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HE LIVED ONLY TO DRINK

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ON LOOKING BACK at my life, I can’t see anything that would have warned me or my family of the devastation that alcoholism had in store for us. To our collective memory there was no drinking on either side of the family. We were from a long Southern Missionary Baptist tradition. My father was a minister, and I attended his church every Sunday with the rest of the family and, like them, was very active in religious work. My parents were also educators; my father was principal of the school I attended, and my mother taught there. They were both champions of community outreach and well respected. There was caring and togetherness among us. My maternal grandmother, herself a deeply religious woman who lived with us, helped raise me and was a living example of unconditional love.

Early on, the values of morality and learning were impressed on me. I was taught that if you were well educated and morally upstanding, there was nothing that could stand in the way of your success in this life or hereafter. As a child and young man, I was evangelical—literally drunk with moral zeal and intellec-

tual ambition. I excelled in school and dreamed of a career in teaching and helping others.

It was not until I was an adult, away from the family and doing graduate work at a prestigious East Coast university, that I had my first real drink of alcohol. I had tasted beer and a little wine before that and long since decided that fruit juice tasted better. I had never been inside a bar until one evening some fellow students persuaded me to go with them to a local cocktail lounge. I was fascinated. I still remember the hazy, smoky atmosphere, the hushed voices, the tinkle of ice in the glasses. It was pure sophistication. But most of all I remember that first sensation of the warm whiskey radiating through my body.

I drank so much that night that nobody believed I hadn't been drinking all the time, and I didn't get drunk, although there were parts of the evening that I didn't remember the next day. But more important than anything else that night, I belonged. I was at home in the universe; I was comfortable with people. Despite my active church and school life as a child, I had never felt really comfortable; I was actually very nervous and insecure around people and most of the time forced myself to be outgoing like my parents because I thought it was my duty. But this night in the bar was like no other time in my life. Not only was I completely at ease, but I actually loved all the strangers around me and they loved me in return, I thought, all because of this magic potion, alcohol. What a discovery. What a revelation!

The following year I began my career as a teacher. My first job was at a college fifty miles from my hometown. Before the school year ended, I had been asked

to resign because of my drinking. Within that short space of time, drinking had become an accepted way of life. I loved booze. I loved people who drank and the places where they drank. At that time in my life, although I had lost my first job and embarrassed my family, it never occurred to me that alcohol could be a problem. From that first night at the bar a year earlier, I had made a profound decision that was to direct my life for many years to come: Alcohol was my friend and I would follow it to the ends of the earth.

After that first job there were many more that I lost, all because of my drinking. I taught in many schools and in different states. I was no longer the moral young man who had seen his destiny in helping people live better. I was loud and arrogant, angry, abusive, always blaming and confronting others. I was getting arrested and beaten up. I had developed a foul mouth and was frequently drunk in classes and in public places. Finally my teaching career ended in total dishonor. My family could not understand what was happening to me, nor could I. In moments of clarity, I was full of shame, guilt, and remorse; I had become an embarrassment to all who had had faith in me; to others I had become a joke. I wanted to die. Now alcohol had become the only friend I had.

I wound up in an insane asylum, which probably saved my life. I do not remember how I got there; I do know that I had become suicidal. I became comfortable there, and months later I cried when I was dismissed. I knew by that time that I could not make it in the world. I was safe behind the barred hospital windows and wanted to stay there for the rest of my life. I could not drink there, but tranquilizers and

other drugs abounded and I helped myself to them. The word *alcoholic* was never mentioned. I do not believe the doctors knew much more about alcoholism than I did.

When I was released from the asylum, I moved to a large city to make a new beginning. My life had become a series of new beginnings. In time I picked up the drink, got good jobs, and lost them as I had in the past. All the fear and remorse and terrible depression returned tenfold. It still did not register that the drinking might be the cause of all this misery. I sold my blood. I prostituted myself; I drank more. I became homeless and slept in the bus and train terminals. I scrounged cigarette butts off the sidewalks and drank from a common wine bottle with other drunks. I drank my way to the men's municipal shelter and made it my home. I panhandled. By this time I lived only to drink. I did not bathe or change clothes; I stank; I became thin and ill; I had begun to hear voices and accepted them as death omens. I was frightened, arrogant, enraged, and resentful of man, God, and the universe. There was nothing else to live for, but I was too frightened to die.

It was at this point that a woman who was a social worker on skid row and a sober member of Alcoholics Anonymous sat me down in her office and told me her story—how she drank, what happened, and how she got sober. No one had ever done this before. I had been preached to, analyzed, cursed, and counseled, but no one had ever said, "I identify with what's going on with you. It happened to me, and this is what I did about it." She got me to my first A.A. meeting that same evening.

The people at the meetings gathered around me in kindness in those early days, and I did not drink. But the spiritual demons of withdrawal descended on me. I was black, and these people were white. What did they know about suffering? What could they tell me? I was black and bright, and the world had consistently rejected me for it. I hated this world, its people, and its punishing God. Yet I believed the people in A.A. were sincere and whatever they believed in was working for them. I just did not believe that A.A. would work for me as a black drunk.

I genuinely believed that I was different until much later, when I had what I now know to be my first spiritual awakening: that I was an alcoholic and I didn't have to drink! I also learned that alcoholism, as an equal opportunity illness, does not discriminate—is not restricted to race, creed, or geography. At last I was released from the bondage of my uniqueness.

In early sobriety I had to continue to live in a flophouse filled with active drunks. Not drinking, I became acutely aware of my surroundings—the foul smells, the noise, the hostility and physical danger. My resentments mounted at the realization that I had flushed a career down the drain, disgraced and alienated my family, and been relegated to the meanest of institutions, a skid row shelter. But I was also able to realize that this bonfire of resentment and rage was beckoning me to pick up a drink and plunge in to my death. Then I realized that I had to separate my sobriety from everything else that was going on in my life. No matter what happened or didn't happen, I couldn't drink. In fact, none of these things that I was going through had anything to do with my sobriety;

the tides of life flow endlessly for better or worse, both good and bad, and I cannot allow my sobriety to become dependent on these ups and downs of living. Sobriety must live a life of its own.

More important, I came to believe that I cannot do this alone. From childhood, despite the love I experienced, I had never let people, even those closest to me, inside my life. All my life I had lived the deepest of lies, not sharing with anyone my true thoughts and feelings. I thought I had a direct line to God, and I built a wall of distrust around myself. In A.A. I faced the pervasive “we” of the Twelve Steps and gradually realized that I can separate and protect my sobriety from outside hazards only inasmuch as I rely on the sober experience of other A.A. members and share their journey through the steps to recovery.

The rewards of sobriety are bountiful and as progressive as the disease they counteract. Certainly among these rewards for me are release from the prison of uniqueness, and the realization that participation in the A.A. way of life is a blessing and a privilege beyond estimate—a blessing to live a life free from the pain and degradation of drinking and filled with the joy of useful, sober living, and a privilege to grow in sobriety one day at a time and bring the message of hope as it was brought to me.