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THE MISSING LINK

He looked at everything as the cause of his unhappiness—except alcohol.

WHEN I WAS eight or nine years old, life suddenly became very difficult. Feelings began to emerge that I did not understand. Depression crept into my life as I started to feel alone, even in crowded rooms. In fact, life didn't make much sense to me at all. It's hard to say what sparked all of this, to pinpoint one fact or event that changed everything forever. The fact of the matter was, I was miserable from early on in my life.

It was all very confusing. I remember isolating on the playground, watching all the other children laughing and playing and smiling, and not feeling like I could relate at all. I felt different. I didn't feel as if I was one of them. Somehow, I thought, I didn't fit in.

My school marks soon reflected these feelings. My behavior and attitude seemed to become troublesome to everyone around me. I soon began spending more time in the principal's office than in the classroom. My parents, perplexed by such an unhappy son, began having difficulties. My house was soon filled with the sounds of arguments and yelling about how to handle me. I found that running away from home could supply me with some sort of temporary solace. Until of

course, the police would find me and bring me back to my house and my worried parents.

About that time I started seeing therapists and specialists, each with a different theory and a different solution. They conducted special tests and interviews designed to get to the root of my troubles, and came to the conclusion that I had a learning disability and was depressed. The psychiatrist started me on some medication, and the problems in school started to clear up. Even some of the depression began to ease up for a bit. However, something still seemed fundamentally wrong.

Whatever the problem, I soon found what appeared to be the solution to everything. At age fifteen, I traveled with my family to Israel. My brother was to be bar mitzvahed atop Masada. There was no legal drinking age, so I found it quite easy to walk into a bar and order a drink. New Year's Eve fell in the middle of the trip, and since the Jewish calendar celebrates a different New Year than the Gregorian calendar, the only celebration was being held in the American sector of a university. I got drunk for the first time that night. It changed everything.

A stop at a local bar began the evening. I ordered a beer from the waitress and as I took the first sip, something was immediately different. I looked around me, at the people drinking and dancing, smiling and laughing, all of whom were much older than I. Suddenly, I somehow felt I belonged. From there, I made my way to the university, where I found hundreds of other Americans celebrating New Year's Eve. Before the night was over, I had started a fight with a number of college-aged drunken fellows and returned

to the hotel stinking drunk and riddled with bruises. Ah yes, what a grand evening it was! I fell in love that night—with a beverage.

Returning to the States, I was determined to continue with my newfound love affair. I found myself trying to convince my friends to join me, but I was met with resistance. Still determined, I set out to find new friends, friends who could help me maintain this fantastic solution to my most desperate problems. My escapades started as a weekend pursuit and progressed into a daily obsession. At first, it took several beers to get me drunk to my satisfaction. However, within three years, it took a fifth and a half of vodka, a bottle of wine, and several beers in an evening's time to satisfactorily black me out. I would obtain alcohol by any means necessary. That meant lying, stealing, and cheating. My motto was, if you felt like I did, you'd have to get drunk too.

As the feelings of hopelessness and depression progressed, so did my drinking. Thoughts of suicide came more and more frequently. It felt as if things were never going to change. Progress with my therapist came to almost a complete halt. The hopelessness was compounded by the fact that the one thing that was bringing me relief, the one thing I counted on to take the pain away, was ultimately destroying me. The end, I feared, was close.

My last semester in high school marked my bottom. It was everyday drinking then. Since I had already been accepted at college, I consciously decided to make that last semester one big party. But it was no fun at all. I was miserable. I graduated narrowly and took a job at a local garage. It was difficult to manage

my drinking and a job since they were both full time, but I concocted all kinds of lies to ensure that nothing would interfere with my drinking. After being repeatedly reprimanded at work for being late in the mornings, I made up a story to hide the fact that I was always hung over. I told my manager that I had cancer and needed to go to the doctor for treatment every morning. I would say whatever I needed to say to protect my drinking.

More often, I was having these little moments of clarity, times I knew for sure that I was an alcoholic. Times when I was looking at the bottom of my glass asking myself, Why am I doing this? Something had to give, something had to change. I was suicidal, evaluating every part of my life for what could be wrong. It culminated in one last night of drinking and staring at the problem. It made me sick to think about it, and even sicker to continue drinking it away. I was forced to look at my drinking as the chief suspect.

The next day I went to work, late as usual, and all day long I could not stop thinking about this very real problem. I could go no further. What was happening to me? Therapy hadn't fixed my life—all those sessions; I was still miserable. I might as well just kill myself, drink my way into oblivion. In one last desperate fight for a solution, I reviewed my life, searching for the missing link. Had I left out some crucial bit of information that would lead to a breakthrough, making it possible for life to become just a little more bearable? No, there was nothing. Except of course my drinking.

The next morning I went to see my therapist. I told him I'd decided to quit therapy, because after eight

years, it wasn't working. But I decided to tell him how I had been searching through my life for that missing link and had come up with only one thing I had never told him: that I drank. He began asking me questions—he asked about quantities, frequency, what I drank. Before he was even halfway through, I broke down and began sobbing. I cried, “Do you think I have a problem with drinking?” He replied, “I think that is quite obvious.” I then asked, “Do you think I'm an alcoholic?” And he answered, “You are going to have to find out for yourself.” He pulled a list of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings out of his desk drawer; he had already highlighted the young people's meetings.

He told me to go home and not drink at all for the rest of the day. He would call me at nine p.m. and wanted to hear that I hadn't taken a drink. It was rough, but I went home and locked myself in my room, sweating it out until he called. He asked if I had had a drink. I told him I had not and asked what I should do next. He told me to do the same thing tomorrow, except tomorrow I should also go to the first meeting on the list he had highlighted. The next day I went to my first meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. I was eighteen years old.

In the parking lot, I sat in my car for about fifteen minutes before the meeting started, trying to work up the courage to go in and face myself. I remember finally working up the nerve to open the door and get out, only to close the door, dismissing the notion of going into the meeting as ridiculous. This dance of indecisiveness went on about fifty times before I went

in. Had I not gone in, I believe I would not be alive today.

The room was very smoky and filled with apparently happy people. Finding a seat in the back, I sat down and tried to make sense of the format. When the chairperson asked if there were any newcomers present, I looked around and saw some hands go up, but I certainly wasn't ready to raise my hand and draw attention to myself. The meeting broke up into several groups, and I followed one group down the hall and took a seat. They opened a book and read a chapter titled "Step Seven." After the reading, they went around the table for comments, and for the first time in my life, I found myself surrounded by people I could really relate with. I no longer felt as if I was a total misfit, because here was a roomful of people who felt precisely as I did, and a major weight had been lifted. I happened to be in the last chair around the table to speak and, confused by the reading, all I could say was, "What the heck are shortcomings?"

A couple of members, realizing I was there for my first meeting, took me downstairs and sat down with me and outlined the program. I can recall very little of what was said. I remember telling these members that this program they outlined sounded like just what I needed, but I didn't think I could stay sober for the rest of my life. Exactly how was I supposed to not drink if my girlfriend breaks up with me, or if my best friend dies, or even through happy times like graduations, weddings, and birthdays. They suggested I could just stay sober one day at a time. They explained that it might be easier to set my sights on the twenty-four hours in front of me and to take on these other

situations when and if they ever arrived. I decided to give sobriety a try, one day at a time, and I've done it that way ever since.

When I entered Alcoholics Anonymous, I had done some damage physically, had a bouquet of mental quirks, and was spiritually bankrupt. I knew I was powerless over alcohol and that I needed to be open-minded toward what people suggested for recovery. However, when it came to spirituality, I fought it nearly every step of the way. Although raised in an ethnic and religious Jewish household, I was agnostic and very resistant to anyone and anything that I perceived to be imposing religious beliefs. To my surprise, Alcoholics Anonymous suggested something different.

The idea that religion and spirituality were not one and the same was a new notion. My sponsor asked that I merely remain open-minded to the possibility that there was a Power greater than myself, one of my own understanding. He assured me that no person was going to impose a belief system on me, that it was a personal matter. Reluctantly, I opened my mind to the fact that maybe, just maybe, there was something to this spiritual lifestyle. Slowly but surely, I realized there was indeed a Power greater than myself, and I soon found myself with a full-time God in my life and following a spiritual path that didn't conflict with my personal religious convictions.

Following this spiritual path made a major difference in my life. It seemed to fill that lonely hole that I used to fill with alcohol. My self-esteem improved dramatically, and I knew happiness and serenity as I had never known it before. I started to see the beauty

and usefulness in my own existence, and tried to express my gratitude through helping others in whatever ways I could. A confidence and faith entered my life and unraveled a plan for me that was bigger and better than I could have ever imagined.

It wasn't easy, and it has never been easy, but it gets so much better. Since that first meeting, my life has completely changed. Three months into the program I started college. While many of my college classmates were experimenting with alcohol for the first time, I was off at meetings and A.A. get-togethers, becoming active in service work, and developing relationships with God, family, friends, and loved ones. I rarely thought twice about this; it was what I wanted and needed to do.

Over the last seven years, nearly everything I thought I could not stay sober through has happened. Indeed, sobriety and life are full of ups and downs. Occasionally depression can creep back into my life and requires outside help. However, this program has provided me with the tools to stay sober through the death of my best friends, failed relationships, and good times like birthdays, weddings, and graduations. Life is exponentially better than it ever was before. I'm living out the life I used to fantasize about, and I have a whole lot of work still in front of me. I have hope to share and love to give, and I just keep going one day at a time, living this adventure called life.