

GUTTER BRAVADO

Alone and unemployable, he was given two options by the court, get help or go to jail, and his journey toward teachability began.

I WAS BORN in a major midwestern city at the tail end of the baby boom. My parents were not well-to-do, but they were employed and pursuing the American dream in the mid-1950s. Dad was an ex-policeman who had put himself through law school and worked with banks and as a real estate broker. Mom had graduated from a well-known East Coast college, majoring in journalism, and moved west to marry my father and raise a family. Both were children of hard-working European immigrants.

Growing up, my big brother and I went to church on Sundays and attended parochial schools. We had plenty to eat and more than just the basic necessities of life. I was a smart but mischievous kid, and at some point I decided it was easier to lie than to suffer the consequences of my pranks. Dad was big on law and order but especially didn't like liars. We often had conflicts. Other than this, my early childhood was a relatively happy one.

Eventually my brother went off to college, and I started venturing into the world on my own. I enjoyed my friends and our many adventures. This is where my first experiments with alcohol began. Sharing a few

beers or a stolen bottle with friends on Friday nights was my approach to maturity and adulthood. In school I developed the reputation of never quite working up to my potential. I felt the world took things much too seriously. Where I saw myself as fun-loving and happy-go-lucky, others saw irresponsibility and insolence. A rebellious nature soon started to surface.

In the mid-sixties I had the opportunity to visit my brother, who had a fellowship at a university in California. These were heady times, and my experiences there left a lasting impression on me. There was music in the air and dancing in the streets. Little wonder that after returning to the Midwest I soon became a discipline problem. Disillusioned with what I saw as the mundane trivialities of school, I found it harder and harder to concentrate. I longed for the carefree life. By the fall of 1968, after leaving three different schools, I decided I'd had enough. So I quit the books, packed my guitar, left home, and headed back to the West Coast filled with the optimism of youth and intending to make a life for myself.

My tiny grubstake soon started to run out, and work was hard to find. I panhandled a little but found I was too proud for it or, more likely, not hungry enough. I began living hand-to-mouth, but my survival skills were not as sharp as I thought. In warmer weather I camped in the woods near the coastal highway. The barking of the sea lions made it hard to sleep. With winter approaching, I roamed the waterfront and the streets, sleeping in storerooms and seedy hotels or flopping with migrant farm workers in town for their off-season.

What had begun as an adventure was turning into a

nightmare. My moments of escape from this uncomfortable reality came when I persuaded someone to share their wine or vodka. With a drink in me, my confidence returned, my direction seemed clear-cut, and I reveled in lofty plans and dreams for the future. Drinking to escape became as important as eating to survive. All of the gutter bravado and determination crumbled when, in the end, I ran up against the law. The authorities sent me packing back to the Midwest with nothing more than the clothes on my back.

Arriving home, I dazzled my friends with exaggerated tales of exotic people and strange happenings, some of them true. We went straight out drinking, and I picked up right where I left off. Always the object was to go out and “get wasted.” Though I sometimes had trouble holding my liquor, I was willing to try harder. I felt the key to successful drinking was the same as it is in musicianship—practice, practice, practice.

After an attempt at college, I sought employment, often with a hangover. The jobs I found I considered to be menial. I did not yet know that all work is honorable. The maintenance crews, the electroplating, the factory work, and the pharmaceutical industry (after emptying the trash, I started on the shelves) were all on my résumé. My thievery, tardiness, and absenteeism, the reasons for my dismissals, weren't on my résumé. I was becoming generally dissatisfied, but I did not know that the problem was within me. I wanted some of the finer things in life, but upon realizing they took effort, I dismissed them as trappings of the establishment. Watching out for a bag of money by the side of the road was more my idea of planning for the future.

In spite of my drinking, I managed to save a little money. With my first thousand dollars I bought a motorcycle. With this I purchased a lifestyle more than a means of transportation. For years afterward I lived the biker lifestyle. At times raw and exciting, my existence revolved around building and drag racing motorcycles. Ride hard, live fast, and die young were the new rules. Weekdays I spent bar-hopping the neighborhoods. Weekends would find me in the clubs downtown. As the years passed, my circle of friends grew smaller. Some died accidentally, some were killed, some went to jail, and some just developed the good sense to get out and grow up. These were the ones I didn't understand. I sure wasn't making any new friends, so more and more I found myself a loner.

In the mid-seventies I was hired by the steel industry, a union job at good pay. Soon I bid to a craft job and started learning the electrical trade. The work was hot, dirty, and dangerous. Everyone worked swing shift and at the end of my turn, I felt as if I had survived an ordeal. The first stop was the tavern on top of the hill. Many times there was no second stop. Liquor was not the only recreational substance available there, and I was no stranger to any of them. This was where I got my first bar tab, so no matter how broke I was, I could always stop in for drinks after work. While the guys around me were buying homes, raising families, and otherwise living responsibly, I was already having trouble keeping my utilities on and my car running. I saw to it that I paid my bar tab, however.

My life became the pursuit of intoxication. After a few drinks I felt more normal and in control. I

changed from a furtive loner into a party animal. My jokes were funnier, the girls were prettier, I shot better pool, and the juke box played better tunes. I could look people in the eye and mingle with the best of them.

Every so often I took work-related college courses. Spending time with normal people, I began to see how wild I had become. My cherished individualism was turning into isolationism. I had a growing uneasiness that I was in a vicious circle. I had no friends—only acquaintances. This fact was underscored by the bullet holes in my car, courtesy of one acquaintance I had double-crossed. My only sense of relief was in the bottle, but even that was beginning to fail me. My dreams had long since faded, my direction was unclear, my confidence lost, and the drinking would not restore them as it once had. Personal hygiene became an afterthought. There were times when I would try to live without drinking, but it was difficult, often ending at the most inappropriate times. I cleaned up for special occasions such as holidays, funerals, job interviews, and court dates, only to fail in the final hour, snapping back to the bottle like a rubber band. Planned abstinence was extremely stressful.

The downward spiral of my life began making smaller circles. My driving record included many accidents and a ticket list that would raise a policeman's eyebrows. When I carried insurance, it was high risk. I grew sneakier and less outwardly defiant. Despite breaking laws routinely for years, I stayed out of big trouble for the most part. A few times they almost had me, but I managed to scam on technicalities

or I got yet another break. Finally an indiscretion committed years earlier came back to haunt me. I was about to have a forced encounter with the federal judicial system. I began to feel like a clown juggling too many balls. Each ball represented a problem I was keeping up in the air. My arms were weary and I knew I couldn't keep on much longer, but I was not about to give up. My pride and ego wouldn't let me. Bosses, judges, co-workers, lawyers, car notes, bar tabs, loan sharks, utility payments, landlords, my girlfriend, people I had double-crossed—I looked to all these as the source of my problems, while overlooking the most basic problem: my drinking and myself. I'd known for a long time that I desperately wanted off this merry-go-round, but I had no idea how to do it.

The judge had no trouble coming up with a few ideas, however. I got house arrest with electronic monitoring and strictly supervised probation with random urinalysis for openers. Five years in the penitentiary waited after that. I still played the angles, until it became clear to the authorities that I could not live up to the conditions of my probation. It didn't matter what the consequences were—I couldn't not drink, and I gave up trying. When the court eventually called me in for my violations, they gave me two choices: get help or go to jail. After careful thought I chose the first. Now either they were going to send me someplace, or I could send myself. I chose the second, and they gave me a week to make arrangements. Procrastinating to the end, it took me three. This is when, once again, desperate, cornered, and at my lowest, I said the only prayer I still knew: "God help

me—if you get me out of this one, I'll never do it again." My life was finally out of my control.

No longer the party animal, I was broke and my rent was overdue. I had dirty dishes piled in the sink and moldy pots on the stove. Bags of garbage and bottles were lined up by the door and the toilet had stopped. Piles of stolen junk were sitting on the floor. I had been wearing my clothes much too long and, except for a box of macaroni and cheese or a pot pie, I was not eating. When a knock came at the door, I would run into the bathroom and peep out the window to see who was coming to get me. Not drinking wasn't an option, but drinking didn't help. Such was my condition as I left the house to check myself into the hospital for my day of reckoning.

Outside of being very nervous, I don't remember much about admissions because I was so loaded at the time. After a few hours I began to feel safer. My apprehension slowly turned to relief. Maybe they could help me after all. I had no idea how sick I was to become. The first five of my seventeen days in detox were hell. I could do little more than lie in bed. It had been years since I was sober that long. After a week I felt a little better and began surveying my surroundings. I started my own counter-evaluations. I found the doctors and nurses to be knowledgeable and professional, but I sensed that while they knew much about alcoholism, they had learned it in books—they had not lived it. I did not need knowledge. I needed solutions. No one but the hopeless really knew what it felt like to exist without hope. The skeptic in me came out, searching for every loophole and excuse to pick things apart and to divert attention from my

condition. My initial optimism was beginning to waver. Was this all there was?

However, there was one man on the staff who seemed different. He seemed very comfortable and at ease with a bit of a knowing sparkle in his eye. This guy was clearly not as stuffy as the rest, and when he told me his story, I was surprised to find it very similar to mine—only his was no secret. He mentioned being a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. How could it be that he obviously had the respect of the staff after having lived a life of crime? How could it be that he was a lot like me but had made it back? Here was someone who was sober, yet cool; humble, yet firm in his convictions; serious, but not without a sense of humor. This was one to whom I could relate and maybe even trust. He may have saved my life just by being there, and to this day he doesn't even know it.

Over the next few days I was still not talking much, but I was listening and watching. I learned more about how Alcoholics Anonymous works and met more of its members. I found out it was not something they left at the hospital as they went home; it was a way of life. I found out it was spirituality, not religion. I saw them enjoying themselves, and they all agreed on one thing: If I wanted to change my life as they had changed theirs, I could, as long as I became willing to do what they did. I became fascinated. Here I was, the scum of the earth, yet they came to me and invited me to join them. I started to feel that if I was ever going to try something different, I'd better do it now. It might be my last chance. After all, I still had to deal with the authorities, and I had nothing

to lose by playing along. So I read their book, I started to work their steps, and (with the door closed and the lights out) I asked for a little help from a Higher Power as they suggested. Finally, they highly recommended that I attend their meetings—especially the first night out.

I walked out of there on a sunny afternoon. I intended to go to a meeting that night, but I also had ten dollars in my pocket and a reason to celebrate. I was sober for twenty-two days, and I was feeling pretty good about myself. Soon my old instincts began to take over. Sunny day. Ten bucks. Celebration. Feeling good. Before I knew it, I was walking into the back door of one of my old watering holes. The smell of alcohol hit me when I entered, and my mouth watered. I sat down at the bar. I ordered my usual ginger wash. Couldn't I make it just one day without drinking? At this last question I realized that yes, since I put it that way, I probably could make it just one day without drinking. Besides, I was going to a meeting that night and who knows, they might have breathalyzers there. I put down my dollar, got off that stool, and walked back out the door. After all, I could drink tomorrow if I wanted to—and that's just what I planned to do.

At my first meeting that night the people fulfilled their responsibility—they made me welcome. I met others like me and it felt good. Maybe this thing was for real. So I went to another meeting, and I got the same feeling. Then another meeting. The tomorrows came and went, and to this day, I still haven't found it necessary to take another drink. That was well over six years ago.

The meetings gave me what my sponsor likes to call one of the most important words in the Big Book: A.A. put a “we” in my life. “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol. . . .” I no longer had to be alone. Fellowship and activity kept me coming back long enough to work the Twelve Steps. The more I did, the better I felt. I started hanging out with my sponsor and some active people at the meetings. They showed me how gratitude is something that is demonstrated, not talked about—gratitude is action. They suggested I was lucky to still have a car, even though it was a junker; therefore, I might consider taking the less fortunate to meetings. They reminded me you can’t teach anything to a know-it-all, so remain teachable. When old behaviors started to creep back in, they called me on it. When life just didn’t feel right, they talked about developing faith and relying on my Higher Power. They told me lack of power was my dilemma and that there is a solution. I took to A.A. immediately and believed like a child that if I leveled my pride enough to thoroughly follow their path, I’d get what they had. And it worked. Starting out, I just wanted to keep the authorities off my back. I never bargained for this program’s changing the course of my life or showing me the way to freedom and happiness.

Still very impatient, I wanted the whole deal right away. That’s why I related so well to the story about a wide-eyed new person and an oldtimer. When the newcomer approached the oldtimer, envying his accomplishments and many years of sobriety, the oldtimer slapped down his hand like a gavel and said, “I’ll trade you even! My thirty years for your thirty

days—right now!” He knew what the newcomer had yet to find out: that true happiness is found in the journey, not the destination.

So today I’m much more comfortable with life, as Alcoholics Anonymous has promised, and I know they’re right when they say it keeps getting better. My circumstances have steadily improved as my spiritual life grows and matures. Words cannot begin to describe the feelings in my heart as I sometimes ponder how much my life has changed, how far I’ve come, and how much there is yet to discover. And though I’m not sure where my journey may take me next, I know I’ll owe it to the grace of God and to three words of the Twelve Steps: continue, improve, and practice.

Oh, and one more thing they told me: Humility is the key.