

A DRUNK, LIKE YOU

The more he listened at meetings, the more he came to know about his own drinking history.

USUALLY OUR stories start out by telling what we were like, what happened, and what we are like now. For me, what it was like was nothing in particular—no problems, nothing special happened. Nothing that I realized, anyhow. Only much later, when I started listening to other people and what happened to them and when and how, did I realize that those things were in my past also.

My story starts in the middle. What happened? My family and I were attending a relative's bris, a Jewish ritual circumcision and baby-naming ceremony. After the ceremonies and brunch I fell asleep. When it was time to leave, they woke me up. The car ride home was very quiet. The wife and my two kids said nothing. Later that day I found out what the problem was.

When they came to wake me, I was very belligerent and threatening. I scared them. They were afraid I would hit them. That was it. I could see that something had to be done. My wife's sister-in-law, who is a social worker, suggested we see a counselor. I thought that might be a good idea. I was having anxiety attacks for no reason. I used to be able to demonstrate products to high-level executives of the corporation I

worked for with no problem; now even minor product showcases were becoming difficult.

Also, I was having trouble getting technicians to work for me. In the past I had had my pick because I was good to work for and the projects were fun, with interesting new ideas. I always had a quick temper, but now things were getting out of hand. I would do things like beat up my desk with my desk chair.

And the most serious thing to me was that I was contemplating suicide. I had an actual plan—a plan for an accident that would raise no question in the minds of the insurance company. So in a moment of sanity, I decided it would be a good idea to seek help. If I hadn't lost my marbles, they were at the least very loose.

So my wife and I found a psychiatric social worker at the local Jewish Family Services agency. She saw us as a couple, then individually, then together, and so it went. When we were together, we worked on our interpersonal problems. When I saw her by myself, she would talk about drinking. I don't know why she kept bringing it up. I drank, but not that much. I never even mentioned my drinking except maybe to say, "Yes, I do drink," when she asked. It wasn't the problem—the other things were. One day she read me some questions from a pamphlet, which I answered honestly. She concluded that maybe I drank too much, and we talked about that for several sessions.

One day she asked if I could limit myself to five drinks in a day. I said, "Sure." Was I surprised when I found that I couldn't. That should have been my first clue that she might be right, but it didn't occur to me.

Then I hit on a clever solution. I have several academic degrees, and someone as smart as I was could solve this problem. The idea was to put off the first drink as long as possible and go to bed after the last drink. That worked out okay, and I told the counselor I was able to keep it to five a day with little or no problem. But she said if you had to control something, it was out of control.

During one session she suggested that I try not drinking at all one weekend. “Okay,” I said. She also suggested that I send the kids off somewhere for the weekend because I might be irritable.

I used to watch a lot of late-night movies—it was my time to relax by having a few drinks, a habit that started in night school when I had a full-time job and was studying chemistry at night. I had seen movie versions of what happened to people who had drinking problems: *The Lost Weekend*, *Days of Wine and Roses*, and others. And so I was nervous about raging, losing control, and maybe being violent as my wife had said I was. So we packed up the kids and the booze (all of it) and took all to my wife’s parents.

Much to my surprise the weekend went well—no problems—and in the next session I told my counselor so. She said, “What about the meeting?” I said, “What meeting?” She said, “The A.A. meeting.” I said, “What A.A. meeting? We never talked about that.” She said I had agreed to go to an A.A. meeting. So out came a meeting list. She explained about open and closed meetings. I decided on one I thought would be okay for me—a men’s discussion group. They would be my kind of people, and the time fit into my schedule. The

meeting list started on Sunday. I never started a project or anything else on a Sunday. Monday was my *M.A.S.H.* night. Tuesday was *Tuesday Night at the Movies*, and I am a big old-movie fan. So Wednesday is when I decided to try this A.A. meeting.

The meeting went okay. We talked about somebody's problem with an anonymity break at his doctor's office. The people at the meeting were telling him stuff that made no sense to me, like "Live and Let Live," "Easy Does It," "One Day at a Time," "use the Serenity Prayer," "talk to your sponsor," and as we went around the table it came my turn. Since they were all saying they were alcoholics, it wasn't too hard for me to say my name and, "Hi, I'm an alcoholic," and suggest that the man should just go to another doctor. He thanked me very much, and after the meeting he said to be sure and come back next week.

During the meeting, somebody mentioned spending too much time at discussion tables when we should have been spending more time at First Step tables for newcomers. So I went to the First Step table the following week. The discussion was very interesting. I didn't think I was "powerless over alcohol," but I knew "my life was unmanageable."

One night we were talking about when we started drinking, and I was saying that I drank all my life. Actually I was given my first drink at my bris. That is usually done when a boy is eight days old. So I said all Jewish boys start drinking early. I had to admit that after that it was just the usual milk and juice until I could sit up at the table with the family, and then there would be kiddush wine every Friday night. Not great stuff—what we got was sweet wine and seltzer,

so I didn't drink very much of it. I didn't like it. Later I learned the definition of a social drinker: someone who could take it or leave it.

When I was about ten years old, we all came back from my cousin's bar mitzvah services to celebrate at my grandmother's house. There I had my first real drink. All the adults went over to the table for a schnapps. There were all these little tiny glasses in front of various liquor bottles and everybody was having one, so I had one too. It was good. It was smooth and warm and wonderful. I liked it and went back for another. This one wasn't smooth—it was hot going down, not as wonderful.

After that I drank what I could, when I could, where I could. Not much, not often, not as a ten-year-old. At that First Step table we figured out, or they did anyhow, that that was alcoholic drinking—having one and going back for a second right away. I know now I never had just one drink, ever.

One night they were talking about how much they drank, and one guy said he had so many beers, the next guy talked about shots, one about mixed drinks I never heard of, another about so many pints, and on it went around the table. When my turn came, I said I didn't know. "Wow, that much," they said. "No," I said. I meant I didn't know the amount. I drank mostly at home and poured some in a tall glass and drank that and did it several times. "Well, how many times did you refill?" "I don't know."

Somebody asked it another way. He wanted to know, how many did I buy? "Well," I said, "I stopped in the package store every day and bought one." "Oh," he said. "How many did you have left at the end of the

week?” Well, he had me there. “None,” I said. He said, “a bottle-a-day man.” I never got to say another word—it was settled over my objections.

I saw the counselor once a week, and I went to this men’s meeting once a week, and everything was getting better. Once I saw somebody get a ninety-day pin. I decided not to get one. Even though I couldn’t see it from where I was sitting, I wasn’t going to wear an A.A. sign. One day somebody got a ninety-day pocket piece that he could rub for luck, and I decided to get one of those. After my three months were up, I went to the literature guy and bought one. He said it would be nice if it was presented to me in front of everybody. I wasn’t too keen on getting up in front of everyone. He said it would be good for the newcomers; it would show them that the program worked. So I told him okay and asked the leader of the First Step table to give it to me. They were paying him to run the meeting, or so I thought at the time. (Later I found out that they were reimbursing him for the snacks.) So the following week I got my pocket piece and thanked everybody for giving me the power over alcohol. Now I was more powerful than alcohol because for the first time in a long time I could choose not to use it.

A couple of weeks later the large company I was with, which had relocated me and my family at their expense, had a large staff cutback, and I was cut back—fired. I thought I was fire-proof. I was in a very important position, doing important work. I was the chief researcher in developing a new product; I was sitting in on strategic planning meetings. I was very upset. After all, I was better now and back to being a good employee and team player again, but to no avail.

We were able to stay on site in special offices set aside for us to conduct our job search. As part of this job search, I was allowed to go to a professional convention being held in the Southwest.

Now somehow, between the time I lost my job and my flight to the convention, I decided maybe I was not an alcoholic and I needed to test that theory. After all, I was a researcher, and things had to be tested. I decided that on the plane (it seemed like a safe place) I would put the question to the test. If I could have one drink and no more, I was not an alcoholic—alcoholics can't do that. So when the stewardess came by to ask me if I wanted a drink, I said, "Yes." She put two little bottles' worth in a glass ("No ice, thank you very much") and went up the aisle. On her way back she asked if I wanted another, and I said, "Yes." I drank for the whole flight—before dinner, during dinner, and after dinner. As we approached our destination, I searched in my pocket for a pen to fill out the in-flight magazine response card. I found this large coin. I took it out to see what it was. It was my ninety-day pocket piece, and I was reminded of what I was doing. And the thought came to me: Wow, those guys at the meeting were right—I am powerless over alcohol. I put that coin back in my pocket and from that day to this, some 15½ years later, I have had no urge to drink.

When I got back to my meeting, I told them what had happened. I don't know why—it was not like the old me to 'fess up to anything. They were concerned only whether I was still drinking. And I said, "No, I'm not." I was worried that they were going to take my coin back. All they wanted to know was what I was going to

do now. I had no idea. They did, however. They said I needed a sponsor—so I found a sponsor. They said I needed more meetings. “How many?” I wanted to know. They said I only had to go to meetings on days I would have had a drink. They said I needed to identify, not compare. I didn’t know what they meant. What was the difference? Identifying, they said, was trying to see how I was like the people I was with. Comparing, they told me, was looking for differences, usually seeing how I was better than others.

One day we were talking about spiritual awakenings. Everyone talked a little about what happened to them and when and how and all that. Then it came my turn. I said I hadn’t had one yet, but I was open to it.

Well, two people were trying to talk at the same time. “What have you been telling us about the airplane flight all this time?” “Well,” I said, “I was drinking and the coin reminded me of what I did. And I decided I was powerless and couldn’t drink anymore and stopped.” One man said, “Well, that’s it. What more do you want?” I said, “What about the blinding white flash?” “What about it?” he said. “Read the Big Book. The Appendix explains the concept of a sudden change and a gradual change, and that not everybody has a blinding flash.” “Oh,” I said, “That was it—that was mine?” “Yes,” I was told. “What more do you want?” Actually I wanted something more dramatic, and my sponsor said what he so often did: “So?” And I found myself saying, “Well, if that’s it, it will have to do.” “Have to do?” he replied. “It was bigger and better than most, and more importantly, it worked. You stopped and didn’t start again.”

Well, that worked for me. I have stayed in the

Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous long enough to find the program in the Big Book and to practice all its principles in all my affairs on a daily basis.

The last big hurdle was closing the meeting with the Lord's Prayer. As a Jew, I was uncomfortable with it and decided to talk to my sponsor about it. So I said, "The Lord's Prayer bothers me. I don't like closing with it." "Oh," he said, "what's the problem?" "Well, I'm Jewish and it's not a Jewish prayer." "Well then," he said "say it in Jewish." I said, "It would still be the Lord's Prayer." "Right," he said. "Then say something else that you like. Your Higher Power, whatever you call it, is helping you, and you need to say thank you."

That was a big step for me; I finally began to separate the religious aspects of my life from A.A.'s spiritual program. Now the big difference to me is that religion is the ritual, and we all differ there, and spirituality is the way we feel about what we do. It's about my personal contact with my personal Higher Power, as I understand Him.

Everything has turned around. I found a new job, which I then decided to leave. I opened my own business. I was able to put my two sons through college at large universities. My oldest son's great passion was to go on road trips to get away from home when it was time to come home on school breaks; now he comes home regularly and brings friends. The younger son comes home often and calls regularly.

My marriage is no longer on the brink and is better than ever. And the best is yet to come. All this and more I owe to the Fellowship in the rooms and the program in the book.