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ON THE MOVE

Working the A.A. program showed this alcoholic how to get from geographics to gratitude.

I THOUGHT MY LIFE had come to an end when I arrived at my first meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous at twenty-eight years old. I had been drinking since my early teens, and to my way of thinking, booze had been the answer to my problems, not the problem itself. Even I had to admit, though, that my life had gotten pretty bad and my options were quickly running out. In a moment of desperation, I agreed to go to *one* A.A. meeting.

It is easier to see now, as I look back on my drinking days, that from the very beginning alcohol had been a part of nearly every disaster in my life. As a very young boy, perhaps ten or eleven years old, I had begun to steal drinks when my parents were not looking, or my friends and I would convince someone from the local high school to buy us some beer. Slowly, but very steadily, my problems began to grow from there.

It started with simple episodes at school. My buddies and I would split a six-pack over lunch and thought nobody would notice. It never occurred to me that a thirteen-year-old could not easily hide the effects of even a single beer. By the time I was fourteen

or fifteen, things were getting far more serious, and the consequences of my drinking were getting more costly in every way—socially, morally, financially.

A turning point came when I was fifteen. My mom was in the middle of an ugly divorce. Through nobody's fault but my own, I decided that I had the answer. In a drunken brawl, having planned every step of my actions, I attempted to kill my stepfather. I vaguely remember being dragged out of the house by the police and came to, yet again, trying to answer for what I had done while drunk. The results were that I was eventually given a choice by the judge: Go to juvenile hall until I was twenty-five years old, or leave the state until I was at least twenty-one. I did not want to go to juvenile hall, so I did the math and decided the better part of valor was to get as far away from there as I could.

Over the next thirteen years, until I graced the doors of A.A. for the first time, life really never got any better. I did, however, learn the fine art of geographics. From my home on the East Coast, I landed in Japan. Then I moved back to the United States and to New England, then out to California, where over the next six years I saw my alcoholism take me to new depths of disgrace, embarrassment, and despair. As one of my early A.A. sponsors used to say, I didn't hang out with lower companions—I had become one.

The specifics are pretty much the same as for most alcoholics. I went places I used to swear I would never go. I did things I could not imagine myself doing. I hung out with people that at one time I would cross the street to avoid. There came a time when, looking into the mirror, I honestly did not know just who was

looking back at me. To say that I had arrived at a “jumping-off point” is an understatement. Life just could not go on like this much longer.

I began the process of speeding up the day when life would end. My doctor has six or seven suicide attempts on my medical records. Most were pitiful efforts to reach out for help, although I didn’t see it at the time. My last such attempt was very public and demonstrated that I had lost touch with reality and with any sense of what my actions could do to others.

A friend took pity on me, I think, and invited me to his home for Thanksgiving. His parents were in town from the East Coast, and he was having a big party. There at the dinner table, I stood up and attempted suicide in front of everyone. The memory of that has always stuck in my mind as the definition of “pitiful, incomprehensible demoralization” that the Big Book talks about. What is sadder is that my actions had made sense to me at the time.

As a result of that episode, I ended up seeing a psychiatrist to find out what was wrong with me. At our very first session she invited me to “tell me about yourself.” I proceeded to do so, only to be told to stop after I had only spoken for five minutes or so. She explained that she really only had two things to say to me: that she thought I hadn’t told the truth since I walked into the office, and that I was an alcoholic. (It took me a long time to understand how a description of my life could make anyone think I was a drunk.) The doctor said that if I was going to continue to see her, I had to agree to do two things. First, she gave me a business card with a phone number on it. She said the next time I tried to kill myself, I should call that

number first. Second, she was going to give me a book to read, and she wanted me to read the first few hundred pages before our next meeting. Before I left that day, she gave me a copy of the Big Book.

It took some time, but I eventually made it to my first meeting. I had gone out on New Year's Eve. When I came to, I thought it was the next morning. As I held my head steady, popped some aspirin, and tried to drink a cup of coffee, I glanced at the front page of the newspaper. It was January 9, and I had been in a blackout for over a week. After everything else that had happened, that was terrifying enough to get me to my first meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous.

When I drove up to that first meeting, though, I saw that the address I had was actually a church. As a nice Jewish boy, I was not about to wander into a church; I knew that I would not be welcome. I hid on the floorboards of the car and peeked out the window, waiting for the drunks to walk by. Everyone looked normal, so I figured I might be in the wrong place. I was about to leave, but then I saw a drinking buddy of mine go by. I jumped out of my car and greeted him. Funny thing, but it was his first meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous also. What a coincidence! In we walked—into a world that has turned everything in my life inside out.

I didn't like A.A. and the people in it for a long time. I didn't trust anyone, and I got tired of sitting at meetings listening to other newcomers as they began to talk of finding God, having their families return to them, being treated with respect by society, and finding some peace of mind. It never occurred to me that they had sponsors and were working the Twelve Steps

of recovery. I had what I now call “a sponsor of the month.” I always had a sponsor, but whenever one of them would “lovingly suggest” I do something, I would fire them and move on to someone else. I remained angry, bitter, and isolated, even though I was going to five or six A.A. meetings per week and was not drinking. At seven months sober I was getting a little bored with A.A. and began to wonder if this was all there was to life. The concept of not drinking again seemed a little extreme, and I thought that perhaps it would be different this time.

Then something happened that I now believe helped me to stay sober and find my Higher Power. I woke up one morning and couldn't feel my legs. I could still walk with a little difficulty, but it got worse as time passed. Several months and lots of medical examinations, doctors, hospital visits, and tests later, I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. The path since then has been quite a journey. I now either walk with crutches or use a wheelchair. There have been lots of times I wanted and intended to drink again. During my second year of sobriety, I slowly became angrier and angrier. I was in what one of my sponsors now refers to as “the angry years.” I was one of those people we see at meetings and wonder how they stay sober.

At my home group, members didn't give up on me; they loved me anyway. One day the group's general service representative announced she was moving and would have to give up her commitment, and they elected me to her job. They explained to me that a serious, two-year service commitment was exactly what I needed. I tried to explain that I was not eligible, but they told me to go to the monthly general service

business meeting and tell them my problems with serving. Needless to say, they didn't allow me to quit either.

Along the way I learned, in spite of myself, that the best thing about A.A. service jobs is that, for a period of time, I got out of myself. At some point I began to shut my mouth and actually listen to what other people were saying at meetings. After white-knuckling it for almost two years in A.A., I finally broke down and saw that I could not stay sober all by myself, but I was terrified of going back to drinking. After all my suicide attempts I had no fear of dying, but I could not stand the idea that I would go back to living that way again. I was at what the oldtimers and our literature refer to as a "jumping-off point." I didn't know what to do.

One evening I did the unimaginable—at least for me. After picking up my sponsor of the month to go to a meeting, I informed him that I was ready to work the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. In most respects my life began again that night. That man took me through the steps in a loving, gentle way that for the remainder of my life I will be grateful for. He taught me to look inward at my soul, to welcome a Higher Power into my life, and to reach out to others. He taught me how to look into a mirror and to like, and even respect, the man who looked back at me.

When I reached the Ninth Step, I began to hesitate in my enthusiasm. One morning I woke up covered in sweat and could not get over a nightmare I had—that this was my last day of sobriety. After calling friends and my sponsor, I knew what had to be done. I spent the entire day, more than eight or nine hours, going into people's offices and making my amends. Some

were thrilled to see me. One woman called the police. When they arrived, it turned out the policeman was in A.A., and he convinced the woman not to press charges. I even ran into someone who I had thought was dead, so I took a “dead guy” to lunch and made my amends to him also. For the first time I thought, and actually felt, as if I was a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, with something to share at meetings.

When I was four years sober, I took a trip back to my home city, one of the very few times since I had left so many years before under the threat of jail time. I made amends to the man I had attempted to kill when I was fifteen years old. I visited, and made amends to, several people who had sat at that Thanksgiving dinner table and had watched me attempt suicide in front of them. I came home exhausted but knew that I had somehow done the right thing. It is probably no coincidence that the following year my old friend invited me back for Thanksgiving dinner.

A.A., and the steps of recovery, have shown me how to look at events in a different way. I can now understand how some things, which once seemed like major disasters, turned out to be blessings. Certainly my alcoholism fits that category. I am truly a grateful alcoholic today. I do not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. Those events that once made me feel ashamed and disgraced now allow me to share with others how to become a useful member of the human race. My physical disability has not altered that attitude; if anything, it has enhanced it. Long ago I learned that no matter how uncomfortable I was physically, I felt better by getting out of myself and help-

ing someone else. It has also helped to learn how to laugh at myself and to not take myself so seriously. I am aware that I am not the only person on this earth with problems.

Through my experiences in general service, A.A. has shown me how widespread and diverse the program is. I have traveled throughout the United States and even went to Israel for several months a few years ago. While there, I attended meetings and was the secretary to a meeting located in a bomb shelter.

Like everyone else I have good days and bad days. Unlike my attitude while I was still drinking, however, I rarely dread what is going to happen to me today. I have even had the chance to see my father come into A.A. We have been to numerous A.A. conventions together and have shared more with each other in the past few years than we ever had before. I think we are both at peace with our pasts and comfortable with the present.

In the past several years I have gone back to school and begun a new career. As I roll around in my wheelchair, I am amazed when I realize that I honestly cannot imagine life to be anything different than what it has been—and that is just fine with me. The tools of sobriety and recovery in A.A. are there for me to use in all aspects of my life, and all I ever need is the willingness to do what is in front of me. I am grateful that a drunk like me was fortunate enough to live until I arrived in Alcoholics Anonymous.