

THE PERPETUAL QUEST

This lawyer tried psychiatrists, biofeedback, relaxation exercises, and a host of other techniques to control her drinking. She finally found a solution, uniquely tailored, in the Twelve Steps.

WHEN I WAS a newly minted lawyer starting out in the practice of criminal law, there were five of us in our law office. My favorite lawyer was the eccentric, disheveled, wild-eyed Irish law professor who was brilliant or crazy, depending on your point of view, constantly cleaning out his pipe bowl with a black fingernail and tossing back vodka martinis whenever he got the chance. Then there was the new but world-weary litigation lawyer who told endless tales of his former life of white wine and bouillabaisse under the Mediterranean sun as he conducted his exporting business on the Riviera. Why would he leave such an ideal, wine-drenched job in sunny climes to slog away at law school? I kept wondering. There was also a giant good-hearted bear of a man, who today is a judge, who spent more time listening and helping others than he did practicing criminal law. Into this office landed a pair of know-it-all, fast-acting, but not too experienced young lawyers: my husband and me.

Within a dozen years, three of these five promising lawyers were dead from alcoholism, struck down at the peak of their careers. The judge is still and always

has been a sober judge. And I somehow unwittingly, and even while drinking, turned into a corporate counsel and later, thankfully, became a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. The professor's kidneys gave out from one too many martinis; the exporting lawyer kept drinking until he died, despite a liver transplant; my ex-husband died in a fire on what was to be, he had said, his last drunk before going to A.A. *again*, when I was ten years sober. I have been to too many premature funerals due to our good friend alcohol.

My husband and I met and married in law school in a romantic haze of alcohol, twinkling lights, and much promise. We stood out as the only young married couple in our class. We worked and played hard, camped and hiked and skied, threw fabulous parties for our sophisticated friends, and prided ourselves on staying away from drugs. In fact, it was fear that kept me away from drugs—fear that I might not get called to the bar (that's the other bar, the legal one) if I were convicted of possession of illegal street drugs. More importantly, my best friend was wonderful, powerful alcohol, and I loved it.

Until I was four years old, I lived upstairs from a tavern, where I saw a few drunks bounced around. My mother worked for relatives who also lived over the tavern, and whoever had time looked after me. Despite my pleas, my mother married a violent man, and we moved away to a life that made my tavern life look really holy. I kept running away back to the tavern until it was demolished. I still fondly look at pictures of that place.

By the age of fourteen I had my first drunk, which ended in a minor police visit to my home. By the age

of eighteen I was a daily drinker, and by age twenty-one I had my first year-long binge in France, which I euphemistically referred to as my study year abroad. I came home very sick and drunk. A few months later I went to bed with a bottle of Scotch one night and decided I would go to law school. If you are having trouble, try something that is even more difficult, to “show them.” That was my philosophy. It was enough to drive me to drink, and it did.

At law school we used to drink a lot of beer in student pubs, debating whether rocks had souls and what was the nature of the judicial process, as though it had never been considered before. As new lawyers, my husband and I eagerly beavered in the office early in the morning before running off to court to fearlessly defend the downtrodden. Lunch was the training ground for the perpetual quest for the best martini—usually two or three of them, good for taking away the knot that by this time had permanently lodged itself in my stomach. (I didn’t know that it represented fear and that I was not a fearless defender after all.) Afternoons would be full of creative legal arguments in court. If court finished early, maybe we’d make it back to the office, maybe not.

Evenings we drank with the best of them: lawyers, writers, media types, everyone vying to tell the best stories, which of course got funnier and funnier the more we drank and the later it got. When I drank, the fear evaporated and I became articulate and apparently very, very funny—or so they said then. Years later I drank so much that I was no longer funny. But at the time, the drinks and the stories and the camaraderie were as wonderful as I was witty. We would

get home to sleep by one or two in the morning, and the next day we would be up early to start all over again. The fortitude and resilience of youth made us invincible.

Unfortunately, by the time we thought it was time to have a “real life” and maybe start a family, the marriage disintegrated. I was then twenty-eight years old, getting divorced, drinking all the time, and seeing a psychiatrist three times a week, trying to solve my problem, whatever it was.

I thought I had found part of the answer when I stumbled into a private controlled-drinking program, which helped me, during the initial thirty-day mandatory period of abstinence, to hook a very large rug, row by row, well into many late nights. “One more row!” I kept saying, gritting my teeth against a drink. My period of abstinence also helped me get a better job in the corporate world, away from all those hard-drinking criminal lawyers, and a new three-story, four-bedroom house. Just what every single woman needs! It helped me to quit the psychiatrist. During this abstinence, I also got out of a sick relationship, which reproduced the violence of my childhood.

Incredibly, I did not connect the improved manageability of my life in this short period of abstinence to the absence of booze. It didn’t matter in the long run, because unfortunately, I started to get drunk again. I recall being fixated on that first glass of wine I was allowed to drink the day my coach informed me that I was ready to start drinking in controlled fashion. My tongue was almost hanging out.

Many drunks later, I tried everything else I could

find: more therapy, different psychiatrists (it was always to be the next one who would solve my problem), biofeedback, relaxation exercises, Antabuse, lots of self-help books from Freud to Jung, to every current fad that was published or taught. All to no avail, of course, because I'd always end up drunk.

Came the day when I realized that I couldn't keep dragging myself off to work in the morning and spending half the energy of every day concealing the fact that I was a barely functioning drunk. I would go home to drink until I passed out, come to in the middle of the night terrified, listen to the radio, and get worldwide telephonitis, finally dozing off at dawn, just in time to be awakened by the alarm and start the process all over again. I gave up on relationships of any significance, saw my friends less, and stopped committing myself to most social occasions because I could never count on being sober. More and more, I just worked and went home to drink—and the drinking was starting to outstrip the working.

One day I was so hungover at lunchtime I called a friend and had a little cry. "I've tried everything and nothing works," I said, reciting my litany of doctors and different therapies. I did not remember that thirteen years earlier, when I was twenty-one years old, I had attended a few meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous after waking up one morning not knowing where I was. I had just started law school and was terrified most of the time, so I went on a binge to quell the fear, which only got worse. I have no idea what made me go to A.A. way back then. But there were no young people at the meetings, and people kept marveling at how young and fresh I looked. (No one

at A.A. said that when I came back thirteen years later.)

My friend suggested that we contact a man she knew who was a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, and I agreed to call him. "Perhaps he could call you," she said helpfully, which was the key, because by that night I was just fine and didn't need any outside help aside from a drink or two. But he kept phoning and bothering me about going to a meeting. When he told me he went to A.A. meetings three or four times a week, I thought, Poor man, he has nothing better to do. What a boring life it must be for him, running around to A.A. meetings with nothing to drink! Boring indeed: no bouncing off walls, no falling down stairs, no regular trips to hospital emergency rooms, no lost cars, and on and on.

My first meeting back at A.A. was on an unseasonably hot June night, but there was not a cool drink in sight in that church basement. The smoke could have choked a horse (today, it is much improved), and a fanatical woman with smiling bright eyes eagerly explained to me that they had this important book I should buy. Thinking that they were doing the book promotion because they needed the money, I said firmly, "I'll give you the money, but I don't want your book!" Which about sums up my attitude and explains why, for the next few months, I continued to get drunk in spite of dragging my body to meetings every few days. I would stare at the large vodka bottle in my kitchen cupboard and say, "You won't get me!" but it did; I always lost the battle and ended up drunk.

My last hangover was on a Friday before a long summer weekend. I had struggled through the day feeling small and hopeless, hiding the trembling of my

hands when I had to sign documents, and desperately working to wrap my tongue around words during meetings. Later that Friday night, after an agonizingly long workday, I was dragging myself up the deserted street thinking that the whole world, except for me, had someplace to go on that long weekend, and what's more, they all had someone to go with.

The first difference between that night and all the others was that I did not immediately go directly to a bar to get lubricated or home with my regular giant weekend supply of booze. Instead I went to my club to swim, where strangely enough I also did not drink. I was so hungover that I had to give up trying to swim and instead wrapped myself in a bathrobe and sat in a dark corner of the locker room lounge for two hours, feeling desperately sorry for myself.

I don't know what happened during those two hours, but close to eight o'clock, I leaped up, jumped into my clothes, and raced off to a meeting I'd had no intention of attending. It was a bit like getting a rap on the head with an invisible hammer and having my brain flip over, because the meeting seemed to be radically different from the last time I had been there. The people looked animatedly alive, the weirdos who had been attending before were absent that night, and the books on display actually looked interesting. I bought the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, listened intently, and then, for the first time, I went for coffee with those people and listened some more.

Late that night at home, there was a presence in the room with me, even though I lived alone. The next morning I knew I didn't have to drink. That night I went to a Step meeting where they discussed Step

Two, “Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity,” and I actually talked about God, the one who had abandoned me when I was very little, very frightened, and very hurt. In the weeks and months that followed, I did everything that was suggested to me. I went to a meeting every day, read the books and literature, and got a sponsor who told me to have a quiet time every morning and try to pray and meditate or at least sit still for a few minutes, before racing off for the day. Since I prided myself on adhering to the intellectual principle of not having contempt for anything prior to investigation, I tried to keep an open mind no matter what anyone said and how stupid I thought it was. That probably saved my life.

I joined a downtown group that met near my office right after work at 5:15. (I would not have made it to 8:00 p.m.) Soon, I got into service. I was given bank books, notes of business meetings, and various other instructions and told to do whatever was necessary to keep the meeting going. I did that job for quite some time. I also instituted regular business meetings and found an eager newcomer to whom I eventually turned over the bank book and papers.

I had a lot of problems in those early days, but no matter what the problem, I was repeatedly told to seek more spiritual development, something that did not interest me. I was also told that my purpose here on earth was to be of maximum service to God and the people around me, and that didn't interest me too much either. However, I said nothing, listened, and kept going to meetings, mostly Step discussions, where I heard people talk about how they practiced the Steps

and about the Big Book, our selfishness, and helping others. Sometimes, I thought they were nuts, those meetings; often I thought they were boring, but I kept listening and tried to relate.

Soon after a friend of mine was killed by a drunk going the wrong way on the freeway, a truck driver talked about driving long hauls drunk. I was horrified and repelled, until I paused to recall that I used to drive when I couldn't walk straight. When my friend was killed, my A.A. friends said, "Don't drink! Don't think! Go to meetings!" I went to a meeting where I sobbed and gnashed my teeth, but I didn't drink.

I became as compulsive about A.A. as I had been about drinking, which was necessary because I had been told to spend as much time at meetings as I had spent drinking. I went to every A.A. get-together possible and was saturated with A.A. I listened to tapes of A.A. talks. I read and reread the literature and books, laughing into the night over *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers*. I signed up for the *Loners-Internationalist Meeting* in print (*LIM*) and shared the meetings I attended in letters to people who could not get to meetings. This helped me to remember what I had heard, and my sharing helped someone else. I once wrote to a man who received my letter the same day he had killed someone in a car accident, which would no doubt make one very, very thirsty.

Many years later, although alcohol is not part of my life and I no longer have the compulsion to drink, it can still occur to me what a good drink tastes like and what it can do for me, from my stand-at-attention alcoholic taste buds right down to my stretched out tingling toes. As my sponsor used to point out, such

thoughts are like red flags, telling me that something is not right, that I am stretched beyond my sober limit. It's time to get back to basic A.A. and see what needs changing. That special relationship with alcohol will always be there, waiting to seduce me again. I can stay protected by continuing to be an active member of A.A.

The hardest thing I had to deal with in sobriety was my own anger and the violence I lived through in my childhood. I had forgiven those involved as best I could, but the mind seems never to forget. I had gratefully received years of outside help because I was told that my drinking was only the symptom of deeper troubles. Yet despite the help of many professionals, I know I would never have recovered from violence and alcoholism without A.A.'s Twelve Steps, which are uniquely tailored for people like me.

Just as importantly, I believe that I recovered through the grace of a Higher Power, despite the fact that I was very angry and wanted nothing to do with God when I arrived at Alcoholics Anonymous. In fact, I did not need to find God. I only needed an open mind, and the spirit found me.

When I was five years sober, I met a man in A.A. who was also five years sober. He said that the rocks in my head fit the holes in his. Today we have a daughter who has never seen her parents drink and who sees them try to help others in Alcoholics Anonymous. We have a nice home and sober family life in a community with lots of A.A. friends and meetings. It's a long, long way from that first A.A. meeting, and it couldn't get much better.