

A LATE START

“It’s been ten years since I retired, seven years since I joined A.A. Now I can truly say that I am a grateful alcoholic.”

I AM A SEVENTY-FIVE-YEAR-OLD alcoholic. For fifty-five of those seventy-five years I led what is known as a normal middle-class life. Alcohol had a little part in it as candied yams—nice when there but unmissed when absent. The home in which I grew up included two loving parents, one older brother, a constant flow of house pets, riding horses, and friends who were welcomed. Discipline in our house was strict but not out of line with the thinking prevalent during the first quarter of the twentieth century; certainly I don’t consider that I was in any way abused. I attended private school and later a midwestern college. I married, had children, worked, experienced the pain of the death of my parents and of a child. Knew, too, the pleasure of real friends and financial success. I enjoyed horseback riding, swimming, tennis, and had quiet evenings filled with children, books, and friends.

What happened to me somewhere between the ages of fifty-five and sixty-three? I’ve no idea! Was life too much? Did some latent gene suddenly take on a fierce life of its own? I don’t know. What I do know is that at sixty-five I was a crawling, dirty maggot of a woman, willing to tarnish all I’d worked for and to

desecrate every dear relationship I had. I know too that through a wonderful set of God-guided circumstances and people, I was led to the only possible course of behavior that will keep me sane, sober, constructive, and happy.

I was twenty when I had my first drink, and although I liked the taste, I didn't like the way it made me feel. I didn't drink again until I was in my early thirties and thought it made me seem cool and sophisticated. During these early years, a couple of drinks were enough, and I often nursed one Scotch on the rocks for a full evening. When I was thirty-five, my twelve-year-old son was diagnosed with an incurable cancer and within a few months my husband demanded a divorce. For the following five years while my son lived, I seldom drank and never drank alone. Agony, fear, hurt, and exhaustion did not make me a drunk. Happiness opened that door much, much later.

During my mid-forties, my interest in alcohol began to gain momentum. Although I had continued to work, I had otherwise isolated myself to care for my son and his younger sister, each of whom required a special dose of stability, love, and security. Soon after my son's death, I made a decided effort to reenter the adult world. My debut encouraged my drinking. It was not yet obsessive, but drinking became more and more a part of my daily life. I no longer entertained without serving cocktails and seldom attended gatherings where liquor wasn't provided. I always managed to find the post-activity drinking crowd whether it was after dog obedience training or an oil painting class. During my late forties, it was not unusual for me to have a drink alone in the evening, although there were

still many days when I didn't drink at all. Any event was an occasion for excessive celebration, and there were increasingly frequent weekends when I drank myself to a hangover-creating high. Nevertheless, it was during this period that I received a major job promotion.

I was forty-nine when my second husband and I were married. Years before, we had dated through high school and two years of college but then were separated by World War II. Each of us had married elsewhere, divorced, and thirty years later we met by chance. We had ten years of laughter, sharing, and wonderment well laced with martinis and Scotch on the rocks. By the time I was sixty, anyone wise in the ways of alcoholism would have known I was in for big trouble. Happy plans dissolved into pouts, arguments began, and meals burned. Hurricanes of anger rushed through our once-happy cottage. We agreed we were drinking too much. We tried the switch technique, the time control schedule, the drink-only-on-weekends ploy. Nothing worked. Between us we were badly damaging our budget. My husband lost his job, and then for two harrowing years I watched him die of alcoholism. But I learned nothing from his death, and my drinking escalated as I bottle-fed my sorrow.

My early sixties saw me drunk every night and more and more frequently calling in sick or for personal leave. Life was pure and unadulterated hell! At work, I was often shaking so badly that I hesitated to give dictation because I would have to sign the letters. I made every possible excuse to meet someone for a "business luncheon" so that I could have a drink or two. As my alcoholism accelerated, my absenteeism

increased and my productivity diminished. I bounced checks, pawned silver, mourned, and I continued my drinking.

Finally on one cold winter day, I called Alcoholics Anonymous, and that evening two ladies took me to a meeting. We had a twenty-five-minute ride in the car, and I remember how good it was to talk about my fear and shakes, how kind they were without encouraging my self-pity. I remember being given a cup of coffee I could hardly handle and hearing impossible promises that would materialize if I would only make the impossible commitment. I did want to stop. The ladies suggested that I go to a women's meeting the next night, and I did. I had a drink first, of course, and when it came time to identify myself, I stated that my brain told me I was an alcoholic but the rest of me didn't believe it. The next night it snowed, and I stayed home and drank. That was the end of my first try at A.A.

Some months later I invited my daughter and son-in-law for dinner to celebrate her birthday. They found me sprawled across the living room floor, passed out cold. What a mournful birthday present! It took very little persuasion to convince me to go into the detoxification program at the local hospital. I knew I was in trouble; I was ashamed and heartbroken that I had caused her such hurt. Seven days in detox and eight weeks of really good help from a psychologist, and I was dry, sober, and ready to face the world again. The doctor strongly suggested that I participate in the local A.A. program, but I would have none of it. I was cured—I needed no further help.

A year and a half later I retired. I was enjoying my

new freedom and gave myself permission to have a drink only when I was dining out. That worked so well that I made a new rule: I could have a cocktail before dinner and an after-dinner drink. Then I made a rule that said I could serve alcohol to my friends in my home. That of course is the rule that sent me spinning right back down into fearful drunkenness. I was worse than before. My self-imposed hell was in my own home. Unbathed, in the same nightclothes day after day, afraid of the phone, the doorbell, and the darkness. If the clock said six, I wouldn't know whether it was morning or evening. Days ran into each other in an agonizing blur. I crawled to bed, drank when I came to, and sat shivering in fear of some unknown tragedy that I thought was about to descend on me. I remember wailing because I couldn't make coffee, sitting curled in a corner trying to sort out how I could commit suicide without making a mess. I might have tried, but I was afraid no one would find me before I started to stink.

Once again my daughter came to my rescue, and I checked into the detox program at the hospital. This time I was there for ten days. During that time, A.A. meetings were made available at the hospital. I was genuinely touched by the fact that they were led by a young man in a leg cast and on crutches, especially when I realized that he came as a volunteer. And twice before I left, I was given a leave of absence to attend local A.A. meetings.

Others have stated that they eagerly embraced the A.A. program. Unlike them, I did not enter the rooms willingly, nor did I find myself immediately at home. However, I had no other option. There was no escape

route that I had not tried, none that had not led to another failure. I was sixty-nine years old. I had neither time nor health to waste. For six months I didn't drink, attended meetings, and sometimes read the Big Book. I went to meetings exactly on time, sat quietly, and left as soon as the meeting closed. In no way was I a part of the group. I was not impressed by the sayings and didn't really believe the messages I heard. Then one day I was called on to share, and I proceeded to explode. I announced that in no way was I a "grateful alcoholic," that I hated my condition, that I did not enjoy the meetings, and that I did not leave the meetings refreshed. I found neither ease nor growth in the Fellowship.

My healing began with the arrogance of that statement. One of the women came to me after the meeting and told me I was about to "go out." She offered to help me find a sponsor and led me to exactly the person I needed. This lady had nineteen years of sobriety and, even more important, a wealth of experience in helping and guiding alcoholics through the steps of A.A. By no means do I intend to imply that I leaped with pleasure into the program. I stalled and resented and refused to accept each step as it came up. I felt challenged by each new concept and resentful toward my sponsor, who seemed intent on reducing me to abject stupidity. It was years before I realized that I resented the changes the program asked me to make, not my sponsor.

With the patience of unconditional love, she led me to acknowledge first that I was powerless over my alcoholism; then that others before me had conquered their illness. That there had to be some source of help

higher than any one of us and that, together, we were a well of strength on which any one of us could draw. From that point it was not hard to venture into the realization that a Power greater than any one of us existed, and with that understanding I found direction to my own special Higher Power. On that spiritual foundation I began to build a new life.

The Third Step was the most difficult for me. But having completed it, I found that I could face or untangle the other steps if, and when, I could remember to relax, trust the program, and implement the step rather than fight it. Accepting my Higher Power did not fully change my attitude of resistance. It just made yielding to instruction a more rational and acceptable mode of behavior. For each step, I still had to go through the process of recognizing that I had no control over my drinking. I had to understand that the steps of Alcoholics Anonymous had helped others and could help me. I had to realize that if I did want sobriety, I had better do the steps whether I liked them or not. Every time I ran into trouble, I ultimately found that I was resisting change.

My mentor had to remind me that A.A. is not just a project. A.A. offers me an opportunity to improve the quality of my life. I came to recognize that there is always a deeper and wider experience awaiting me. Early in my growth I remember thanking my sponsor for the hours and hours she had given me. She said, "Don't you think that you will do the same for someone else some day?" I replied, "I will never be responsible to or for anyone else ever again." That refusal to make any kind of repayment to the program delayed my offering to be of service in any capacity

and consequently delayed my maturing process. Not until two years had passed was I willing to act as group secretary. It was four years before I was willing to sponsor anyone. Today it is with real gratitude that I am allowed into the lives of a few women. My own understanding is broadened and deepened by their influence in my life. As the newcomer and I examine each step, both she and I receive new insight and find an additional facet to this jewel of sobriety. I'm proud now to be a part of the Fellowship that showed me the path up and out of hell. Now I am eager to share my experience as others have shared theirs with me.

Small miracles keep offering new opportunities just when I need change and growth. New friends have shown me hidden truths in those sayings that I once found so shallow. The lessons of tolerance and acceptance have taught me to look beyond exterior appearances to find the help and wisdom so often lurking beneath the surface. All my sobriety and growth, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, are dependent upon my willingness to listen, understand, and change.

During my fifth year, as a part of my annual personal inventory, I realized that I had not succeeded in developing a spiritual depth in my program. I had accepted what I was taught but had not gone in search of the private growth that I saw in others. I watched for and found people who take the program with them as they live, work, and play in the real world. Through their leadership, by precept and example, I am finding the daily excitement essential to my development as a person and to my contact with my Higher Power.

I approached Alcoholics Anonymous with fear and hesitation. Then, urged by the dread of what was be-

hind me, I took tiny delicate steps onto this new path. When I found the footing was firm, each tentative move brought me a little nearer to trust. Confidence grew, faith in my Higher Power expanded, and I came to recognize a light I had not known existed. Something within me shifted and welcomed a new source of strength, understanding, tolerance, and love. That selfish, withdrawn woman who announced that she would “never be responsible to or for anyone ever again” now finds sincere warmth in just being available. I count it a privilege to help another drunk.

It's been ten years since I retired, seven years since I joined A.A. Now I can truly say that I am a grateful alcoholic. Had I not become a drunk, I would have become another sober but sad statistic. At seventy-five I would be a lonely, unproductive old woman, watching TV, doing needlepoint, in my home without friends, and sinking further and further into an old age depression. As it is, A.A. has filled my days with friends, laughter, growth, and the feeling of worth that is rooted in constructive activity. My faith in, and contact with, my Higher Power shines more brightly than I dreamed it could. Those promises I thought were impossible are a viable force in my life. I am free to laugh all of my laughter, free to trust and be trusted, free to both give and receive help. I am free from shame and regret, free to learn and grow and work. I have left that lonely, frightening, painful express train through hell. I have accepted the gift of a safer, happier journey through life.