and as such, I just can't drink. Thank you for allowing me to accept the fact that I am an alcoholic, and I just can't drink. Thank you..... ..* I find this acceptance comforting; it is just who I am. I can now move away from thinking that I can or want to control my drinking. It is relaxing to accept my medical condition that trying to control something I know in my heart would be a losing battle.

At the meetings I had been attending, I kept hearing *I should get a sponsor and go through the steps* if I wanted to stay sober. One of the men, a regular member, had a sense of humor that put me at ease. I asked him if he would be my sponsor and help me get through the steps. Much to my relief, he agreed. We began by reading and talking about The Doctor's Opinion and Bill's Story, He asked if I could discuss any similarities in my life? When we went through or worked on the steps, I began to gradually see a little more clearly who I was. Discussing my thoughts in relation to what was written in the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, again allowed me to review what and why I thought as I did. I began to feel more attuned to and more in harmony with my spiritual energy through this process.

As I progressed through the steps with my sponsor, I was surprised to realize, I was enjoying my daily meetings, looking forward to them, and the sharing with each other, our hopes, and fears. We newcomers were learning we wanted to face them and those with more experience helped us find the way. I also saw some who just did not get it. They could not fully let go. This was frustrating for me and for some of them, it was fatal. Was I just lucky, or fortunate, that I was able to believe it would work, believe in the promises described in the chapter *Into Action*. They really do come true.

I have learned, 12 years after joining AA, That I am still discovering new facets of my life and developing new freedoms. This is a perpetual program that just keeps giving. Perhaps my significant gifts were willingness to change, being open to new or different points of view and seeking an honest view of myself.

I became involved in the organizational aspects of service to learn more about how AA functions. I wanted to pay back all the help that was freely given to me. It amazes me how well AA works, with so little structure. I also sponsor others and learned that together we both grow. The power of one person working with another coupled with a desire for a better life for all is very powerful.

Today, I am at peace. I can quietly admire the day coming alive as the sky begins to lighten. I can hear first one bird sing, then another. Perhaps a rooster or a dog will join in to proclaim the new day.

I am truly fortunate because today I am living a normal life in a normal home one day at a time.

Truly fortunate, but..... Why am I an Alcoholic? Should there not be an Uncle, a Cousin or even a favorite family friend who had a drinking problem. A role model, someone whom I thought had it figured out, was cool. Someone or thing that might have encouraged me to drink. Someone to blame?

We had alcohol in the house, but it was not normally consumed. Our house was not the exception. Our friends and neighbor's homes were the same way. I have no memories of anyone saying *Don't drink alcohol, it's bad*. I knew the law said you had to be twenty-one to buy it. There were people we called *winos* that lived up by the Railroad who, I was told, were alcoholics. It was obvious that being an alcoholic was not something anyone would aspire to be. So why me? Why could I not be like all the attractive men and women I saw in pictures enjoying themselves with an alcoholic beverage at some celebration or sporting event. It would seem everyone is enjoying alcohol, why am I different?

Dr. Silkworth told Bill W., that alcoholism is an allergy. He said the phenomenon of craving is limited to certain people but doesn't occur in the average temperate drinker. My experience with plant allergies like poison oak or ivy got less with continued exposure. The more I was around the plant my tolerance to it or the effect it had on me diminished. The *phenomenon of Craving* as Dr. Silkworth put it, is quite different. I know from my experience; my drinking became worse with exposure. The more I drank the more I wanted. It was a continual escalation of consumption until I was forced to quit. Then after ten years of abstinence I would have thought, I was starting over with a minimal craving, something I could easily control. But no, when I had that *one beer never hurt anyone* I was right back emotionally to where I had been the ten years prior, which had landed me in the hospital. I am incredibly lucky to have survived this second drunken experience. I believe my allergy is caused by my genetic makeup which evolved over my past ancestry and is not something I can change. It is a part of me. A *phenomenon* all right, and of course it does not matter why I am an alcoholic. What matters is that I accept that I am. I know for me, I am living a wonderful life I can continue to enjoy, as long as I don't drink.

I have found this is possible through my continued participation in AA, and I repeat, for that I am truly fortunate.

(4)

DIFFERENT, BUT NOT ALONE

Written by
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Shell Beach, California

A lonely young woman found more similarities than differences in the rooms of A.A.

I felt different from the get-go. I have a vivid memory of my mom, setting me down when I was around four years old, saying she had a sad story to tell me. She told me she had not given birth to me. I had another mother and father who were no longer able to take care of me. She tried her best to explain that my birth mother was a sick alcoholic and had abandoned the family when I was an infant. She also told me I had two older brothers, who remained with my birth father. I told her it was not a sad story, but a happy one, for I knew in my heart that even though I could not actually remember them, I had siblings. I was delighted I was not crazy, and they really did exist! I remember that made my mom cry. Those good people eventually adopted me. Sure, we had our problems like all families do, but even as a child I was grateful they took me in.

I was a happy child, until I left the security of a loving home and started school. I was bullied and made fun of by some other students. Probably no more than other kids were, but I took it especially hard. I felt fearful and deeply lonely. Mostly, I just felt different than everyone. I eventually did make friends with some other misfits, but we often cut class and got into trouble.

My adopted father, even though he had a good heart, drank too much. The first time I heard about Alcoholics Anonymous was when my mom told me my dad had gone to an A.A. meeting, but never went back. I confronted him about his drinking, and he got very defensive. Later when my mother confronted me about my own drinking, I also got defensive.

My first drink was at fourteen-years-old. After a dinner party, my parents left some bottles out. I took a big swig. It burned going down, but my chest expanded with warmth, and the tension in my shoulders dissolved. I lost my shyness and inhibitions. I felt pretty, smart, and funny. My mom finding me in my cups, showed her disapproval and what I perceived to be disgust. She told me I was just like my birth mother. I yelled; I am NOT like her! I am different!

At first, I did not drink every day, but around every six months I would drink into a blackout. The next day I would be shocked by what my friends told me I said and did, but in a perverse way, I kind of liked what I heard. I, who was usually so quiet and ladylike had some depth. Yes, I was different, but at least I was interesting!

I came of age in the early seventies. My idols were those I thought were free spirits who sang about sex, drugs, and rock n' roll. They were rebels, and I wanted to be like them.

I started drinking daily. To avoid the blackouts, I learned to stick with just beer. That worked fine unless I ran out and still wanted more. Then I would drink anything in the house and enter the abyss.

I married for the first time when I was nineteen. My husband was only eighteen. We were both immature and soon found we were not ready to settle down. After we separated, I felt

like a failure and drinking eased the pain. I shared a house with friends. Even though there were other people often around me, I still felt alone.

By my mid-twenties, I was living with a boyfriend who was a drug addict. He would hit me from time to time. He told me it was because I drank too much. My self-esteem was so low, I accepted the beatings. The only thing that gave me relief was more alcohol. It was at this point I started to try to control my drinking, by only having a couple of drinks a night. It was torture. Seldom could I stick to that plan. The drink controlled me.

We had a roommate, who had stopped drinking. I asked her how she did it? She told me she started going to A.A. She gave me a meeting directory. I got so desperate, I finally decided to go to a meeting. Really, I just wanted to keep the boyfriend off my back. My first attempt was not successful. I was so hung over from the previous night, I could not find it. I came home in tears. My boyfriend gave me a sedative and put me to bed. Our roommate came in to talk with me. She told me she knew that I would someday find sobriety because I had a key ingredient, which was an open mind. She said with that, and some honesty and willingness, I would find my way.

The following week I made another attempt to go to the meeting. Sure, our roommate could have driven me there, but this was something I needed to do for myself. This time I found the meeting. I sat in my car in the dark watching as others arrive. Every time the meeting doors opened, and someone went in, I could see the light from inside and hear the laughter. Then the doors would close, with the light and laughter fading. I wondered, what they were laughing at, this is serious business! I finally summoned the courage to go in. It was a women's meeting and when the others found I was new I could almost see them rubbing their palms together in glee. They had a new one!

The speaker that night had around five years of sobriety, which seemed impossible to me. She told a story of how she stood in a middle of a field during a thunderstorm, shaking her fist at God, daring him to come off his throne to help her. That caught my attention. I did not think you could do that and not get struck by lightning! Yes, there was a lot of talk about God, or as some called it "a power greater than myself." I thought, bless their hearts, they believe in God. That was not for me, but I continued to listen. I had a cousin who I loved very much, who died in a tragic car accident. I blamed God. How could a God exist that would let such a thing happen?

To my surprise I liked the meeting. I wanted what the other women had. They had a sense of serenity and peace, but I did not want to quit drinking to get it!

The next night I said my first honest prayer to a God I was not sure existed. I asked for the desire to want to quit drinking for good. My prayer was answered, but not how I expected. The following night I did drink again. Little did I know it would be my last. I was in a car accident. I ran a red light and crashed into another car. My little car flipped over into a power pole. When I came to, I was lying on the floorboard as the ambulance came. The medics told me I had hit a man in another vehicle. I asked how he was, and found, thank God he had minimal injuries. I knew deep down in my soul, that if I were ever to drink again, I would get in another accident, and someone would get killed. I still believe that to this day. Yes, my prayer was answered; I had the desire to never drink again. Fortunately, I knew where to go for help – the rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous. I believe if I had only gone to A.A. I would have eventually drunk again. If I were only in the car accident, I might have quit for one or two months, but eventually I would have picked up. It was a combination of the accident, A.A. meetings, and a loving God, which kept me coming back.

At ten days without a drink, I remember coming home from work and feeling that old restless urge to get drunk. I knew from the meeting directory, that my roommate had given me, there was a meeting starting in ten minutes, just a couple of miles from my apartment. I arrived at a crowded meeting and there was only one seat left. I knew it was just for me. When I sat down, I felt relieved and the tension in my shoulders dissolved. Like what I felt when I took my first drink when I was fourteen.

I had broken my wrist in the accident. As my bones recovered, so did I in the rooms of A.A. I started going to meetings whenever I could. It was the only place I felt okay and where I did not want to drink. Plus, the stories I heard were more entertaining than anything I ever saw on TV! I loved A.A. and all the friends I made. I had not had real friends for so many years.

I heard early on to look for the similarities and not the differences. When I had twenty-nine days of sobriety, I realized the next night was a birthday meeting. If I could make it another twenty-four hours, I could get a thirty-day chip. I started getting the insane idea that I might not really be all that bad. Maybe I could manage it with some self-control. Like that ever worked before. The speaker that night was a burly construction worker, so different from me, a skinny hippy chick. He shared that on that unusually hot spring day after the workday ended, his crew popped some cold ones. He instead drank a nonalcoholic beverage. He said even if there was a magic pill that could make him a nonalcoholic, he would not take it. For he would not trade all that he had gained in A.A. in friendships and peace of mind, for one cold beer that he knew would turn into one hundred. I knew he was speaking the truth. The next night I picked up my thirty-day chip.

When I was newly sober, a couple I met in A.A. would pick me up every week for a meeting. I offered to pay them for gas, but they declined. They told me just do the same for someone else someday. In other words, to pass it on. When I got another car, I started giving rides to meetings to those who needed them. I was nominated as a greeter at my home group, which was good for me because I was so shy. I then became a meeting secretary.

It took me a while to trust someone enough to ask them to be my sponsor. I finally asked someone when I knew I needed help going through the steps. The first time we got together, I went to her house. She had spent the first couple years of her sobriety in England, and over our cups of English tea we got to know each other. She said she felt I had already completed Steps One, Two and Three. I admitted I was powerless from taking the first drink that would lead to another, and another. My life was a mess. I opened the window of my heart just a few inches, and the sunlight of the spirit came flooding in. That is how I came to believe in a Power greater than myself and caught a glimpse of sanity. My sponsor explained that Step Three was merely to decide to continue with the rest of the steps. I was ready and willing to work the Fourth Step. After our meeting, as I was leaving, she told me that on March 29, by the Grace of God, she would be celebrating nine-years of sobriety. It was a beautiful coincidence that I was able to tell her that on March 29 I would be celebrating one year. I was delighted in this sign from my Higher Power that I had picked the right sponsor!

After a while, my boyfriend started giving me a tough time about going to so many meetings. Our roommate had a talk with him and told him if I did not go to the meetings I would drink again, and I would not survive. He backed off and told me to go to as many meetings as I needed. To his credit, he continued to encourage my sobriety, even though he surely knew I would eventually leave him if I remained sober. We did part. Sadly, I do not think he ever recovered from his addictions.

I later met a man at one of my local meetings. We began to date and fell in love. I had still not completed my personal inventory or shared it with another, as the Big Book suggested. I knew I had to finish those vital steps, and the rest of them, before I could seriously commit to another relationship. Love is a great motivator! I completed the steps with my A.A. sponsor and married my sober boyfriend.

I do not know exactly when, but the compulsion to drink was lifted. It may have been around the Fifth Step, when I shared my deep dark secrets with my sponsor. It was easier to admit to God and to myself my shortcomings, but to another human being was more humbling. I did not want to be judged, but I discovered in doing my inventory that I so often judged others. My sponsor kindly shared with me some of her own deep dark secrets, and again I was reassured I was not as different as I thought. I was becoming a part of the human race.

The Sixth and Seventh Steps were hard for me to grasp, until I realized in Step Six I need only to become willing to have my character defects removed, and in Step Seven I had to take the action to ask for help from a Higher Power. I learned that every prayer I ask, needs to be followed by action on my part. Though it is true, we claim spiritual progress, not spiritual perfection, we still strive to do our best.

In completing Step Eight, I became willing to make amends to those I had harmed. Making those amends in Step Nine was liberating. I was able to look the world in the eye. I have experienced tattered relationships healed through the amends process, including those with my first and second husband. My second husband (the sober one) and I shared twenty-four good years together but amicably parted. Still, we stayed dear friends, up until the day he died. We owed that to A.A., the steps and a loving God.

Still, I made mistakes. In early sobriety I made a half-hearted attempt to make an amends to my adoptive parents for all the heart ache I caused them. It was hard for me to admit where I was wrong. After their deaths, I wrote a letter to each of them and told them how grateful I was for them and that I was sorry for my lying and disrespect, but I was especially sorry that I did not tell them this when they were alive. I read my letters to my sponsor, who told me the amends were "perfect," because I did not cast blame on them. I had only looked at where I was at fault. At last, I was relieved of the burden of guilt.

I was on the other end of an amends. My birth mother called me a few years into my sobriety and asked me if I was in A.A. I told her yes, and she told me she had two years sober. She told me she was sorry for abandoning my brothers and me when we were so young. I was able to tell her, being an alcoholic myself, I understood. She later died with 26 years of sobriety. I treasure the friendship we formed through the years. The woman whom I did not want to be anything like, I now aspirer to have many of her fine qualities. I was able to thank both my birth parents for loving me enough to let me stay with my adopted family. It was just meant to be that way.

Later I remarried for the third time. Hmmm, would that be a good time to do another thorough inventory? Yes, it would. My current husband is not in our fellowship, but he encourages my sobriety. A matter of fact, he sometimes suggests I call my sponsor. Ha-ha! In practicing the Tenth Step, I make amends promptly. I still do not like admitting when I am in the wrong, but I would rather swallow my pride to have peace in my house and relationships. One of my greatest blessings was on our wedding day. My older brother, who I was separated from as an infant, was able to walk me down the aisle. My husband and I recently celebrated nine years of a happy marriage.

The Eleventh Step of daily prayer and meditation is one of my favorites. I found that taking the time to connect with my God throughout the day, has made me a calmer and more productive person.

I would say the twelfth step is my all-time favorite, where we carry the message of recovery to another suffering alcoholic. It was the one that kept me coming back when I was new; I had that greeter commitment that I had to show up for or needed to pick someone up to give them a ride to a meeting. It continues to get me out of myself by reaching out to someone else who is looking for recovery. In my third year of sobriety, I started sponsoring others and walking with them through the steps, which is truly the high light of my life.

Through the years I have been involved in my local A.A. Central Office and General Service. I started out as a GSR (General Service Representative), and now serve as a DCM (District Committee Member) here on the Central Coast of California. I am also involved with our Hospitals and Institutions committee and Bridging the Gap. It is an honor to share my recovery with the incarcerated, and I am ever so grateful to leave as a free woman after my visits. I do not say all that to brag. It is what gives me joy.

Music is a big part of my current husband and my life. We have been able to share live music events with our friends, drinkers, and non-drinkers alike. Some of these places are in venues where alcohol is served. Our Big Book tells us in the chapter *Working with Others*, "Assuming we are spiritually fit, we can do all sorts of things alcoholics are not supposed to do . . . So, our rule is not to avoid a place where there is drinking if we have a legitimate reason for being there." I go there for the music and to share it with my friends.

Life as a sober woman has not always been easy. I have lost jobs, gotten divorced and made unwise financial decisions. One of the saddest days of my life was when my adopted mom died, then later my birthmother. A few sponsors have died, including my first who I shared my sobriety date with. Every year on March 29 I think gratefully of her. The hardest loss was my second husband who was also in the fellowship. But I am ever so grateful to have known him. Never having children of my own, I treasure the relationships I continue to have with his children.

As I write this, it has been a couple of years since the beginning of the 2020 Covid pandemic. In-person meetings as I knew them no longer existed. I was fortunate to find an on-line meeting right away, that I still attend most every morning. To me it was a lifeline in some very uncertain times. I am impressed how A.A. has adapted, and it is a joy to see newcomers recover despite adversity.

By the grace of God, I celebrated forty-one years of continuous sobriety this year. I have found that by practicing the A.A. principles in all my affairs, that all my problems can be overcome. I love my life, in and out of the rooms of A.A. All those many years ago, this skinny, broken, lonely hippy chick, fell in love with the fellowship of A.A., and I am still amazed. I have grown up and I do not mind being different, because I have found a place where I am a perfect fit and am no longer lonely.

(5)

NOTHING SHORT OF A MIRACLE

Written by

Mark C.

Cathedral City and Morro Bay, California

This man's Higher Power paid him a twelve-step call.

I grew up in a small town in New Hampshire. My dad worked for the largest employer in the city, and my mom was a stay-at-home mom. Being an only child, my parents had me late after many attempts. I was the center of their universe. So, I was extremely close to my mom from the beginning until her death. My dad, on the other hand, was my nemesis.

They threw lots of parties in which people got very drunk. It was all very 1960s-style, with bright cocktails and handsome, well-dressed people in their 30s and 40s. I was always allowed to be at these parties, learning early how to act like a grownup. It was clear that I was to behave like an adult, which screws up a childhood. So, I had my childhood once I started drinking.

For my parents, this period was the best part of their lives. For me, it was just my childhood and my swearing that I would never be like my dad. Dad drank. Mom only a little and preferred not to.

We moved to Maryland when I was eleven, for which I am incredibly grateful. I didn't know at the time that I was a budding gay boy, and it was good to be away from a small town to a large, liberal metropolitan area. Mom went back to work as a registered nurse. She was magnificent at her job and would help save my life in the future.

I, on the other hand, was just kind of an average kid. I saw no reason to put effort into stuff like school because I could get Cs without studying. I started many projects but stopped for some foolish reason. I loved cars and architecture, but I could never figure out how to pursue those interests. High school was depressing when I shut the door to my room, dreamed about cars, and ultimately suicide.

Figuring out how to get as far away from my dad as possible, I moved to Wyoming for university. I majored in drinking. The first semester I applied myself and got on the honor roll. As my drinking progressed, my grades worsened until I ended the ordeal by quitting after three years. The pattern of quitting before the miracle was firmly entrenched at this point.

My dad got me a job with an airline working at a station. Many days after work, the gang would go to the bar and drink until nighttime. On one particular night, I was so drunk and was going to drive home. One of the guys knew my car wouldn't start without the seatbelt plugged in, so he detached it. As a result, the car wouldn't start. I was angry at the car because I was too drunk to figure out why. That man probably saved my life that night. I got a ride

home from another drunk and promptly threw up all over the side of his car as we were driving down the road. Good times.

During this time, I also led the double life of straight by day, gay by night. I would drive to the big city of Denver to go to the clubs and drink and pick up guys. This life was exhausting, so I finally moved there but shortly after that, I was sick as the result of my drinking.

My folks tried to right the failing ship of my life by buying me a home. I tried to get it together, but it was getting harder and harder. I did manage to keep my job (barely) because I knew that having the job paid for my drinking and partying.

Then, I was introduced to other substances. While I had always been a daily pot smoker, I hadn't done anything else but drink. I liked them both very much. The first introduction was cocaine which I hated. But then I was introduced to something called crystal. Now that hit the spot. I could dance all night long and control my drinking. It was perfect.

What it was perfect at doing was speeding me to the doors of Alcoholics Anonymous because I got to AA at 29. To be clear, I am, first and foremost, always a drunk. Everything else was just a distraction or a way of control.

Life just got messier and messier. I had a big row with my dad and decided to dissolve the business we had built together. Talk about a stupid thing to do. But I did because I was always so resentful toward him and blamed him for all my problems long into sobriety. Alcoholics are like that. I learned in AA that I always have a part in my troubles. The age-old question, "What's the common denominator?"

The disco era was ending, and I was missing out, or so I thought. So, I took a job in Los Angeles to extend the party. But what was really going on was my higher power was slowly and lovingly directing me to where he knew I would hear the message of sobriety. So, there was something in my mind, an intuitive thought that said, "Mark, take this job in LA." And this was against all reasoning.

LA was hard. The job was hard. Living was hard. Everything was expensive. But my higher power had a hand on my back, directing me with kindness from one spiritual experience to the next. I met people who cared about me and showed me a different way, and they were even in AA. I didn't know these experiences were my higher power's twelve-step calls, but that's what they were.

Finally, it was the Friday before gay pride. An acquaintance of mine from the gym and I were talking. I mentioned that I had learned I was an alcoholic from an information meeting I had attended a few weeks earlier. They had asked me to stop drinking, but I could not. He listened and then said, "Why don't you go out for the weekend, and if you want to get sober, there is a meeting on Monday at 6 PM?"

From that moment, I knew I would follow his instructions to the letter. The disease of alcoholism was lifted from me that Friday because I drank all weekend and could not get drunk. I was stone-cold sober even while drinking alcohol.

That Monday evening, I walked down the hill to the meeting. It was a small room packed with people. I got a seat and knew little of what was happening, except they told

me to go to a meeting the following day at 7:30 AM and then return the next evening for this meeting. That was 37 years ago, and I have not found it necessary to take a drink since.

The fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous embraced me with open arms. And, for the first time in my life, I followed the directions to be sober which showed me that when the stakes are high enough, I will follow through, unlike so many things I had quit before sobriety.

And the stakes were high enough. I was going to die. I was suicidal. They say you have to get sober for yourself, and I agree with that; however, I also got sober because I wanted to stop hurting my parents. I knew that if I died after all the emotions and work, they had gone through to have a child, I would destroy the rest of their lives on the planet. And it was only through working the steps, particularly step nine, would I learn just how much I had hurt them.

So, I dived into AA with both feet. I followed the simple suggestions from the fellowship: go to a meeting every day, get two commitments, get a sponsor, buy a book, and put your hand out to another alcoholic because they said if I had two days sober and the guy sitting next to me had one, then I had something to give back. So, I have something to give back immediately upon entering the doors of AA.

What was also happening when I got sober was the AIDS crisis was becoming large. It affected our fellowship immensely. There's no way to describe watching the fellowship die each week. 100s, if not 1,000s, of sober members of Alcoholics Anonymous dying before our eyes and sober. It was a very fearful and most memorable time of my sobriety.

There was so much I didn't understand about Alcoholics Anonymous. I loved the book, but it didn't make much sense. The 12 and 12 only confused the issue. So, finally, one day, my sponsor handed me the Joe and Charlie tapes. Like a real alcoholic, I ran with them. I had to take a trip to see my folks and drive a car back. I took the tapes and put a small Big Book on the steering wheel. Set the cruise control at 80 mph. And learned the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous. If I hadn't done that, I probably would not have stayed sober. Once again, the hand of God was gently pushing my back, going, "Here, Mark. Learn this. It will help you."

Learning to grow up in AA took a lot of time. They say you have to do everything sober that you did drunk, and I tend to agree to a point. All I know is that I did a lot of stupid things. I did a geographic. I did another. I still hurt my parents occasionally but not to the degree I had before. I still sometimes hung out with shady characters. But I didn't drink and never walked away from Alcoholics Anonymous.

At about eleven years sober, I came down with AIDS. My parents moved to where I lived to care for me; if they had not been around, I would have died. I was sick for three years until the medications came out. Members of AA came to see me each weekend. I came close to death six times and was on sedatives for pain. Not a good combination for a head full of AA. But I had a foundation from the instruction the fellowship had given me, and I followed from the beginning. So, when I was not well enough to go to a meeting for three years, I still knew how to stay sober.

One night in the hospital, I thought I was going to die. I was pretty scared and told my doctor, who happened to stop by to see me. He knelt and asked me what I envisioned death

as. I told him, and he said, "Then, what's there to be fearful of." I let go of my fear of death at that moment, and shortly the medications arrived, and I got well.

The next order of business in my life was to switch roles and ensure my parents were cared for. I had an enormous resentment still about my dad. One night I was listening to the Joe and Charlie tapes on Step four. One of them told the story about how he had a resentment toward a parent that he couldn't get rid of. He was at a meeting with Alabam Caruthers as the speaker. He went up to her, and she directed him to the story entitled "Freedom from Bondage" in the Big Book. Since I knew the story he was telling, I burst into tears and cried for an hour. After that, I knew what I had to do. That night, I got down on my knees and prayed for my dad that he may have everything I wanted for my life. I prayed for his happiness, his health, and his prosperity.

Unlike in the story, it took six months for the obsession and resentment to be removed. But, when the resentment was gone, we had a good time for the last three and half years of his life. During the time I was sick, he taught me baseball. I watched baseball on TV but didn't understand it. Once I was well and over my resentment, we went to baseball games all the time. The night he died in ICU, I sat at his bedside watching the monitor flatline, and I said to him, "Thank you, daddy. I love you." That is the gift of Alcoholics Anonymous.

The next gift from Alcoholics Anonymous came in the order of travels with mom. I took my mom around the United States for five years in an RV. We traveled most of the country, and I attended many meetings in many different places. When I announced that I was heading to a meeting, my mother used to look, "Oh, thank God."

It was a marvelous time and another demonstration of "living amends." I was able to be responsible and take care of her for the last fourteen years of her life. While I didn't do it perfectly, I don't have any regrets. So few get an opportunity like that, only because of AA and sobriety.

Going to meetings around the country taught me the value of humility and keeping my mouth shut when I saw something wasn't the way "we" did it back home. I had to walk through the fear of not being accepted in groups outside my realm. I learned that the meeting schedule may not always be correct, and there was no meeting. Then, I knew I had to rely on God directly. But, most times, the meeting was there, and the comfort and sigh that came from my body upon sitting down for an hour with my kin was a gift I wish everyone could have.

My mom died six years ago, leaving me with me. A me that had never seen the light of day. My commitment was that I do not die before my parents happened. I am so grateful for that, and it all started with walking through the door of that very first packed, hot room on a Monday evening.

Over the years, I noticed older members come less often to AA. They seem to be doing just fine. This is different from my experience because I continue to need and want to attend meetings. I need to hear the message. I need to sit in a chair, sighing and thanking God I made it to the meeting.

AA is nothing short of a miracle. Millions of alcoholics have died from the disease of alcoholism since man first crushed grapes. Then in 1935, two men got together, and the first AA meeting occurred though they didn't know it at the time. From that single connection in Henrietta Seiberling's home in Akron, Ohio, one hand touched another until I walked in the door of AA on that Monday evening, and I reached out to the next hand, and it continues. We are all connected here in Alcoholics Anonymous. We have a singleness of purpose where we precisely recover from a seemingly hopeless state of mind and body.

My name is Mark, and I am an alcoholic. And, but for the grace of God and the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous and the program of Alcoholics Anonymous, I have been able to stay sober one day at a time. I have not quit drinking. No, I surrendered to the disease of alcoholism by walking in the doors of AA and having someone say it's all going to be okay as long as you stay sober. And, it has been such. It has all been okay since that Monday evening so many years ago.

PART II

*Other Districts and International
Stories written by members outside of
Area 93 District 22*

(1)

EARTH SCHOOL

Written by
Ralph P.
Germantown, Maryland

This promising but unlucky young writer nearly lost it all until he found a new way of living with a higher power and learned his greatest fortune was giving to others what was so freely given to him.

“*Y*ou have to be the unluckiest person in the world!”

My boss was calling me a liar because I couldn't make it to work. It wasn't the first time. However, I thought this occurrence was different. Someone really did kick open my door. I was looking at the busted lock and splintered wood. But I neglected to mention one important fact. I was the one who had kicked open my door the night before.

I was drunk, didn't have my keys, and kicked it open, then promptly passed out. I lied to avoid the consequences, and got angry when my boss didn't believe me. Yes, the door needed to be fixed, but I was the one who needed to be repaired. I was broken.

I was born in Washington, DC, aka the Chocolate City because of its predominately African-American population. The U Street corridor was broken too. Several months had passed since the 1968 riots. The once thriving mecca took decades to be put back together. But the community found its way.

My childhood was much like DC after the riots. But there wasn't any bright yellow tape wrapped around the family home with a stark warning: *Caution!* No one really knew about the trouble inside. And we didn't share our business.

Don't get me wrong. My parents provided. The eldest of three boys, my mother called us her three 'suns'. She believed we each had our own special light, but my mom also drank to black out when she wasn't teaching. And my father, a gifted architect, suffered from depression and had rage issues.

Every day wasn't always traumatic. There was love and periods of levity. Yet, I never knew what to expect at home. It was dysfunctional gumbo. A bit of everything.

Outside of the home, there was a mix of everything too. I went to private school, played instruments, and traveled a lot. I was naturally curious with a vivid imagination. And I was voracious reader and breathed stories.

As I grew into adolescence, I relied on my intellect. I was a resilient albeit chubby kid with a defiant streak. My mom and I would always knock heads. She'd threaten me with a shoe if I didn't behave. I would react. *Go get the shoe!* I got the shoe alright. And anything else handy to discipline me. Physical beatings were common yet ineffective. A temporary solution. I'd forget about the pain and misbehave again. It seemed much easier than changing my behavior. I realize now, my mom and I were more alike than different. We were both stubborn.

I harnessed my tenacity in high school, cultivating my gifts. At fifteen, I auditioned and was employed as a host and radio scriptwriter for a non-profit broadcast network, which

produced radio programs for youth by youth. I participated in debate tournaments and played Hamlet at a locally televised Shakespearean festival. Indeed, the world was my stage. I performed well in front of people but didn't enjoy being with people. To the outside world I looked put together. But inside, I was a mess.

When I was accepted into Hamilton College, a 'little Ivy' in Upstate New York, I told my parents *there's something wrong with me*. I knew it and I hadn't had my first drink yet.

In the fall, I stepped onto the sprawling campus nestled at the foothills of the Adirondacks and quickly realized I was no longer in the Chocolate City! I was a black student living on a mostly white campus. I became a curiosity in this new setting.

My classmates either peppered me with cultural questions or avoided me because of my race. I was a fish dumped into an unfamiliar ocean. I didn't know whether to swim with the current or against it. Paralyzing fear. All the coping tools I used before; they didn't work.

So, when I had my first drunk one night, trying to fit in, all the anxious apartness disappeared. Alcohol was doing for me, what I couldn't do for myself. The physical allergy was triggered. And by the end of the first year, my classmates told me, maybe I shouldn't drink so much. But alcohol was my emotional thermostat. Too hot? Too cold? I would drink more, and the temperature in the room changed right along with me. I enjoyed drinking and its effects.

And among the heavy drinkers, I was one of the heaviest. Through the semesters, my personality started to change. I grew up not wanting to be like my mother, but I was acting like her. I tried to stop, but college was an open bar with classrooms. The temptation was too great.

My work in my academic concentration, creative writing, didn't seem to suffer though. I did well but I never had a chance to thrive. And for those courses outside my major, I picked the ones with a lot of writing assignments so I could get drunk like I wanted. Then, I would dash off something before deadline. I thought I was "managing" but ended up at the bottom of the graduating class. Only two others had a lower GPA. Showoffs!

But I graduated and landed a job, which came with a nice paycheck. Too nice for a young drunk like me. I still lived at home, paying no rent. All my money went to drinking and other illicit substances. I was earning a new degree. Misery on the installment plan.

After a little more than a year, I lost the good paying job because I couldn't stop drinking. I got kicked out of the house and found myself briefly homeless in Atlantic City before being introduced to another twelve-step recovery program. But I didn't work the steps or use a sponsor. After nine months, I relapsed.

I returned to DC without a dime and wound up being charged with assault after a drunken and drug-fueled night where I just wanted more. My parents had enough. They shut me out after bailing me out and paying for a lawyer.

How could this happen to a nice guy like me?

My former classmates were establishing careers and starting families. I was making routine trips downtown to give urine samples awaiting my trial. I was full of anger and mired in self-pity. Eventually the charges were dropped. The victim was a wanted man in another state. I deeply regretted my actions, and I didn't want to return to the madness.

I cleaned up, but I didn't know how to be sober.

I was abstinent for the most part, and landed a great job because of my communication skills, which eventually blossomed into a career. And I met a woman who partied liked me and didn't think I had a drinking problem. Even better. Or so I thought. We moved into an

apartment, then found a townhouse in Maryland close to DC. We were renting, but it was our starter home.

I moderated my drinking. Circumstances improved. I wasn't out on the streets. I took on greater work responsibilities, and on the side, I continued to write screenplays, hoping to catch a break with a film studio. I was twenty-eight years old. The damage done so far was repairable.

My girlfriend and I were adulting nicely to the outside world. We were happy until the climate inside the home changed. Our drinking did not help. My girlfriend had a good heart, but had her own demons. We argued a lot and drank a lot, mostly on weekends. The dysfunctional gumbo from my childhood repeated in my adulthood. We were two sick people without tools. We couldn't maintain a happy home, but it was our unhappiness.

I do not know if we were in love, but we did love each other. So, when my girlfriend was diagnosed with breast cancer, we got married because my medical insurance could provide the necessary treatments. It was grueling for her. I did my best. It wasn't very good. I would drink at night when she slept. Drinking helped me cope but provided no peace.

The one source of joy, my creative writing, was inconsistent. I was a great starter but poor finisher.

And my drinking on weekends began to include workdays too. It impacted my work performance. Co-workers and managers took notice. Especially after I had called my boss and lied about kicking open my own front door after fleeing from the scene of a traffic accident. I became the "unluckiest person in the world" after I lied about what had happened. But it wasn't my luck that was problematic. I was the problem. With or without alcohol in my system, I lied all the time. Anything to avoid consequences.

But some things can't be avoided. My employer intervened. And instead of termination, management decided the best thing for me to do was sit in my office and do nothing. They didn't want to fire me. But sitting in the office, I convinced myself without any alcohol in my system, I was not appreciated, and quit. My manager looked at me with utter disbelief, but she accepted my resignation. I went home and got drunk, full of resentment.

I bounced around from employer to employer for a few dismal years. Without steady income, my fear and unhappiness festered. I didn't share my troubles with my wife unless we were drinking together. Then drunk, I would blame her for our circumstances. I was unwilling to take a look at the real problem, which was staring at me in the mirror. All I looked for was the next drink and another job to provide long-term employment.

Finally, my communication skills opened another door for me, and I found a good job, which came with nice benefits. And another big break came my way as a writer. I worked very hard, but it didn't happen. The project fizzled. I had creative talent, but talent wasn't enough. I couldn't see how drinking shattered my opportunities to grow as an artist. It also prevented me from being present for my family. I had one good friend, a drinking buddy, but even his girlfriend watched me drink and said, "your friend is an alcoholic."

But I wasn't ready to accept that I was an alcoholic. My life had been quite unmanageable, sure. But I seemed to manage it back together. I had stopped the illicit substances, relied more on wine and beer, drinking hard liquor mostly on the weekends. I still had a home, a wife, and only a few brushes with police. But there were emotional and physical side effects. Constant dread, bouts of depression, my elevated liver enzymes, and I was very overweight. Drinking was taking its toll on me.

Then, in 2006, my father died of a massive heart attack. He'd been ailing for a decade after a severe stroke. My mom and my brothers helped, but I wasn't present. Now he was gone. I never got to say goodbye. I medicated myself with alcohol but couldn't heal from the pain.

A year after my father's death, I totaled my car. I drank and drove all the time, but this was my first DUI arrest. Thankfully, I didn't kill anyone.

Soon after, I lost my job, and drank my sizeable severance and extended unemployment benefits away. Unlike liquor stores, misery is always open for business. Dependent on alcohol now, if I didn't drink at night, I didn't sleep much.

It had been a few years since I was working consistently. My wife did her best. My drinking habit was expensive. And we were behind on rent. I probably would have perished on the streets but rationalized I didn't want my wife to be homeless. Honestly, I really needed a steady income to drink more.

I cleaned up again and was hired in a part-time position. It was a temporary gig but enough to pay bills and drink.

Then, on a chilly Friday night, I came home after work. I was thirsty. I wasn't going to drink too much but the alcohol didn't last. It never did. I made a quick run for more. Lights and sirens came next. Charged with my second DUI.

Just my luck. My employer had recently offered to extend my contract. I hired a lawyer. He suggested going to a weekend intervention program. It may help reduce jail time. I perused the calendar. All the weekends were wide open leading up to the court date, but I picked the last possible slot so I could drink over the next few months.

Eventually, the evening before checking into the weekend intervention program had arrived. I had my last cheap six pack and a tall-boy beer then went to sleep. I had no plan to stop drinking. I only had to not drink for three days.

On June 7, 2013, I checked myself into the program outside of Baltimore. I couldn't leave the grounds.

The following morning, I went to the balcony. On the sidewalk outside, there was a family going to Temple. Free as they please. It had come to this. I was a forty-four-year-old man with all the education and advantages growing up. But my opportunities were wasted because I was usually wasted.

Later that day, I watched a video about a drunk driver. He didn't kill but horribly disfigured a beautiful young woman in an accident. That was me! I drove in blackouts. I just hadn't killed or maimed anyone yet.

Before I left, the counselors suggested going to a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. When my wife picked me up, she asked, did I want to go to the liquor store? She knew the deal. But I said, "I want to go to an AA meeting."

A couple of hours later, I walked into an AA meeting at Grace Methodist Church. I hadn't had a drink in almost three days and felt lower than a footprint, utterly hopeless.

Finally, I was broken.

During the meeting, a man nicknamed 'Brown Water' George, gave me a book with a shiny cover sleeve entitled *Alcoholics Anonymous*. A gift. I felt welcomed. The next day, I came back. And the day after, I came back.

On the night before my court date, I went to a speaker meeting. A man shared his story calling himself an eleven-time DWI loser, but he had found AA, and wasn't drinking anymore.

I wasn't great at math, but I knew eleven was more than two. I asked him to be my sponsor. He told me to call him the next day. I said, "I will try but I have court in the morning, and I may be going to jail." He told me to call him anyway. Later he would say, he knew I wasn't going to jail. And he was right.

I received my second probation before judgement (PBJ), with no slips to sign, unsupervised. After my first PBJ, I got drunk to 'celebrate.' This time, I called my sponsor. He's been my sponsor ever since.

The first few weeks were rough. The physical withdrawal from alcohol was terribly uncomfortable. Sleepless nights, vivid drinking dreams and wild mood swings. I wondered if my favorite beer and wine store missed me. (I didn't venture inside to find out, thankfully!) But each day, there was more hope. Waking up instead of coming to; the garbage can was free of liquor and beer bottles; I smelled better, and oh, I had my first sober belly laugh. Not a regular laugh but a hearty belly laugh, tears streaming down my face.

There were more tears in the early days. Not always happy tears. The rocky marriage. The cavern of debt. The adverse health issues. Even the mundane, everyday life situations seemed daunting without alcohol. But as I showed up, I opened up. I kept coming, and I stayed.

I put down the sledgehammer and learned how to use new spiritual tools, which were the steps of the program. Working with my sponsor, I received practical guidance how to live without a drink. Little by little, I listened and began to trust. I'd complain. He'd listen, then share his experience and make me laugh. Even when I didn't find anything funny.

I learned from my sponsor and his sponsor. They spent a lot of time with me sharing their practical wisdom:

I may feel hopeless, but I am not helpless. Mood follows action. I'm only responsible for the effort not the outcome. Expect nothing, appreciate everything.

Spiritual growth did not happen overnight. I would get frustrated at my lack of progress. My sponsor would remind me, "we come here in a million pieces, on a conveyor belt. It takes time to be put back together. We have to be forged." He did not ask me what I was thinking; he asked me what I was doing.

I took a service commitment as a greeter. Seven o'clock *in the morning!* Roaches and hangovers don't like light. Mornings were the worst before I stopped drinking. But now sober, I showed up even if it was a bad day. I was learning by doing. Getting out of self by helping others. I was becoming well.

Unfortunately, in my second year of sobriety, my wife didn't want any part of this new way of life. She had lost her drinking partner. I made direct amends to her but she was still drinking and using. I had to make a choice and I chose AA.

Through the separation and divorce, I relied on program, service, and prayer!

I grew up without a God of my understanding. My father was an atheist and while my mom believed, she never made me attend church. I remembered the first time I prayed early in my AA journey; it was like an awkward first date with God. I told God who I was and said, "I don't know who You are but just don't stick me with the bill."

My prayers evolved. I learned to keep it simple. In the morning I would ask, please keep me sober today, and at night, say thank you for keeping me sober. It worked. One day at a time, I stayed sober and my relationship with my higher power began to deepen. Not between my ears, but within my heart.

I remember I received a card from my mother after I had made amends to her. She noted with happiness, the most important thing I did with my life was getting a higher power. My mom was right. She got sober a year after I did, then was diagnosed with colon cancer. She put up a great fight without drinking. I helped care for her along with my brothers and was there when she passed away. Her sponsor delivered the eulogy. Her three “sunz” still feel her presence (and my father’s presence), and we see their light often.

Cultivating my connection with the Spirit of the Universe through prayer and meditation has brought peace within myself and peace with others including my two brothers. They attended a recent open meeting celebration online. It was a very special day to have them see how this program works.

There are still difficult times, but I let go more easily and I lean in more to the good stuff, which includes working with others, guiding them through the steps. I enjoy working with my sponsees. They are often my best teachers.

Since I got sober more than nine years ago with the help of AA, I have the same job and I’m also a freelance writer and lend my voice on audiobooks. I’m also a pretty good baker.

Yep, thanks to AA, I learned how to bake. I was looking for service to get outside of myself during a low spot in sobriety. I thought about baking but didn’t know where to begin. I asked an AA member. She gave me a simple recipe. A few baking disasters later, the results improved, and I’ve been baking for AA members, friends and family ever since. I’m useful and happy. Baking mimics my journey through the steps. If I follow the recipe (the twelve steps) I get better results.

During the pandemic, I’ve visited treatment centers and I’ve “traveled” to different states and countries online and have a service position at an online meeting based in California even though I live in Maryland. I work with newcomers virtually (as well as in person), sharing my experience, strength, and hope. Our message carries to other alcoholics beyond brick-and-mortar meetings. Within our program and fellowship, we find a way.

Come join us!

I’m not the same person when I first started my journey in Alcoholics Anonymous. I’m not broken. I’m not unlucky. I’m sober and my spirit is lifted by working with others.

Every single day is an opportunity to learn, to care more about others than myself, and to thrive in this big, blue-marbled classroom, which I call *Earth School*. I’m grateful to be marked present for this amazing gift.

(2)

AM I BEING HEARD?

Written by
Francine M.
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In recovery, this woman started finding the answers of who she really was; She found her voice, spoke her truth, and felt heard.

“You are to be seen and not heard.” I have heard these words echoing in my ear most of my life. Yes, that was also what it was like for many years of my drinking. From my first drink as a young child to my first year in Alcoholics Anonymous.

My father’s had his say to what college I was to attend, choosing my career path, would not let me work, and set the amount of my allowance. He died in a car accident when I was 20 years old, weeks before he was to attend his first AA meeting. I often wonder what our relationship would have been like if my father had been a part of our fellowship.

In the fall one year, when I was a child, my father took me for a ride in the country to get some “cider.” He didn’t tell me it was fermented. I loved the taste and “fell asleep” (what I now know as blackout) and found myself waking up as we pulled in our driveway. I found myself going to the grocery store, buying cider, anxious to get home to drink the cider. To my surprise it was not like father’s cider (fermented).

Those “trips” continued until I went to college where I lived in the dorm, and I started my drinking career.

In my first year of college, a relative asked if I would spend some time with a friend who was grieving and needed companionship. I spent time with that friend of the family, he was 80 years old, and I was 18 years old. I looked forward to our Wednesday nights not for our time together, only for how many drinks I could gulp down while listening to him talk about his dead wife. I learned how to control and manipulate him to get my drinks. It worked so well I continued to do the same with men most of my drinking career. In the back of my mind, I was using men to get even with my father for all the harm he caused me on our trips.

One of many Friday nights, drinking at a fraternity party, I remember waking up at a fraternity house across the state. Fortunately, I arrived back to my dorm at the end of the weekend. That was the start of my blackout and periodic drinking. I did not like the taste of alcohol. What I did like was the effect.

Marriage was the thing to do way back in the day. I got married in my second year of college. My first husband and I drank although we mostly had separate lives. There were times when we would attend the local social club together. Looking back, I remember sitting at the table with friends and watch them drink.

When they would get up to dance, I would drink what was left in their glasses. I never had a glass of alcohol in front of me. I would always gulp down my drink and push my glasses away from me to tell myself – “This is ok, I don’t drink every day.”

After 16 years of marriage, I was tired of *his* drinking and behavior. I divorced him and I took our two sons and moved out of state. Life continued to change for the worse. Alcohol

distorted the way I was brought up. I had to re-parent myself but didn't really know how. After settling into my new house and new job, the drinking continued every weekend. I did not find this a problem. How was that harmful to my sons. After all my mom lived with us and was there in case there was an issue with my sons.

My drinking and unacceptable behavior continued. I was blind to the problems that were to surface. My sons moved out when they became of age. I did not see that coming as I was so focused on my drinking. After all, I was a responsible mom. The boys had a roof over their head, didn't go hungry and had plenty of clothes to wear. What was the problem? I was clueless.

A few years later I met my second husband at a bar where he worked as a bartender.

I remember sitting at the u-shaped bar looking at the couple sitting across from me and feeling sorry for them having to be there every night drinking.

It wasn't long before I fell in lust and chose to get married to that bartender in my living room with two bar regulars as our witnesses.

About 4 months into our marriage and more drinking no solution came. Maybe a honeymoon is what is missing. Our solution was to take a trip out of town. As we were sitting at the hotel bar drinking, no solution came.

The consequences of our drinking caused my husband to be removed from the hotel because he tried to throw me out of the 9th story of the hotel. He was put on a plane for home. I was in the concierge's office to "process the paperwork" and there was no mention of my drinking. It was not until '*years*' later when I was doing my 4th and 5th step again, I was rigorously honest about my drinking that weekend.

I checked out of the hotel and walked miles to get to my relative's house only to be embarrassed by the look on my families faces seeing my face full of bruises from the scuffle. Nothing was said. I stayed a couple of days until the bruises started to heal and I flew home to face my teenage son who was still living at home.

How to explain the weekend venture, resulted in a drunken mess? This was the second man to abuse me. "I remembered you are to be seen and not heard." After all my mom didn't speak up when she was verbally abused, why should I?

When returning home, my husband was in outpatient treatment. The administrator of the facility, who was a friend of ours, sent me to the Al-Anon outpatient. One night I had been drinking in the meeting. After the meeting a guy came up to me and asked me if I was an alcoholic. My response was, "No, not today." As a result, the next morning the administrator called me at work to stop by his office. The conversation did not start out well as there was a complaint made the night before about my behavior. I knew what was coming.

I had heard about the 20 questions pamphlet when I was visiting the outpatient family meeting with my husband. Being cocky I said I know all about the 20 questions - I am, not an alcoholic. By the time I left his office I was on my way to my first AA meeting to acknowledge I was an alcoholic. That first meeting I felt shame and guilt and kept looking down not wanting to face the women I knew in the meeting.

AA was quite different visiting, than "joining" Alcoholics Anonymous.

Looking back over my 39 years of sobriety, life in the first 3 years of sobriety was not easy. I remembered what I was told by my mother "You are to be seen and not heard." There were so many changes that were happening. I was struggling and didn't know how or when to speak up.

I asked myself, am I real alcoholic? Visiting AA I heard about daily drinking, losing jobs, getting DUI, going to jail and losing everything. Now a member of AA. Was I a daily drinker and in denial? A periodic binge drinker? Thanks to AA for sponsors, the 12 steps and meetings, through which I started finding answers.

I heard someone say, "The answers will come if your house is in order."

I also heard 90 meetings in 90 days. One meeting a day for 90 days, not jam all 90 in one week.

When they ask for newcomers, you stand up, say your name, you're an alcoholic. Then you sit down and shut up. You are to listen.

When I had three months of sobriety I was asked to share. Not knowing what or how to share I went up to the podium and shared some intimate details.

I was not aware such details are only to be shared with a sponsor. As it happens, my husband's best friend was sitting in the meeting. He carried my message to my husband. This could have been avoided.

That was another struggle in the first year, getting and keeping a sponsor. In the first two months of sobriety, my first sponsor picked me and told me to work the steps. I'll never forget the humiliation sitting in a coffee shop reading my 5th step. As I kept going to meetings, I found out it was okay to change sponsors. I asked several women and one who had 30 years at the time said I was too crazy for her to handle. I kept asking until a woman agreed to take me on. I was told I could share anything that was on my mind. That didn't work well either. Since she said I could talk to her about anything, I mentioned her husband was making passes at me. She fired me just before my anniversary.

I made it through my first year as I kept coming back to my home group. They presented me with a cake with marbles on top. Thinking I was special I accepted my cake. My pride was smashed when someone whispered in my ear, you have lost your marbles.

Coming out of the fog from the first year, the second year was the most difficult and the most memorable and lifesaving for me. After 3 sponsors in my first year, my second year I found the sponsor that was compatible. She had unconditional love and there was something about her that made me feel safe. She gently guided me to focus on my drinking and my behavior, to let go of focusing on my husband's drinking.

She told me to go to a different meeting everyday: open meeting, closed meeting, ticket meeting, speaker meeting, big book study, 12 x 12 study, and a meditation meeting. When they went around the room, I was to stand up say my name and identify as an alcoholic, sit down and shut up. About three weeks later I called my sponsor complaining. I have gone to each one of the meetings three weeks in a row and I think they know who I am by now.

Pausing, said, yes, they know who you are, but YOU DON'T.

She helped me recognize I was a periodic drinker who blacked out when I drank, caused me to struggle and not identify with other alcoholics in AA meetings. I shared with her I didn't have the physical craving every day although I was focused on the mental obsession to drink. I was being careful to put on a facade for my family and friends. One day she asked me if I could stay stopped. Bingo, that was the turning point for me.

Step 3 says, made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*. God sent me to AA to punish me. I did not recognize the spiritual malady, for example the negative emotions that caused me shame, gluttony and false pride. These became a struggle as I believed in a punishing god. I learned to accept what I understood God to be and I now understand "GOD."

I became willing to sit down with my sponsor and discuss the whys and how of Steps 4 and 5. These steps were talking about the NATURE of our wrongs, not the wrongs themselves. After reading the 5th step to her, the relief of the heavy burden that was lifted from the hoarding of traumas and binge drinking in dark places, I was free.

The freedom was changing the shame, and guilt of my drinking past to acceptance of myself, other people, places and things. I learned a valuable lesson in acceptance of myself that day. I felt equal to others, at peace with myself and closer to God. I started to feel and experience God leading me when I let Him. I took the action of owning my moral wrongdoings while drinking. This was the beginning of my spiritual housecleaning. The spiritual housecleaning taught me to use things and love people instead.

Being very thorough looking over my defects of character, I took a deeper look at gluttony. I had to look at wanting and taking too much: food, sex, time, money, comfort, leisure, material possessions, attention, and security. I had acquired things: material things, relationships, attention at the expense of others. To me, the material things were related to the time I spent on how much liquor I could acquire and consume while I was sitting at the bar or table with my drinking partner who paid the bill. I recognized I had to control something, and the situation got out of control. There are images of my character defects I will never forget. So far, I have reevaluated the food, time, money, and possessions. No problems with sex, I'm a widow! Working on the other aspects of gluttony and other character defects taking time which I am using wisely.

One day reading the steps in the chapter How It Works, I noticed the words, moral inventory, in Step 4 and personal inventory in Step 10. It was an aha moment for me. Step 10 became for me, most important. Today I focus on my daily personal inventory as a sober woman. This step allows me to speak up and admit my wrongs. This new habit gave me the opportunity to do service work as: coffee maker, set up chairs, answer phones, 12 step calls, treasurer of my home group, being a sponsor, H & I Rep, sitting with a member before or after meetings, going for coffee, speaking when asked, intergroup rep, chairing a Grapevine book study on zoom, and writing an article for the intergroup newsletter.

As I approach and continue to work at each one of these volunteer positions, I know God puts me there. Each volunteer position in some way, presents a character defect that needs attention. I remember complaining about the uncomfortable chairs (more comfortable than a bar stool) or when someone asked me to speak at a meeting (saying to God "Why me?")

Being self-centered, I had to face, what harm I had done to others. Being a blackout drinker there were many drinking episodes I could not remember. What I worked on was my drinking behavior before the blackout and when I came out of the blackout. My sponsor and I came up with several reasons why I did cause harm to my children.

Getting real and honest I also had to look at my behavior toward men. Resentments from my past gave me an excuse to deliberately cause harm to the men I chose to drink with. Working on Steps 8 & 9 I have the opportunity to be brutally honest with myself as I see the character defect blaring in my face. Not a pretty sight. My sponsor reminds me Step Four is not like Step Ten. Thank God!!!

One time I remember grumbling to my sponsor about who cares if I had two bad drinking marriages because of the choices I made. She replied, "Someday you will be sharing those experiences and give hope to other women." I do share my experiences with other women; many experiences from my life on the difference of being in healthy relationship verses an unhealthy relationship.

That someday came. Yes, a healthy relationship with my late husband. It was a gift given to me by God. We met at meetings, and he asked me to help him start a meeting. Shy me said with a pause (in a whisper), OK. That was the start of our relationship. We became soulmates and experienced a memorable and fruitful married life. Every Wednesday we attended that meeting. That was our meeting until he wasn't able to attend, Cancer took his life over 25 years ago and I still miss his touch.

Over the years I have made some lifelong friends in AA.

Recently I participated in our intergroup anniversary and ran into a dear friend. We reminisced about the service experience we shared at our intergroup 43rd anniversary. I was scared to ask her to volunteer with me and she was afraid I was going to ask her. We laughed and I walked away from my lifelong friend with much gratitude in my heart.

I bumped into another dear friend as I was walking back to my seat. I recalled being at a meeting one night, I was grieving my late husband. My friend came over to give me a hug. I started to cry, and he held me until I stopped sobbing. I then realized I missed my husband and grateful my friend took the time to comfort me.

There are other ways I have been encouraged to continue to work my program and not take a drink one day at a time. My motivation is wanting what my sponsor has, a new freedom and a new happiness. I also have had the privilege to hear years of stories in meetings and in other sources. To continue to stay sober, I must work this program daily and not take anything for granted.

Relationships with family does not come easy and most of my sober life I have not had the opportunity to spend with family. When the time was right, I visited my two sons and made amends to them. My younger son, his wife and children eventually chose to move near me. My son said to me I want to get to know my mom. They lived with me a few months until they found their home. He and his wife observed the sober behavior and action of Mom. Soon after he and his wife quit drinking.

As we spend time together, we continue to improve our relationship. One day he stopped by and to my surprise he came to make his amends to me. How can family relationships get any better?

The key word for me is "continue." Reviewing my sobriety of 39 years I recognize the many changes in my mind, body, and spirit.

I used to attach myself to my thoughts. They were not real. Looking at my mind today, I am no longer in blackouts and no more – "not being heard."

I am grateful it was suggested when I first started coming to AA that I get a physical exam. I have carried out that suggestion every year of my sober life.

The spirit part took some work to understand and have an open mind. They say practice makes perfect. The strong connection with God started in my third month of sobriety. I was sitting in a meeting wanting to drink. The lady sitting behind me asked me how I was doing, I said fine. I just want a drink. She suggested I ask God to remove the compulsion to drink. Not believing her I went home frustrated. I gave in and did what she suggested. To my surprise it worked!!

I have developed a strong connection with God. I recognize when He is working miracles in my life. I speak with Him throughout the day and thank Him. I know I am being heard.

Reflecting on my many areas of service work, I am grateful for my service oriented homegroup. I was and am given many opportunities to be heard. I am also grateful for all the support and encouragement from others in the program.

Overall, the self-centered, self-seeking, dishonest and judgement has shifted to love, patience, and courage. Sobriety gives me back the very part of myself that I lost from my drinking days.

As a responsible alcoholic, the more I give what has been given to me. I am blessed beyond words. What I do give the most is my time. The many hours with my sponsor, sponsees, program people and friends are well spent. They help me stay sober and work through the daily challenges. It's priceless.

THE BOTTOM LINE

I now believe I have what my sponsor of 40 some years has, a new freedom and a new happiness. Memories of todays and yesterdays, is, a reflection of myself.

And so it goes, one day at a time, as I speak my truth.

(3)

A LIFELONG JOURNEY

Written by

Gloria B.

District Heights, Maryland

Learning to forgive others and herself, set this woman free.

*M*y mother gave me my first drink of alcohol, which was a can of Black Label beer when I was about 12 years old. My parents split up around that time and I was the eldest of six children, which made me an instant mother.

I will never forget the day they separated. My sister and I were on our way to a Five and Dime store in our neighborhood, when my mother's boyfriend picked us up and he noticed our dad behind him. He told us to hide, and we did. He dropped us off and our dad immediately came into the store and asked us why we were hiding in the truck? I told him that we weren't hiding that I was looking for a quarter that I had lost. He rushed out of the store, and I knew something terrible was about to happen. I grabbed my sister's hand and was hiding out when my dad came around the corner and almost hit us. We ran about 4-5 blocks to where my mom's cousin worked, and I was very hysterical when we got there. I was screaming that dad is going to kill mom, dad is going to kill Mom. He put us in the car and headed to my house which was about five blocks away. When we got there my dad had my mom up against the wall about to hit her with a hatchet. My cousin hit him and knocked him to the floor, and my parents split up that night.

Life went downhill after that. We stayed at different people's houses most of the time with no food and I had to fend for my other five siblings. I remember one day when we were at my dad's girlfriends house and her sons had come home from work and they were cooking hamburgers and I told my siblings that we were going to get something to eat that night. One of them heard me say that and came up to me and told me that they didn't have enough for us. He was not mean about it, but they needed their strength to go to work the next day. I went to the kitchen later and found some flour and mixed it with water to make pancakes and got some apples off the tree and cook them as best I could I for my siblings. We lived like that for months until my mom's cousin told her that she needed to come and get us and take care of us. She came and got us but taking care of was still left on me. I can truly say that I never had a childhood.

I took my first drink when I was 15 years old. I was going to a ball game, and I was all dressed in black, seeking attention and some guys that I knew there was drinking old grandad hotel old crow or so old somebody and asked me if I wanted to drink? I said yes and I took the bottle smacked it at the bottom like I saw my dad do and I never looked back. I didn't like the taste of liquor, so I was a beer drinker. I loved Miller high life. That was my drink of choice. I could not stay home once I started drinking, I had to go out to the bar. I had to be the queen of the bar. I would get on the table and dance. People seemed to like that.

My mom exchanged me for money to a man twice my age to become sexually active with me when I was only fifteen. I found out later that the money was exchanged.

One of my sisters had a baby six days after she turned fifteen. I saw my mom dote on this little girl and it made me wonder what was wrong with me, that she couldn't love me like that, and my dad had abandoned us not even sending child support. I felt totally worthless.

I used to have cramps really bad when I was younger and one day I had gone to school, and I got very sick. My legs had swollen, and I had messed up my dress. My dad's sister worked at the school as a secretary. She called my mom to come and get me because I was sick and in the nurse's office. I was happy to be sick, I thought my mom would come and get me and hug me and take me home and take care of me but that didn't happen. She sent her boyfriend to get me and when I got home, she was upset with me because I messed up her day. I promised myself that if I ever had daughters, I would not treat them that way. I was determined to be a better mother than my mom had been if I ever had children. I would never hurt my children or allow anyone else to hurt them.

I was allowed to quit school when I was 16 years old, and I became pregnant and had my first daughter at the age of seventeen. I got married the first time when I was seven months pregnant because I was determined that if my mom couldn't love me the way she was loving on her first granddaughter that she would not have my baby to dote on. I was still drinking even though I was pregnant. I subsequently had three more daughters and I was drinking through all those pregnancies. I didn't know I was not supposed to, and I didn't know how to stop. I didn't even know how to be a mother, but there were some things that I knew not to do. Everybody I was around when I was growing up drank. I was determined that I would be a better mother than my mom was.

Just because I became a mom didn't mean I stayed home. I did most of the things that other drunk woman did when I was hanging out at the bars. Some nights I had no intention of going out. I was going to stay at home with my family but once I started drinking at home, after that first beer I had no choice. I did have good intentions but once I drank the first beer, there was no stopping me. My husband had no control over me. I used to see my mom fight and she was good at it. I used to see other women get beat up by men and I was determined that nobody would ever beat me like that. And I didn't allow it. I know one time my husband had hit me, and we were in the car, and I took a beer bottle and hit him up beside his head. He had a cauliflower ear for a few weeks. He never touched me again.

I continued drinking and bar hopping until August 1980 when I walked into my house, and I felt like if I didn't stop, I was going to die. I ended up going to a hospital and I stayed there for a week but when I came out, I did the same thing over and over expecting different results. My second visit to detox was on April 17th, 1981, because I truly felt like if I didn't stop drinking, I was going to die for real and I did not want to go on. I ended up on to the hospital again but when I came out this time I went to a few meetings and decided I did not want to drink anymore but did not know why it was necessary to go to meetings. I heard one guy at a meeting saying he was getting ready to celebrate a year and I figured well I don't have to come back anymore until I get ready to celebrate a year, so I quit going to meetings.

During that time, I was still hanging around the same people doing the same things expecting different results and during this time, I partook in those little funny cigarettes from April until Thanksgiving that year and I was feeling terrible had no peace in my life. Something happened that ended me back up in the hospital. This time on a psych ward. Horrified, strapped down, hallucinating thinking, I gave birth to Jesus. I had to be sedated with several shots of Thorazine.

I remained on the psych ward and was transferred over to the alcoholic unit and released about a week later. I spent my 33rd birthday on the psych ward. I will never forget the nurses bringing me a cake and singing happy birthday to me. No one had ever done that for me on my birthday. In fact, I cannot even remember anyone ever recognizing my birthday prior to that.

When I was released, I immediately went to a meeting. I was going to two or three meetings a day on purpose, but I was still in a tremendous amount of mental and emotional pain. I had a sponsor, a spiritual advisor, and a psychiatrist during this time, but I ended up in the hospital again, this time for severe depression and suicidal thoughts.

When I was released, I came home, and continued going to a lot of meetings as I was not working and did not have an education and no training or skills. I was so paralyzed with fear that I could not even drive my car to get to meetings. Members were picking me up during the day and my husband, at the time, would take me to night meetings. I was terrified of doing everyday things like going to the grocery or to the bank. The only place I felt safe was in the AA meetings and I desperately wanted to go into a rehab or a house for alcoholics only. I didn't feel that I could function in society.

My Dad died when I was two months sober from this disease. I went to the hospital, as they had called me to tell me he was transitioning. I went to a meeting first, which is the only thing I knew to do. I felt very lost and extremely upset and told my group what was happening. After the meeting, you all told me that I had to do the next right thing and that was to go to the hospital. I did and my dad died a couple of hours later. I read the 23rd Psalm to him and even though he was in a coma, tears came down his face. I don't know if I had forgiven him enough to be there for him or if I went because my home group told me it was the right thing to do. I am just glad that I was in enough pain to follow directions that my home group gave me.

I was blessed to be at a meeting that Clarence Snyder, the Home Brewmeister, whose story is in the first, second and third editions of the Big Book was speaking and doing a question-and-answer period. I was waiting for one of you to ask him, when does one do their fourth and fifth steps? Of course, none of you did, so that forced me out of myself to raise my hand and ask him. I know that was God working in my life then to bring me out of myself in that large group of people that I did not want to notice me.

When he looked at me and called on me, I identified myself and asked him when does one do their fourth and fifth steps? He looked me dead in the eyes and said as soon as they want to stop hurting. That saved my life and my sanity. I was four months sober and ready to go on with the rest of the program. I wanted what you all had so I had to do what you did. These were not suggestions to me. I was told things like hang with the winners. In my confused mind that told me there were some people I should not be hanging around even in this program. I was told to listen with my eyes. Wow, that meant to notice if people were walking the talk in and out of meetings.

I got my high school diploma a couple of months after I did my fifth step. I had to get the garbage out before I could receive what the program was offering me. My first sponsor suggested that I go to Vocational Rehabilitation to see if they could assist me. I had absolutely no idea what I was doing or why I was doing it. I simply followed directions.

I remember getting this counselor who told me to go home and find a business school, etc., that I would like to enroll in, and they would pay for everything. Oh my God, I'm in tears

now thinking about the feeling that I had because of what was happening in my life. Someone was believing in me and wanting to not only help me but make an investment in me.

I prayed and asked God to guide me in making my decision. I was determined that I was not going to disappoint this lady, AA, or my sponsor. I began searching with purpose and I found a business school not too far from where I lived because I wanted to be able to get there even if something happened to my car. I took this information to the counselor, and she set up the appointment with the school, paid for it and I began my journey for nine months. I enrolled in an accounting class, by mistake, because I had no idea what I was doing. My memory and retention were horrible, and I thought that I had made a horrible mistake, but I was determined that I was going to do the best that I could. I missed one day of school and that was because I had surgery. I still made meetings every day, sometimes twice.

But for the grace of God, AA, challenging work, and determination, I ended up being my class's valedictorian. I am so proud to say that out of fifteen grades, I earned 13 As and 2 Bs. I had a 3.9 GPA.

One of my close AA friends helped me write my speech. At the end of the graduation ceremony, I ended up on my knees on stage and some of my classmates joined me. I was overwhelmed with gratitude.

I had three job interviews shortly after graduation. On one of them, I was told that the only reason that I would not get the position would be if someone else applied with more experience. I was not offended and didn't feel rejected because I could tell that they really liked me.

I got my first job with the government in the early eighties then moved up the ranks and within ten years, I was receiving opportunities only available to those with more tenure and experience, but they valued my performance, and I was rewarded until I retired after 25 years. Imagine that a drunk like me, retiring!

I was preparing to go the international convention with my sponsor in 1990, and I received word that one of my sisters, 39 years old was found dead with her 3-year-old granddaughter in her apartment. She had been ill for some time, and she was addicted to pain pills.

My family and I were not as close as we use to be when I was drinking and hosting card parties and hanging out in the bars with them dancing on tables and other crazy stuff. So, I was still going to go to the convention because my sponsor and I were sharing a room and expenses. When I got to the airport with my sponsor and another AA member, we were at the desk talking to the desk clerk and I started crying because I didn't know what to do. They told him what was going on. He told me that he would refund my money for the flight and my sponsor told me to go home and would not let me give her anything for the room. Again, I had to do the next right thing and that was to miss the convention.

My mom was hit in the head and robbed of her purse in a nursing home, where she was transported to the hospital for emergency surgery, and she never regained consciousness. I took off from work and was there every day. I thank God that I had forgiven her, or I could not have been there for her. The hospital staff called us there twice to tell us that she was 98% brain dead, but my two younger sisters didn't want to turn off life support. They had put her in there for medical reasons. It was strongly suggested to me that I not be the one to put her in a nursing home even though I was the oldest. My AA family told me that if something happened to her in there, that my siblings would blame me.

I had resolved my issues with both my parents and forgiven them only because of this program, God, and intense therapy. When my mom died, I had a small policy on her that had just matured a couple of months before she passed. I don't blame myself anymore for the things that my mom and dad allowed to happen to me. I did when I first got here. In addition to what I had been through, I heard some of you saying that we play a part in everything that happens to us. I probably took that out of context, as I learned later that I was not responsible for what my mom made me do as a child and I was not responsible for my dad leaving and not caring about what was happening to us or checking on us. I was there and sober for both my parents when they died.

Forgiving them freed me and really helped me to move on. I often hear people say that people did the best that they could. Unfortunately, I don't believe that in all cases. I believe I should say that I know the cycle can be broken. It absolutely was in my case.

I have four daughters and I vowed as a little girl in the seventh grade that if I ever had daughters, I would not treat them the way my mom treated me. All four of my daughters graduated high school and have their own homes. This credit too, goes to AA, as you all taught me how to be a good mom and give my girls what they needed, not necessarily what they wanted. Yes, they did try to get over on me when I got sober.

I was very active in my community before the pandemic hit, volunteering in the public schools with my grandsons and my great grandson, community meetings, police department, line dancing, senior bus trips, travelling and church. I still participate in some of these activities via Zoom and in person for a few. Because of Alcoholics Anonymous, I have my own home. I've been a homeowner for over 20 years. I purchased a new vehicle two years ago and I'm a representative in a cosmetic company. I absolutely love what AA has done in my life. I sponsor women and try to give back what was so freely given to me.

Try as I might, I will never be able to repay AA for what has been so freely given to me. May I never forget that I am sober today only by the Grace of God and the fellowship and program of Alcoholics Anonymous and I must pass this miracle on.

(4)

ANYWHERE . . . BUT HERE

Written by
Jodi B.
Bullhead City, Arizona

I finally realized my only problem was me.

*I*t didn't matter how beautiful the beach was in Maui... or how serene the setting was in Fiji ... I ripped through life like a tornado tearing down all of the structures of love and meaning in my life.

I didn't know why ~ because I didn't realize what I was doing ~ until one day ... no one was left. I was Alone. Sad. Confused.

As an egotistical, insecure alcoholic, I had enormous self-sabotage and self-hatred. I always wanted to be "Anywhere but Here". Run off to the next party, go to the next bar, where to next? "Just one more!" I acted as if I had it all together, living my best funniest, most successful life ever, yet no one truly wanted to be around me. Drinking allowed me to drown that. It locked out everything (good and) bad because I could no longer see anything clearly.

37 years of self-destruction, torment and never feeling good enough.

8 years of *kind of* trying to get sober, going to meetings, talking with other alcoholics, but not thoroughly being honest and working the steps.

5 sponsors that I was unwilling to take direction from

2 destroyed marriages

3 wounded children caught in the crossfire

A world of hurt left behind in the rubble - the chaos - the whirlwind tornado leaving wreckage, broken hearts - destroyed characters.

Today Life is Simple. I can no longer live in the past and I am unable to see the future. God is my Best Friend. God is my Husband. God is my Keeper. I am safe. I am loved. I no longer rely on human beings to keep me happy. Happiness begins inside my soul. Doing the right thing: Every time. Genuinely Caring about others. Living a wholesome, honest life is the answer to my Serenity.

Sitting with my feelings, seeing me through the eyes of the ones I've hurt and truly understanding why they feel unsafe around me. Listening, hearing, and reacting appropriately to everything anyone says. No action is always my best response. Understanding "it is None of my Business" and that no one really wants (or needs) my opinion on ANYTHING!

Today I don't drink. I am sober almost 4 years. I listen to the Saint Francis prayer, practice Step 11: Meditation and Prayer and have a "must do" routine in order to live a peaceful, grateful, and loving day. I read our Daily Reflections, "Jesus calling" book, and a codependency daily read. These 3 books now define my character and the grace and dignity that I was able to receive in recovery. These books represent AA, God and human behavior which directly effects each one of us in every sense of emotion. The rooms of Alcoholics

Anonymous & these guides to living, along with every one of you ~ telling the *same* story out of a different mouth of a different color from a different neighborhood ~ but the *same* story: the loneliness, the self-hatred, the negativity, the abrasive behavior, the incomprehensible demoralization that we suffered under the grasp of alcohol ~ is what keeps me Alive.

I know I am not alone.

God has and will continue to remove the obsession to drink from each and every one of us that choose to stay sober, clean house and help others. That is our new way of life. That is what we learn in our meetings and from this big book. If I go to God first, my problems seem to not end up being problems because I went to God and I didn't try to do it myself. I didn't try to control and manipulate other's behavior. Let me go *Anywhere but there*. Life is far from perfect. I have two daughters that did not allow me to attend their weddings, but I didn't need to drink over it. I have an ex-husband that I still love with all my heart and soul, and he will not communicate with me, but I don't need to drink over it. I live alone and I can do whatever I want, whenever I want, but I know drinking is not a solution. Even though Life is messy, and I allow myself to feel sad and lonely, I do not have to drink...EVER.

Every day is a New day. Today is a brand-new beginning. What I did yesterday doesn't matter anymore. It's done. It's over. What I do today is make living amends and not repeat hurtful behavior. I go to sleep listening to AA stories, meditation, and self-improvement on YouTube. This helps me overcome the resentments I carry with me, and it helps me stay out of my own way. Every day is a Gift from God and when I live in an Attitude of Gratitude, I receive the gifts of feeling grateful for every 24 hours we breathe. I won't leave before the miracle happens.

(5)

ROCKY ROAD

Written by
Anne W.
Augusta, Maine

This Woman survived sexual abuse and trauma with the courage she found in A.A.

One of my favorite sayings is: Denial is not a River in Egypt. I grew up in a chaotic environment with a mother who was in denial. I have pictures of many events that my mother denied ever happened. I grew up thinking I was going to die. One of my pre-school recollections is of having my father sit on the top cellar step shooting at rats, when suddenly he roars shut up and pointed his pistol at me then pulled the trigger. I froze for what felt like years. I was just a kid playing in the kitchen. For a while, I thought I imagined it, but many years after we moved my older brother told me that he went back and dug the bullet out of the wall.

My mother used to talk freely of abuse in her own childhood with her sisters. I grew up hearing the truth told at home. After my parents divorced, I was called a liar if spoke about the past. I was being molested by the time I was 7 and felt uncomfortable in my own body. I became isolated because I shared the sexual language I was taught with another little girl. The mothers in the neighborhood didn't want their girls playing with me.

Eventually, I wanted to die and expressed that desire by cutting myself with rusty razors. From that I got a very swollen arm with two red lines running up almost to my armpit. I asked my cousin who worked at the school if I could call my mother, she denied my request. I called when I got home and Instead of taking me to a doctor, my mother told my brother to use drawing salve and a hot knife to pull out the infection. My mother's only comment on the whole situation was that I would be sorry for doing cutting myself. After that, I stopped physically harming myself because I realized I really would die if I kept it up. I vowed I wouldn't turn out like my parents.

My mother remarried when I reached high school. My stepfather was good to all us kids. He promised that he would pay for half our college education if we wanted it. I managed to graduate from high school despite ignoring the work in several of my classes. I knew I would need some kind of help eventually. I applied to three public colleges so I could afford that help. I was conditionally accepted by one of them. My stepfather kept his promise to pay for half of college and I worked in factories during the summers.

My first semester, I realized I didn't fit in with my classmates. My one classmate from high school suggested that she wanted us to get to know other people and not spend time together. I certainly looked different from everyone else with my homemade clothing. I hadn't broken my isolation in high school and had no social skills. I started talking about my abusive experiences with anyone who would listen. My proctor told me I sounded like a modern romance story. My foul mouth got me in some trouble in the dormitory, I was disciplined. After a couple days I ignored the discipline and so did the proctors and the housemother. So, I learned nothing. I got respectable grades. I loved to read and read all my

textbooks in the first week while my roommate was in classes. I glanced through them before tests but had forgotten how to study.

My sophomore year I had a single room across from a special needs student. One day, I accidentally bumped into this woman. Some of the sorority girls saw me, took offense, and reported it to the house mother. I got called down to her apartment and was told that I would be moved to the third floor. She said she thought I was “queer” and said she didn’t want to upset this woman who was the first special needs student admitted to that school. Then, she offered me a banana and dismissed me while all the proctors moved my stuff upstairs. As a result of the “queer” accusation, I started questioning my sexuality and became promiscuous picking up different guys.

I was invited to a party where people drank alcohol. I acquired a pint of vodka. What I remember was that when I drank alcohol, I felt like I’d been lit up like a Christmas tree. Suddenly, I could socialize. After I finished my pint, I craved more booze. I felt like I fit in for the first time in my whole life. The next week, I was of legal drinking age and forgetting that I didn’t want to drink like my parents, I bought 2 fifths of Bacardi light and a quart of coke. I drank most of it, and later I passed out on the proctor’s bed. I came to as I was being paged that I had a visitor. My biological father visited and told me he would like to teach me how to drink. I had a big supper and a few more drinks and ended up 45 miles away. I wished I hadn’t eaten because I was nauseous all night.

During my college years, I had some companions who were afraid I would die. They would come looking for me when I was out walking at night. Drinking kept getting me into trouble. During my second semester, my former roommate decided she wanted to match me drink for drink one night. So, we started drinking. The next day the rumor mill had me drugging my former roommate. When she found out what was being said, she went to the house mother and told her that she was just drunk and that it had been her own idea. I had been thinking of suicide a lot and her integrity restored some trust in people.

My junior year, started with a woman telling the house mother that I tried to jump out a 2nd story window during the summer. I denied it. In February, I lost a niece to crib death. That semester, I was assigned 50 books to read for my various English classes. I sat in my rocking chair reading and drinking for the whole of the second semester. The proctor came in once and asked me if I planned to drink and isolate the whole semester. I said yes. That was, I think, the only semester that I made dean’s list. My father showed up the week before finals to tell me that he was dying. I had a 300-watt light bulb burning day and night in my room. Instead of sleeping, I spent nights terrified of my third story window. I told no one. I didn’t realize that I had complex PTSD and depression, but I knew I needed help. I had no idea how to get that help. That summer I took care of an injured relative for a few weeks, then my sister who had pre-eclampsia for the rest of the summer. As predicted, my biological father died that summer. I didn’t drink during the summers that I was in college.

My senior year was a little easier. The proctor invited me to join her watching TV and I declined politely. After student teaching, I believed that I would never be able to handle a classroom and decided not to teach. I graduated drunk, almost falling off the stage. I went out drinking with my mother one night and she introduced me to a manager at a local bank. At the end of the night he said, “I’d like you to go to the main branch of my bank downtown and take a test. If you pass it, I have a job for you.” I passed the test and was hired to do clerical work at their computer center on the swing shift. I started out doing poorly, then I suddenly figured out how to do the job and excelled after being given a second chance. After

work, I would drink like crazy at a favorite hangout, unfortunately the managers didn't want me drinking there. They asked me to go elsewhere, and I didn't, so my hours were changed so I couldn't drink after work. I just put booze in my car and road around drinking. I had acquaintances on the police force and the drinking and driving laws were still lax.

After a year, I obtained a job working for a state agency. One night my stepfather showed up to tell me my boss was ready to fire me because I hadn't showed up for 3 days and I hadn't called in. I called my boss and told him that I was sorry I hadn't been to work that I was sick and didn't have a phone yet. He said make sure you are at work tomorrow. I instantly decided to switch from hard liquor to beer during the week. After a year, I got a job as a librarian serving adults and children in small rural towns. I would drink until 4 am and go to work at 7:30 am. I knew I needed to get help soon for my mental problems. Instead, I went to Weight Watchers to deal with my obesity and lost 179, pounds. I stopped drinking for a year and a half. Then I had an identity crisis. I didn't recognize myself.

I got an appointment at the mental health center to be evaluated, the doctor tried to get me to see him as a private patient, but I panicked after I heard what that would cost. I ended up in a psychiatric unit. I prepared by writing the history of my abuse for the doctor. During that hospitalization, I had a meeting with my mother, stepfather, and the doctor. My mother denied my history. Unfortunately, I didn't know how to handle my anger and left the meeting. The doctor tried to get me to return, but I wouldn't. It ended up with my being medicated with a very sedating anti-psychotic drug which caused me to hallucinate, and it felt like I'd drunk a six pack of beer to drink morning noon and night. I wasn't scared of the hallucinations because it was the age of sex, drugs and rock and roll. I felt betrayed though because I had specifically asked to not be medicated. A week later, I was released and returned to work. I was referred to a psychologist. Within weeks of my release, I was again drinking. Unfortunately, there wasn't much effective treatment for PTSD yet. I stayed with that doctor for years all the while getting angrier and angrier. I would complain about the meds and my doctor would say stop taking them. I was offered no guidance on how to withdraw from the drugs and became psychotic due to rapid withdrawal of the drug.

One day, the psychologist told me that I was chronically mentally ill and would never get any better. My reaction was to call Employees Assistance and ask to see a counselor. I met with a woman who suggested that I go to AA. A few weeks later, I did arrange to meet someone I knew who went to meetings at a local AA meeting. Here were people who told me to come back instead of telling me to get to hell out. I took them at their word and started going to a meeting every night. I listened to someone who wasn't qualified to tell me to go off the psychiatric medication and stopped taking it. Once again, I ended up psychotic in a psych unit. But it was a different hospital and a different doctor. They listened to me and changed my medication to something that was far less sedating. I got a sponsor who told me to follow my doctor's directions regarding medication. I listened to her. I continued going to meetings. I had a lot of suicidal thoughts in the beginning but didn't talk about those and kept talking myself out of taking any action. I didn't want to show that as an option to my nieces and nephews. I don't recommend that. Now, there are much better therapies and medications. My job was altered for financial reasons. I didn't deal well with the changes. I continued going to meetings and worked the steps to the best of my ability.

I had no trouble admitting that I was alcoholic. Because I was a librarian, I started reading the Big Book at the preface. I learned that Alcoholics Anonymous was a textbook. I, also, learned about the allergy and obsession. I believe that I already had the allergy when I

started drinking. I couldn't see that my life was unmanageable despite a wealth of evidence. As I absorbed what was said in meetings, I came to believe that the group of drunks worked miracles with love and grace. I decided to turn my life and my will over to this group of drunks. I launched into an inventory. I was too afraid to share it with anyone, so hid it. I learned from that inventory that not only was I very angry, but also fearful of just about everything, including myself. I let that gel for another 9 months, then I did another inventory. I learned what some of my character defects were. I shared it with a friend who was not in the program. I didn't explain to her that it was supposed to be confidential, so she talked about it with other people, and it got back to my workplace. I learned to be much more careful who I shared with and to discuss the confidential nature of the work. I have used either clergy or members of AA since then.

I had trouble letting go of my resentments partly because they made me feel alive. But I was poisoned with hatred. I prayed incorrectly for a long while. Finally, I was unwilling to pray for those I resented. Much later, I began to be willing to pray for the willingness to pray for those I resented. People had been showing me the resentment prayer in Freedom from Bondage for years. I just didn't get it. Everything seemed to fall flat for a long time.

I changed therapists and psychiatrists several times. Then, I found one psychiatrist who was working with cutting edge trauma treatment and underwent a life changing treatment. I hoped that would change my work situation. My parents passed away. I went through a series of low paying jobs with some successes and some failures. I found I worked better independently. I retired when it became apparent that I was physically unable to continue. It was many years that I went to meetings and prayed rotely. I was in and out of all kinds of programs including a study targeting morbid obesity. I explored every alternative except surgery. I'd seen too many people where surgery was a temporary solution. Finally, I found an anonymous program that worked for me. I stayed with it for a couple years then left because of an unresolved resentment. I went back to that program after about 15 years. One day, I heard in a meeting a simple way to address a Higher Power. I'd used the fellowship for a Higher Power for years and believed in the laws of nature and that God spoke through people. One day, I heard the phrase "In the Spirit of Love and Grace" and knew immediately that these were the right words for me. I felt electrified. Suddenly, I could pray with feeling for those I had resentments against. I was moved to tears. Years of rage fell away. It became easy to pray and meditate. I could begin to make amends to those I had harmed to those I resented so terribly without causing more harm.

(6)

SHINING THE LIGHT ON MY SHAME

Written by
Stephanie C.
Rockville, Maryland

A single mom shares her story to help others who might struggle as she did.

I am writing my story, not because I feel I have ‘the best program’ or ‘better sobriety’ than others. Hardly. I feel like a newcomer and hope I always do. I have today’s sobriety, just like the next alcoholic. I am writing my story because I think stories like mine are not heard or shared enough and because of that, I believe, I struggled more than other women should.

I was born in 1981. I grew up in a nice suburban family with two parents, an older sister, and a younger brother. We were upper middle class, and all the children went to private Catholic school and church on Sundays.

My father worked hard and believed the house was overseen by the woman. Outside of the finances, he was not much help to my mother, and we heard that from her all the time. It was very important to my mother that we be an “involved” family and she was always volunteering for things with the church and the school.

My mother also worked and the toll it took; working, volunteering, caring for family, and ‘looking good’ as a family was often too much. She always seemed to be at her wits’ end and quick to lash out. My father would come home from work every night, make himself a huge manhattan, have dinner, and fall asleep watching tv.

I grew up in a family and a church where image was very important, and I felt I saw hypocrites everywhere. We were raised to leave the house with your hair brushed and your clothes clean. We were taught to never ‘air your dirty laundry’ outside the home. However, we were never encouraged to talk about our feelings inside the home either.

At age seven I began having extreme anxiety. I was convinced something terrible would happen to my parents if I weren’t around. I began faking illness to stay home and twirling and pulling my hair to the point where I had a collection of bald spots. I was put on a few medications and sent back to school.

After that, the children at school never looked at me the same way again and I began feeling very isolated. I began to eat my feelings and became severely overweight. I began stealing things at school and at stores. I was always getting in trouble or made fun of for something and began to truly believe that I was born ‘wrong’ or ‘bad.’

Entering high school, I decided I was going to do things differently. I decided I was going to “like” things other people “liked” and do things other people did and then I would have a better chance of people liking me because if people knew who I really was, they wouldn’t want anything to do with me. This tactic worked and I found a variety of people in a school that was much larger than my last. I had different friends in different groups and felt that was happiness. I was always very uncomfortable when the different groups were in the same

room because I didn't know how to behave. I had different masks for everybody so no one would discover me, not even myself.

After high school I had my first break up and was devastated, so heartbroken that I didn't eat much. I began to lose weight. I had been obese for so long that I didn't think it was possible. I began exercising to the extreme and trying to live off water and few calories. One day my friend confessed to me that she had struggled with bulimia in high school. Her innocent confession had me so intrigued that I immediately tried it when I got home. Thus began another addiction.

I hadn't done much drinking in high school, just a handful of times because my friends didn't enjoy it the way I did. Now we were 21 and going to bars, and I looked better than ever before. In my head I was still an overweight kid and had no self-esteem, but I could fake it, especially with alcohol. I ended up getting engaged to a boy in my friend circle. It was all I ever wanted, right? Someone to love me and actually want to marry me. Me! So, I began to devote myself entirely to him. Everything was about him, and he was happy to comply. It became a controlling relationship and I saw less and less of my friends and family. I was miserable and didn't understand it.

One day I had the thought that if drinking made me feel better when we went out at night, it stood to reason it would work at any time during the day. I don't remember my first drink alone or the first time I hid an empty bottle or the first time I drank while behind the wheel of a car, but all of a sudden it was a way of life for me. Drinking was my one and only way of dealing with everything. I was uncomfortable being me 24 hours a day, so I was soon drinking 24 hours a day.

Within the first three months of this new lifestyle, I had a seizure, a car accident, and trips to the emergency room. I was drunk at inappropriate times and inappropriate places. It was obvious to everyone that I had a problem with alcohol. Everyone but me. I believed that if people didn't try to control my drinking then I wouldn't have to sneak it or drink so much so quickly. I also believed that if people truly knew how it felt to be me, they would understand that I *needed* to drink. My engagement ended, and although I had been miserable, I was now devastated by the loss of the relationship. After three months of using alcohol to cope and having various problems as a result, I passed out during nap time at the daycare that employed me, hit my head on a bookcase on the way down and ended up in the hospital. From there I went to my first detox and from there, my first rehab.

My family knew nothing about alcoholism at the time, although we later found out that my father's sister was an alcoholic who never got her drinking under control. She had been dead for years when we found out, having passed from complications of her Diabetes, although it is more than likely drinking played a large role in her death. My parents did some research and found an expensive rehab to send me to in Arizona. The thinking was the more you paid, the better the result. We all assumed I would come out of there 'cured'.

I did very well in rehab. There was structure, I felt productive, and was kept away from alcohol. It was a 35-day program and I felt good when I left. However, I returned home to the same person I had been when I left. I felt as if I were an empty shell of a person with a big, black hole inside me. I didn't know who I was, what I liked, what I was good at or what I wanted to do with myself. I still felt separated from the rest of the world, and I was uncomfortable being me. I knew what made that feeling go away.

I had been introduced to AA in rehab and began going to meetings when I returned home. I remember going to a midnight meeting on my 59th day because I *really* wanted that 60-day chip. I already had a bottle of vodka in my bag for after.

This is when my cycle started. The cycle of going to rehabs, detox's, hospitals, getting out, feeling panicky all the time, drinking, and going around again. I needed to drink to be around people, to be alone, and I especially remember the nights. I would need to drink to sleep because the time it would take to lie there and wait for sleep to come, alone with my own thoughts, was unbearable.

I would get menial jobs that never lasted very long. I would stay far enough away from people that they couldn't smell the alcohol but my performance and tendency to call out 'sick' made for repeated firings. I ended up with a job down in D.C. and would take the subway into the city. This job worked well for me because I was on an entirely different floor from anyone else. I simply had to answer the phone and transfer the call upstairs which I was mostly able to do through my drinking. I was alone all day which suited my needs. I would frequent different liquor stores on my lunch break to replace the bottle I'd finished throughout the morning. I would often pass out on the train ride home and end up at the end of the line with someone waking me up to get me off. Pity and disgust written on their faces. Many times, I would wake up and my bag or purse would be gone. One time I fell asleep at my desk, and no one knew because they left from their own floor. I woke up at 3am and called my mother. She drove into the city in the middle of the night and found me passed out against the building.

Soon after my second time in rehab, my parents couldn't live with me anymore, but they couldn't kick me out on the street. They had the financial means to get an apartment where they put me, and my father would come by once a week to bring me a bag of groceries and to make sure that I was still alive. That is the kind of life I gave my parents during those years. And I didn't think I was hurting anyone but myself.

I was still going to AA meetings through most of this. My friends wouldn't have anything to do with me, my family couldn't be around me and people at the meetings told me to 'keep coming back', and so I did. I did not want to be alone, but I couldn't tolerate being myself while sober. I would go to meetings intoxicated, I would bring alcohol in various containers, always thinking I was being sneaky and fooling everybody. I had a seizure on the driveway of our meeting house and passed out in the bathroom during someone's celebration meeting. The wonderful people at the meeting would try to engage and invite me out afterwards, and I would reward them for their kindness by passing out in the bathroom of a diner or throwing up in their car. Still, it was always 'keep coming back'.

I did love meetings. I loved the program. I could see it working in others and I thought it was beautiful. I would cry when people read the promises because I believed they were real. I just didn't believe any of it could work for me. I heard a phrase once that I completely related to. 'Some of us must die, so others may live.' Now *that* I believed was my purpose, and part of me was alright with that. I had never met such people as the ones I met in the rooms who smiled every time they saw me, even when I told them I had drunk again. I loved seeing them because it was this unconditional love I'd never felt before. But I kept pulling away because I was ashamed, and I knew that I could only disappoint them so many times before they would give up on me.

I have learned that when one is not doing something for the right reasons they tend to gravitate towards others who are not as well. I met numerous men in the program who

weren't there to work on themselves, and we would click because I certainly wasn't either. I had a whole apartment and hated being alone so they would quickly become my boyfriends and move in. Often the worse their behavior or use was, the better I felt about my own. I was in physically abusive relationships, emotionally and verbally abusive relationships, and all this became part of my cycle too.

In the last relationship I was in, at 29, I became pregnant.

I'm the kind of alcoholic who would wake up in the middle of the night and need a drink to go back to sleep. I would wake up in the morning and need a drink in order to function. Throughout the day I could feel when the alcohol was leaving my system and I would panic and crawl out of my skin until I knew where my next drink was coming from.

I didn't feel like I could breathe without alcohol.

I had a miscarriage when I was 22 when my drinking began and, at 29, I told myself, 'I wasn't even drinking that much then. There is no way this baby will be born and what kind of God would give a person like *me* a child anyway?' This was my thinking and my denial as I continued to drink.

I would end up in the hospital sometimes, no different than when I wasn't pregnant, with dangerously high blood alcohol levels. The doctors there would talk to me and look at me with disgust and loathing after finding out I was pregnant. As if somehow their feelings would snap me out of it. How wrong they were. No one could hate me as much as I hated myself, and their treatment only helped to validate my own feelings.

I was 28 weeks pregnant when my child was born in the apartment. The father who was a drug addict happened to be with the program enough to call 911. A team of paramedics came and took the baby away and then another team came and took me away. I found out a few hours later that I had a baby girl who was 2 pounds 3 ounces with brain damage due to lack of oxygen and they didn't know what kind of life she was going to have.

They wheeled me into the NICU (neonatal intensive care unit) to see her, and when I looked at this impossibly tiny human, with tubes and wires all over her and her eyes unable to open, I was finally hit with all the damage my drinking I had caused. It had been acceptable for me to slowly kill myself over the last 8 years, but seeing this child finally opened my eyes to what my drinking had done.

I was devastated, completely devastated. But finally, with this devastation came something new. For the first time, I wanted something different. Something better. I wanted to *get* better, and I wanted to *be* better.

My daughter was going to be in the NICU for a good long while, so I took that opportunity to go back to a rehab I had frequented over the years. They told me all of the same things they had said every other time, but for the first time, I heard the message. I heard the instructions. And I wanted it. I wanted it for myself, and I wanted it for my daughter. I had no idea what a life with her would entail, but I was determined to be there for it and to love her and show up.

She was in the hospital for seven months. I would go to my outpatient and an AA meeting and then go be with her. I also thought that her father should get sober and attempted to make that happen. After a short while I realized he would pull me down before I pulled him up, and we split up. A few months later I realized that I was pregnant with my second child. What was God thinking?! How was this ever supposed to work?! I even contemplated giving my second child up for adoption because I couldn't fathom having a special needs child, staying sober AND having another baby.

Today, I can tell you from the bottom of my heart that **nothing** happens in God's world by mistake. My younger daughter has modeled behavior and milestones which my older daughter has absolutely benefited from. My older daughter began walking, talking, and eating at 3 and ½ years and I know, absolutely, it was because she was watching her little sister.

You might like to think that is the end of the story and we all lived happily ever after. However, I've learned that I am capable of forgetting my story, capable of forgetting I am a real alcoholic, and that I can, and will, choose misery if I don't keep my sobriety as a priority.

After my first daughter was born, I did finally *work* the program. I did the steps, I did service, and I participated in my recovery. I moved back in with my parents and began making my living amends to them. When the children began going to school I went back to school as well. I worked hard and earned my Associates degree at our local community college. I became employable and eventually found steady employment.

After a number of years though, my program started losing priority. We were living with my parents who were getting older and needed more help, I had two busy kids, and I had two jobs. The biggest issue, I see now, was that I thought I was 'fine.' I had done my steps and worked on my resentments and was making my living amends, but I had not done much work on resentments towards myself: the shame and the guilt over what I had done, seeing it in the flesh everyday in this child I loved with my whole heart. It never seemed to be relieved, but I would stuff it down and go on with my days.

Eventually the hectic pace of my life got so that I wasn't making it to AA meetings. I wasn't connecting with recovering people at any point during my days. I drifted away and had no outlet for the feelings that were being shoved down.

The day came when I thought about how much I was accomplishing. I had worked a full day, taken care of my children, my parents' needs had been met, and at the end of the day I thought that I could just have a drink and go to sleep. So, I did.

The drinks started 'few and far between' and I was happily amazed because I had always believed that if I ever drank again, my life would immediately explode. I continued to drink. The few and far between drinks became bigger. And they came earlier. And soon, and without my consent, I was back to being that same alcoholic who needed alcohol from morning until night. After all of my achievements, mentally and emotionally, I was lower than I had ever been.

In 2020 I went back to treatment, and truly faced my powerlessness. I faced the feelings I kept so deep and the self hatred that I could never acknowledge or deal with. I unloaded every horrible thing I felt about myself and continue to do so today as I trudge this road of happy destiny. For me, self-forgiveness is not a 'one-and-done.' My shame and guilt creep back in and I need to address them regularly. I do so by sharing my story. I do so in AA by remaining a full participant in my recovery and making sure my hand is out for the next struggling alcoholic. I bring my story to middle schools and high schools because I know, for me, my feelings started before I picked up my first drink, and I want young people to know that they are not alone. I speak at universities to medical students to try to break the stigma attached to women who drink while they are pregnant.

I never wanted to hurt my baby. My life was never a party that I just didn't want to leave. I was stuck living in a nightmare. The only way to help someone like me is with compassion.

I have realized, fully and completely, that nothing happens in God's world by mistake. Everything happens for a reason. I truly believe that my daughter is exactly the way God

intended her to be, and when the doubt and the guilt and the shame inevitably start creeping back, I look at the effect she has on everyone she meets. She has brought our entire family together and opened our eyes to how truly special people with special needs are. I believe we are all more loving and empathetic because of her presence in our lives.

My family and friends are so supportive of everything that I do because they tell me they have seen a change in me, one even I wasn't always aware of. Working this program, for me, means continuing to attend AA meetings, being active at meetings, working with a sponsor, working with newcomers, and practicing these principles in all my affairs.

I find that when I am embedded in the program, some steps automatically work in my life. The tenth step is always right there when I have said or done or am getting ready to say or do something I shouldn't. When I am feeling upset or uneasy about something, I know to examine my life for the cause of it because it will be something in me.

This miraculous AA program we have is medicine, but it isn't as simple as taking a pill everyday. There are things I must do each day to continuously work on myself. I also must WANT it. AA will not work without my permission and participation.

The 12 promises I always looked at longingly have absolutely come true for me. I am comfortable in my own skin. I no longer hate myself. At some point I stopped hating myself and started accepting myself as I know my Higher Power does. Then I liked myself a little. As time has gone on, I have even said out loud that I love myself and that is a miracle all by itself. I have realized that I can use my past, the past I wanted to erase, wanted to forget. I can use my past to help another alcoholic.

It is important for me to share my story and reach out to women, especially mothers who drank while they were pregnant because I know that pain. Drinking during pregnancy is stigmatized and rarely spoken of, but it is part of my story. I know the dangerous isolation that comes with feeling that I can relate to other alcoholics, but not completely, because I have done something no one ever talks about. It is so important that, for this reason, I talk about it.

I am not alone and this is why I write my story. It is important that others who can relate to my story know that they are not alone, for that is how this works.

And so today, to sum up, I primarily surround myself with people in recovery, people constantly and consistently working on themselves for the better. I am a productive member of society and my homegroup. And as much as it catches me off guard sometimes, I am a good mother, and my children adore me.

(7)

PRICELESS TIP

Written by
Bridget B.
Los Angeles, California

This newcomer was sure the right amount of cash and sympathy would solve her problem. What she discovered instead, was that service is its own reward.

I would not recommend waiting table for anyone with an attitude problem. I was under the impression that I had a rough life, and the world should tip accordingly.

Growing up, I wanted to be a detective or a ballerina. I envisioned myself dancing in theaters across the globe and solving mysteries on the side. Instead, I wound up working in the kitchen of a gated community. The facility was called CIW, an acronym for California Institution for Women. My life had become so unmanageable that the state of California had decided to manage it for me. This was not part of my plan, but when I drink, I am open to suggestions.

Upon release, I made a few failed attempts at sobriety and wound up at the dismal Pepper Tree motel, without heat and hot water. Coming to after a bender, I had about \$1.50 to my name and 24 hours to vacate this fine establishment. The thought occurred to me that I might attend one of those AA meetings I had been court ordered to attend.

My destination that day was a little club house on a dead-end street which held some vague sense of comfort for me. Not sure if it was the coffee, donuts or the cranky old men who sat outside chain smoking and telling me they spilled more on their tie than I drank. "Gee, you must have dipped yourself in a vat of Tequila" I snapped. They laughed and said, "keep coming back kid."

Once inside, I was escorted away from the men and the coffee bar (known as the half measures room) to the area where the meeting was about to take place. An older woman with a thick southern accent introduced herself to me as Alabam Corruthers and asked how many minutes I had sober. As my tale of woe began pouring out, insisting that money was the answer to all my problems, she interrupted me mid-sentence, saying "the meeting is about to start, go help those people set up chairs." Incredulous at this callous request, my deer in headlights look must have caught her eye. "If you take care of your number one problem today, everything else will take care of itself" she advised.

Out of desperation and lack of a better plan, I walked over to the official chair wrangler and offered to help. He introduced himself as Frank and asked what brought me to the meeting that day. I could not wait to tell him. When I got to the part of my trilogy about no job, no money and one day left at the flea bag motel, his eyes lit up like a Christmas tree. "I know the manager at Bob's Big Boy! Have you ever waited tables?" I was offended. Musical Theatre was my background. Alcohol may have interrupted my career, but work for a paycheck? "No" was my prompt response. After explaining that Bob's actually prefers people

without experience so they can train them from the ground up (yikes), he offered to take me there after the meeting. This was an act of kindness with no strings attached. Ground zero for being a solid member of Alcoholics Anonymous. With nothing else to do and nothing to lose, I took him up on the offer. The date was December 17, 1982. I have been sober ever since.

I got that job and worked as a waitress for the first three months of my sobriety. I would not recommend waiting tables for anyone with an attitude problem. But I needed a gig, and I had a court date coming up. Soon I was renting a room from a woman I met at the meeting where I set up chairs.

Before every shift, I attended an AA meeting where I heard one old-timer say, “the only thing you have coming today if you don’t drink is another day sober.” However, my case was different. I was under the impression that I had a rough life, and the world should tip accordingly. Well, that did not happen at Bob’s. I ended up getting fired for throwing food at a customer. She started it.

Stripped of my Big Boy Apron with matching pin, I marched down the street on my way to the bus stop. I intended to get off at the nearest liquor store. Getting fired from Bob’s was God’s way of telling me I needed to drink. I never shared this pearl of wisdom with anyone. Sometime later, I shared this theory with Alabam, who became my first sponsor. Her response was that any alcoholic consulting with himself is getting advice from an idiot.

As fate would have it, the man who got me the job was driving down the street as I headed towards the bus stop. He asked if I wanted a ride. I couldn’t say no because it would look suspicious. Everyone knew that I HATED the bus. Back in the early 80’s the bus system was the RTD, which in my hateful mind stood for reason to drink. So, I took the ride. Once inside the car, he told me he needed to make one quick stop before he took me to wherever it was, I needed to go. We stopped at some dilapidated apartment project where a woman with three sick kids (all under the age of 5) was waiting. Her husband crashed the car, spent the rent money and was in jail for drunk driving. She had a 3 day or quit notice on her door. It never looks good when the sheriff’s office is your moving company. Her life looked like hell to me, with these kids crying in the background, dirty diapers, and no money for food. The woman could not get to a meeting, obviously, but she had three months sober, and Frank brought her a 90-day chip. She cried when she took it and said, “no matter what happens to me and these kids, even if we have to sleep in the park, I have something you can’t buy at Tiffany’s.” She started to cry.

When we left the apartment, my justification for needing a drink was insufficient compared to this woman’s story. Rather than drown my sorrows in a tumbler full of tequila, I asked if we could go to a meeting.

I dodged a bullet that night. The moment Frank handed this woman a little plastic 90-day chip, something clicked in me. Sobriety is a gift that money could never buy. I may not have been tipped well at Bob’s, but I know for a fact that some of the best tips I have gotten in life are free.

(8)

LETTING IN THE LIGHT

Written by
Robert J.
United Kingdom

There was a darkness inside this alcoholic which he was unable to illuminate by himself.

*I*f I write my story then, if in danger of forgetting, it can be read again and remembered.

Memory of infancy, growing up in a leafy London suburb in the 50s, is limited. On occasion, I was truly terrified of the dark, of a large wardrobe in my bedroom and of the long mirror on its door. Being safely ferried around town on the back of my mother's bicycle is a comforting memory. Both my mother and father had served in the armed forces during World War II putting any plans they may have had of settling down on hold. I had an elder sister and we experienced a modest yet stable upbringing. My sister attended a Catholic convent school for girls. They took a handful of boys up to the age of seven and this was my first school. Being in this minority, I enjoyed the extra attention paid to me and was liked by the girls. After this I attended all boys' schools.

First day at a new school, aged seven, was a shock. I became aware of being an outsider, like an alien abandoned on planet Earth and the mother ship had departed. With a feeling of disquiet, standing on the edge of a playground marked out for games unknown to me, I watched the other boys playing, but was fearful of joining in, and remained frozen on the exterior. And so I became a loner, an observer, rarely feeling able to properly participate.

As the years of childhood progressed, I grew to feel that other people were potentially hostile and not to be trusted. This was not backed up with much evidence, more a habitual survival strategy. I believed I was becoming self-reliant, my superpower, which would have been a very useful skill if it had turned out that I could actually rely on myself. Sitting in the back row in class and never paying too much attention, my mind was often transported through daydreams into a fantasy world of characters from Greek mythology.

Aged twelve, on a kids' summer camp in North Wales, I had my first drink, a swig of red wine. The shudder, as the warming liquid, passed down my throat, changed me. Alcohol was a ground-breaking discovery. This was a substance meant for me and we would be in a lifelong relationship. A year later, attending a family wedding, the knack of grabbing one drink, downing it and replacing it with another from the drinks tray as the waitress passed from guest to guest, was acquired as if by instinct. I was starting to get the hang of this drinking game. On a school trip to Paris, aged fourteen, buying large bottles of beer and then large bottles of wine from shops was easy. Throwing up was an acceptable consequence of the main effect which enabled me to relate to other people and feel good about myself. The

price of a can of beer, at a small bar at the top of the Eiffel Tower, was cheaper than a soft drink. It was a no brainer which one to choose. With alcohol, I was transformed into a version of myself which was acceptable to me.

Adolescence found me relating far more to some of the older boys at school, reading the books they read and listening to the records they liked, and more or less socially bypassing my peer group. It certainly made it easier to blend in, in a pub. The world always seemed to be a better place with a few drinks inside me and my witty comments on anything and everything were well received although sometimes after a Saturday night party, when finally trying to sleep, the world would go round and round. Teenage girls started to appear on the scene. The first intense emotion I felt, leading to physical pain in my gut, was jealousy.

Leaving home for university in the North East of England to study biology was my big break. I was eighteen, technically an adult, and about to commence a new adventure. My sister had been a student there. The locals were friendly, and I hit the ground drinking. For the first year I had hollow legs, could drink with impunity, never had hangovers, and even managed to pass the end of year exams. I believed I was enjoying the best life ever and life would carry on like this forever. The summer was spent on a scientific expedition to the North Coast of Iceland. This was a rare period of several weeks where I wasn't drinking due to lack of availability. Feeling connected to everything and at one with the landscape and in harmony with the universe was a profound spiritual experience, especially watching a fabulous display of the northern lights once the days started to grow shorter. I would constantly, in vain, be attempting to recapture that sense of belonging using the wrong kind of spirit as a substitute.

I was surprised at the speed and severity of my decline in year two. Hangovers became a regular accompaniment to my daily attempts to function. Unable to rise early, the morning lectures would often be missed, practical sessions in the laboratory incompetently and sometimes dangerously fudged, leaving what remained of the day to drinking in the various bars on campus. By year three, I was lost and adrift. I had taken to drinking vodka alone in my room and thought that my flatmates were unaware of this until someone knocked on the front door asking for me, receiving the reply that I was in my room, drinking vodka, alone. How dare they say such a thing! My father had once said to me that social drinking was fine but drinking alone was problematic. I reasoned that, if I did some social drinking, I was fine and my solitary drinking was just a little add-on even though I was starting to have black outs. Not obtaining the final exam results I thought I was entitled to was devastating, a real body blow. The opportunity to work in a field I was really interested in had been squandered. Worst was I would have to go out and work for a living.

Humiliated, I returned to London and thus began my wilderness years of trying to work and drink. This was a very bad combination. A witty playwright once quipped "Work is the curse of the drinking classes." It was unreasonable to expect someone to drink like I did, get up early in the morning, be somewhere on time and do a hard day's work. Turning maudlin, after an evening drinking alone in my grotty room, the cheapest I could find to rent in East London, I once drove to a place on the East Coast of England where I had memories of being happy in the past. I blacked out on the return journey, regaining consciousness on a busy

road early in the morning. Becoming, let's face it, neurotically miserable, I was falling into an alcoholic depression.

My father died, shortly after his retirement, from cancer. My sister, my only sibling, committed suicide leaving a husband and two young children. I was unable to healthily process either of these deaths. Memories became buried deep within me. Nevertheless, my outlook had been improving after meeting someone who would become my wife. The 80s were happening. Energy levels rose. I was positive, purposeful, had a project, commenced a new career, had status, a house, and a car. My marriage was blessed with three children. The drinking was not debilitating for a time. I started doing a lot of amateur dramatics, about which I was far more diligent than my day job. Going into old theatres after work, preparing in dressing rooms, which smelt of unwashed costumes, slapping on the greasepaint and false eyebrows in front of cracked mirrors with half the surrounding lightbulbs either broken or missing, and becoming someone else made me feel like I really was someone else. The applause at the end of a performance was addictive and, of course, downing as much as was humanly possible in the pub afterwards seemed to add up to a full life. Studying for and successfully completing a master's degree in ecology convinced me I was back, big time, and on form. I was creatively on fire. This was short lived.

Applying for job promotions proved irresistible and I came unstuck in a new job for which I was not trained at the level expected. No end of drinking would make it better and, in 1990, another bout of alcoholic depression, a complete burnout, brought me down. Breakfast would consist of brandy, espresso and cigarettes, like rounds of toast. Staring at a blank wall took up much of the day. I felt useless. I'd let myself down and had betrayed those closest and most precious to me, my family. A burden of guilt weighed heavily upon me. Drinking gin and tonic in the evening seemed civilised enough but I was lost and adrift again.

Miraculously, I managed to find another job on a lower salary with less responsibility and discovered, to my amazement and relief, that I could actually do the job. In many ways, I had been given so much, in life, but there was a darkness within me that could not be illuminated with my resources alone. I was still putting up a desperate alcoholic fight and resisting. I had not learned my lesson, and my drinking escalated leading to unpredictable and dangerous escapades. I remembered the delirium tremens scene from the film "The Lost Weekend" and thought to myself that, at least, that hadn't happened yet. And then it did happen. Having the DTs in the form of a giant winged demon on my chest, which prevented me physically breathing, and wrestling with it, fighting it off in order to breathe again, is something which is difficult to forget.

Throughout all these negative experiences due to alcohol, I never vowed to stop drinking. The plan was always, next time, to just get a little bit squiffy in order to nicely take the edge off things, a vain hope, which was rarely the result. My life was effectively over. My drinking had become a drudgery providing only a few seconds of relief, following that first hiss of a ring-pull on a chilled can of industrial-strength lager, to the days which seemed impossible to get through to anyone's satisfaction, certainly not to my own. I didn't want to die but I didn't know how to live. I was dead behind the eyes.

One day, a woman I was getting to know, becoming a rare confidante, evidently cared for me enough, when I thought I had become unlovable, to throw a telephone book at me. She had been angry with me and disappointed after seeing me legless following a long train journey. She said there were numbers at the front of the phone book and if people like me never got past where I was, there wouldn't be numbers at the front of the phone book. She added that she wasn't going to hang around and watch me die. For some reason, I was listening that day and accepted that I had a problem. The game was up. The desire to stop drinking entered my head. At 39 years of age, a voice had finally called "Last orders!". I saw the light and made that phone call.

On 12 August 1993, I woke up sober and, by the grace of God and with more than a little help from my friends, have stayed that way, one day at a time. The alcohol counselling service, a local authority funded facility, I had phoned, was just five minutes walk from my house. All the while I had been soaking away the hours in one room, while my children grew up in another, people had been getting sober and recovering just around the corner. Abstinence was expected. They asked me which drink gets me drunk and, after much debate, enlightened me to the fact that it was the first drink that got me drunk. This was news to me at the time. It became clear to me that I am an alcoholic. Paradoxically, I never used the word "alcoholic" to describe myself in all the years I was drinking but do now that I don't drink. The group counselling was how I realised I was not alone. There were other people who were also fed up with being the way they were, and I could identify with them. The art therapy sessions were particularly helpful, releasing thoughts and memories which could not be expressed verbally, at that time, out from my head and onto a sheet of cartridge paper using brightly coloured oil pastels.

I then benefited from two years of one-to-one counselling. It was put to me that I may have started drinking to feel something and continued drinking to stop feeling anything. I certainly kept a lot of people close to me at arm's length emotionally. I was emotionally numb before I started drinking and emotionally frozen by the time my drinking ceased. My drinking had ended where it began. It would take a long, long time to slowly defrost. During these sessions it was becoming clear to me how disturbingly angry I was at other people, the whole world and myself although this had rarely surfaced. Under the surface there was a reservoir of resentments about to be discovered. Towards the end of these weekly counselling sessions, an acute awareness arose in me that I could not remain sober on my own and joined a "self-help" group that had recently started up in London. Whilst beneficial to start with, it disintegrated. I began to feel some disquiet, fearing a relapse. It was time for Alcoholics Anonymous.

Phoning the London AA helpline, they suggested attending a meeting in Chelsea, London. There must have been about one hundred people there. I thought that they can't all be wrong. At the end of the meeting the secretary said, "It works!" with such conviction that I believed her. I had finally joined the Fellowship of AA. A weekly "Step" meeting near where I was living in East London became my home group. Looking at the 12 steps listed on a scroll in the room, I understood that the steps are what we do. It's a 12-Step program. However, I feared I would not be able to complete the steps so hesitated to start. Listening, at meetings, to other people

sharing their understanding of God, made me think a lot about spiritual matters. My approach to the concept of a higher power, seemingly beyond my understanding at the time, was like an investigation into the paranormal. However, I chose to keep an open mind which proved invaluable. At length, I was able to accept the existence of a God of my understanding. I reasoned that there had to be a God, otherwise the world and my existence in it was just too absurd. I don't know what God is. I just know that God is.

My big break, in recovery, was going to breakfast AA meetings in the City of London. Yes, I was able to get up early in the morning. This proved a great way to spiritually prepare for the day. I had taken a stressful job in Central London because, although my last job, the one where I got sober, had been good for me in early recovery, there was nothing left for me to learn there. It had been a difficult decision to make but sitting on the fence was not a long-term solution. At the City breakfast meetings, I met the man who would be my sponsor. He offered to take me through the steps, in numerical order. Each step was an eye-opener, a challenge, requiring determination and hard work at times. It was only made possible through trusting other people in AA and, through them, trusting the AA program. It was easy enough, now, to accept that I was powerless over alcohol once I had taken that first drink but how to stay away from that first drink required having the faith to believe to be possible, that which had seemed impossible before. Remembering that my life had become unmanageable was facilitated through my sponsor patiently eliciting actual examples from me, starting with recollection of incidents, behaviour, and consequences during my second year at university. I really had locked so much away and didn't know how to express myself in words.

This was the powerhouse phase of my recovery, and I took on a variety of service commitments including evening sessions on the London AA telephone helpline. Working the steps was truly liberating. Writing it all down, in the relative quiet of a public library, allowed me, among other benefits, to recollect my past and record on paper the emotional reverberations of how my actions and reactions during the whole of my life were still affecting me. Making direct amends, allowed me to level with the world and relate to other people on equal terms. I was glad to make amends with my mother and to have enjoyed a few years of a sober, adult relationship with her before she died. Having graveside chats with my father and sister helped unravel the trapped feelings held inside for so many years. Both had died in the thick of my drinking. Their loss now became a manageable burden, allowing acceptance of what had happened. One summer, in the South of France, just sitting in a landscape of pine forests, I was able to finally be at peace for the first time since my time in Iceland some 25 years before. Much to my surprise, I returned to some of the practices of the faith of my childhood, which I had long abandoned, and for it to mean something. After concluding the steps with my sponsor, I was free to go on working the steps to maintain my sobriety. Somehow, the light had got in dispersing the darkness. I had grown up in the Fellowship.

About 10 years into sobriety, I experienced another depression. This took me by surprise because I thought I was making steady progress in recovery. However, unlike the depressive episodes in the mid 70s and 1990, I could stand outside of myself, objectively observe myself and recognise what was happening. I was not stuck, subjectively, inside the

problem, not understanding the situation, unable to name the condition, unable to decide what to do. Whatever drastic action deemed necessary was taken which, among other things, involved moving and leaving my job. It was a humbling experience. Looking back on this period it is possible that, in sobriety, I had become well enough to feel able to compete with others, trying to conform to what I perceived to be their expectations of me but not being true to myself. An unexpected result following this upheaval was that I was able to feel love, real love, again. Most importantly, I stayed sober, and my recovery continued.

Sobriety is worth having just for itself. It is a gift which I choose to keep. Recovery started when I put down the drink. I now have a language to describe my experience, strength and hope. If I'm in good shape, spiritually, my day more or less goes in flow. If I lose this spiritual connection, my day is abruptly interrupted by doubt and fear of suddenly having to rely on myself alone which I am unable to do without God's help. In flow, choices presented to me in any given day seem reasonable and decisions I make are doable, more like adjusting the sails of a moving boat rather than labours of Hercules. I try to discern the next right choice and act accordingly. By developing a conscience, doing bad things makes me feel bad.

I now live on the South Coast of England. Sometimes, for example watching a sunset over the horizon of the sea, I experience moments of pure bliss, gaining peace of mind, everything being the way it's meant to be. These moments, in contemplation, are a gift. At other times, when it is clear that all is not right with the world, I do know that the world is a better place for me being sober in it.

I now realise that I was never truly abandoned on planet Earth. God has always been here with me. I just didn't know it. I needed the courage to reach out and ask God for help. I have been given a life worth living. I have been blessed with grandchildren. I am a happy sober man, continually learning to live as a better person.