

ACCEPTANCE WAS THE ANSWER

The physician wasn't hooked, he thought—he just prescribed drugs medically indicated for his many ailments. Acceptance was his key to liberation.

IF THERE EVER WAS anyone who came to A.A. by mistake, it was I. I just didn't belong here. Never in my wildest moments had it occurred to me that I might like to be an alcoholic. Never once had my mother even hinted at the idea that, when I grew up, I might like to be president of A.A. Not only did I not think that being an alcoholic was a good idea, I didn't even feel that I had all that much of a drinking problem! Of course, I had *problems*, all sorts of problems. "If you had my problems, you'd drink too" was my feeling.

My major problems were marital. "If you had my wife, you'd drink too." Max and I had been married for twenty-eight years when I ended up in A.A. It started out as a good marriage, but it deteriorated over the years as she progressed through the various stages of qualifying for Al-Anon. At first, she would say, "You don't love me. Why don't you admit it?" Later, she would say, "You don't like me. Why don't you admit it?" And as her disease was reaching the terminal stages, she was screaming, "You hate me! You hate me! Why don't you admit you hate me?" So I admitted it.

I remember very well saying, "There's only one person in the world whose guts I hate worse than yours, and those are my own." She cried a bit and went to bed; that was the only answer to problems that she had left. I cried a bit and then mixed myself another drink. (Today, we don't have to live like that any more.)

Max hadn't gotten that way because I didn't care. Indeed, it seemed that I cared too much. I had sent her to four consecutive psychiatrists, and not one of them had gotten me sober. I also sent my kids to psychiatrists. I remember, one time, even the dog had a psychiatric diagnosis. I yelled at Max, "What do you mean, 'The dog just needs more love'? You tell that dumb cat-and-dog doctor he's not a Beverly Hills psychiatrist. All I want to know is, why does that dog wet in my lap every time I hold him?" (That dog hasn't wet my pants once since I joined A.A., and neither have I!)

The harder I worked with Max, the sicker she got. So, when it ended up at a psycho ward, I wasn't all that surprised. But then, when that steel door slammed shut, and she was the one that went home, I truly was amazed.

I had begun to drink in the early years of pharmacy school, in order to get to sleep. After going to school all day, working in the family drugstore all evening, and then studying until one or two in the morning, I would not be able to sleep soundly, with everything I had been studying going round in my head. I would be half asleep and half awake, and in the morning I would be both tired and stupid. Then I found the solu-

tion: At the end of study time, I would drink two beers, jump in bed, sleep real fast, and wake up smart.

I drank my way through schools and always got honors. And as I went through pharmacy school, graduate school, medical school, internship, residency, and specialty training, and finally, went into practice, my drinking kept increasing. But I thought it was because my responsibilities were increasing. "If you had my responsibilities, if you needed the sleep like I do, you'd drink too."

My drinking took place after work hours. I remember finding myself in the middle of the night in the doctors' parking lot at the hospital with one foot in the car and one foot on the ground, not knowing which was the lead foot; finding myself hanging up the telephone—then realizing I had gotten out of bed, answered the phone, turned on the light, and carried on a conversation with a patient. I didn't know whether I had told him to rush to the hospital and I'd meet him there, or to take two aspirin and call me in the morning. With a problem like that, I couldn't go back to sleep. So I'd sit up, watch old Wallace Beery movies on all-night TV, and drink.

The longer the drinking continued, the shorter the time the alcohol would keep me asleep; I would have to drink myself back to sleep again and again throughout the night. But I never became a morning drinker. Instead, I had a 5:00 a.m. shutoff time. If it was one minute before five, I'd drink myself back to sleep. If it was one minute after, I'd stay up and act like a martyr all day. It became progressively harder to get up in the morning, until one day I asked myself what I would do for a patient who felt this rotten. The answer

came right back: I'd give him something to pep him up.

So I immediately started taking and shooting pep pills. Eventually, I was taking forty-five milligrams of the long-acting Bensedrine and forty-five of the short-acting just to get out of bed in the morning. I took more through the day to increase the high, and more to maintain it; when I overshot the mark, I'd take tranquilizers to level off. The pep pills affected my hearing at times: I couldn't listen fast enough to hear what I was saying. I'd think, I wonder why I'm saying that again—I've already said it three times. Still, I couldn't turn my mouth off.

For the leveling-off process, I just loved intravenous Demerol, but I found it hard to practice good medicine while shooting morphine. Following an injection, I would have to keep one hand busy scratching my constantly itching nose and would also have sudden uncontrollable urges to vomit. I never got much effect out of codeine and Percodan and the tranquilizers. However, for a period of time I was injecting Pentothal intravenously to put myself to sleep. That's the stuff used when the oral surgeon puts the needle in your vein and says, "Count to ten," and before you get to two, you're asleep. Instant blackout was what it was, and it seemed delightful. I didn't feel I could lie in bed and squirt the stuff in my veins while my kids and wife stood around watching me, so I kept the drug in my bag and the bag in the car and the car in the garage. Luckily, the garage was attached to the house. In the garage I would put the needle in my vein and then try to figure out exactly how much medication to inject to overcome the pep pills while adding to the

sleeping pills while ignoring the tranquilizers, in order to get just enough to be able to pull out the needle, jerk the tourniquet, throw it in the car, slam the car door shut, run down the hall, and fall in bed before I fell asleep.

It was hard to judge the right amount. One night I had to put myself back to sleep three times, and then I finally decided to give it up. But to do so, I had to get all the stuff out of the house and out of my possession. In the end I had to do the same with alcohol and *all* pills. I wasn't able to quit chemicals as long as they were in the house. If they were around, I always found a need for them—especially the pills. I never in my life took a tranquilizer, sedative, or pep pill because I was a pillhead. I always took it because I had the symptom that only that pill would relieve. Therefore, every pill was medically indicated at the time it was taken. For me, pills don't produce the desire to swallow a pill; they produce the symptoms that require that the pill be taken for relief. As a physician and pharmacist who had grown up in a drugstore-home, I had a pill for every ill, and I was sick a lot.

Today, I find I can't work my A.A. program while taking pills, nor may I even have them around for dire emergencies only. I can't say, "Thy will be done," and take a pill. I can't say, "I'm powerless over alcohol, but solid alcohol is okay." I can't say, "God could restore me to sanity, but until He does, I'll control myself—with pills." Giving up alcohol alone was not enough for me; I've had to give up all mood- and mind-affecting chemicals in order to stay sober and comfortable.

On two occasions, over weekends, I had decided I

would take absolutely nothing. On each occasion I had a convulsion on Sunday morning. Both times my reaction was that I had had nothing to drink the night before, so obviously alcohol had nothing to do with it. The neurologist in charge of my case didn't think to ask me whether I drank, and I didn't think to tell him. As a result, he couldn't figure out why I had the convulsions, and he decided to send me to the Mayo Clinic. It seemed to me I needed a consultation first. I happened to be the best diagnostician I knew at the time, and certainly I knew my case better than anyone else. So I sat down with me and went over the facts behind the convulsions: personality changes, daily headaches, sense of impending doom, sense of impending insanity. Suddenly, it was obvious to me: I had a brain tumor and would die, and everyone would be sorry for me. The Mayo Clinic seemed like a good place to have my diagnosis confirmed.

After nine days of tests at Mayo, I was put in the locked ward—of all places! That's when that steel door slammed shut, and Max was the one who went home. I didn't like being on the nut ward, and I particularly didn't like being forced to ice cookies on Christmas Eve. So I raised enough fuss that they finally agreed to let me sign out, against medical advice. Max accepted responsibility for me after I had promised never to drink again, never to take another pill, never to swear again, and never to talk to girls again. We got on the plane and immediately had a big fight over whether I'd drink the free booze. Max won; I didn't drink it. But by God, I wouldn't talk or eat either! And that was how Max and I and our two daughters spent Christmas Day, eight years ago.

When we got home, I got a bottle of Scotch and went to bed. The next day, Max called the neurologist and told him about the Mayo psychiatrist's opinion. He arranged for me to see a local psychiatrist, who quickly decided I should be in the mental-health unit of our local hospital. The people there insisted on putting me in a ward, when Max and I both knew I ought to have a private room. Finally, she asked, "Do you realize he's on the staff of this hospital?" And I got my private room.

Time went by very, very slowly on my second nut ward. I never could quite get the knack of it and kept asking myself, "What's a nice guy like me doing in a place like this?" They wanted me to make leather belts, of all things! Had I gone to school all those years just to sit and make leather belts? Besides, I couldn't understand the instructions. The girl had explained them to me four times, and I was too embarrassed to ask her again. (I am pleased to state, however, that I had gone to only a very few A.A. meetings before I was able to make a really beautiful pair of moccasins—and half of a wallet. I wore those moccasins every night for the next seven years, until they wore out. For my seventh A.A. birthday, my program-oriented, Al-Anon wife had my moccasins bronzed. Now I own perhaps the most costly pair of moccasins anyone has ever seen, and they help me remember where I've been.)

In the hospital I hung on to the idea I'd had most of my life: that if I could just control the external environment, the internal environment would then become comfortable. Much of my time was spent writing letters, notes, orders, and lists of things for Max, who was also my office nurse, to do to keep the world running while

I was locked up. One has to be pretty sick to do that, and perhaps one has to be even sicker to come back every day for a new list, as she did. (Today we don't have to live that way. Max still works with me in the office, but we have turned our wills and our lives and our work over to the care of God. Each with the other as a witness, we took the Third Step out loud—just as it says in the Big Book. And life keeps getting simpler and easier as we try to reverse my old idea, by taking care of the internal environment via the Twelve Steps, and letting the external environment take care of itself.)

One day as I sat there in the hospital, my psychiatrist walked up behind me and asked, "How'd you like to talk to the man from A.A.?" My reaction was that I'd already helped all the patients on the ward, and I still had plenty of problems of my own without trying to help some drunk from A.A. But, by the look on the psychiatrist's face, I could tell that it would really make him happy if I agreed. So, for no better reason than to make him happy, I agreed. Very shortly, I realized that had been a mistake—when this big clown came bounding into the room, almost shouting, "My name is Frank, and I'm an alcoholic, ha-ha-ha!" I really felt sorry for him; the only thing in life he had to brag about was the fact that he was an alcoholic. It wasn't until later that he told me he was an attorney.

Against my better judgment, I went to a meeting with him that night, and a strange thing began to happen. The psychiatrist, who had generally been ignoring me, now became quite interested; every day he would ask me all kinds of questions about the A.A. meetings. At first I wondered whether he was alco-

holic himself and was sending me to find out about A.A. But it quickly became obvious that he had this childish notion instead: If he could get me to go to enough meetings while in the hospital, I would continue to go after he let me out. So, for no better reason than to fool him, I asked Frank to take me to a meeting every night. And Frank did set me up for a meeting every night except Friday, when he thought he might have a date with his girl friend. "That's a devil of a way to run an organization," I thought, and I reported Frank to the psychiatrist, who didn't seem perturbed; he just got someone else to take me on Fridays.

Eventually the psychiatrist discharged me from the hospital, and Max and I began going to meetings ourselves. Right from the start, I felt that they weren't doing anything for me, but they sure were helping Max. We sat in the back and talked only to each other. It was precisely a year before I spoke at an A.A. meeting. Although we enjoyed the laughter in the early days, I heard a lot of things that I thought were stupid. I interpreted "sober" as meaning "drinking but not being drunk." When a big, healthy-looking young fellow stood up there and said, "I'm a success today if I don't drink today," I thought, "Man, I've got a thousand things to do today before I can brag about not taking a drink, for God's sake!" Of course, I was still drinking at the time. (Today there is absolutely nothing in the world more important to me than my keeping this alcoholic sober; not taking a drink is by far the most important thing I do each day.)

It seemed that all they talked about at meetings was drinking, drinking, drinking. It made me thirsty. I

wanted to talk about my many *big* problems; drinking seemed a small one. And I knew that giving up “one drink for one day” wouldn’t really do any good. Finally, after seven months, I decided to try it. To this day, I am amazed at how many of my problems—most of which had nothing to do with drinking, I believed—have become manageable or have simply disappeared since I quit drinking.

I had already given up all the narcotics, most of the pills, and some of the alcohol when I first came to A.A. By early July I had tapered off alcohol completely, and I got off all pills in the ensuing few months. When the compulsion to drink left, it was relatively easy to stay off alcohol. But for some time, it was difficult to keep from taking a pill when I had an appropriate symptom, such as a cough, pain, anxiety, insomnia, a muscle spasm, or an upset stomach. It has gotten progressively easier. Today I feel I have used up my right to chemical peace of mind.

It helped me a great deal to become convinced that alcoholism was a disease, not a moral issue; that I had been drinking as a result of a compulsion, even though I had not been aware of the compulsion at the time; and that sobriety was not a matter of willpower. The people of A.A. had something that looked much better than what I had, but I was afraid to let go of what I had in order to try something new; there was a certain sense of security in the familiar.

At last, acceptance proved to be the key to my drinking problem. After I had been around A.A. for seven months, tapering off alcohol and pills, not finding the program working very well, I was finally able to say, “Okay, God. It *is* true that I—of all people, strange as

it may seem, and even though I didn't give my permission—really, really am an alcoholic of sorts. And it's all right with me. Now, what am I going to do about it?" When I stopped living in the problem and began living in the answer, the problem went away. From that moment on, I have not had a single compulsion to drink.

And acceptance is the answer to *all* my problems today. When I am disturbed, it is because I find some person, place, thing, or situation—some fact of my life—unacceptable to me, and I can find no serenity until I accept that person, place, thing, or situation as being exactly the way it is supposed to be at this moment. Nothing, absolutely nothing, happens in God's world by mistake. Until I could accept my alcoholism, I could not stay sober; unless I accept life completely on life's terms, I cannot be happy. I need to concentrate not so much on what needs to be changed in the world as on what needs to be changed in me and in my attitudes.

Shakespeare said, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." He forgot to mention that I was the chief critic. I was always able to see the flaw in every person, every situation. And I was always glad to point it out, because I knew you wanted perfection, just as I did. A.A. and acceptance have taught me that there is a bit of good in the worst of us and a bit of bad in the best of us; that we are all children of God and we each have a right to be here. When I complain about me or about you, I am complaining about God's handiwork. I am saying that I know better than God.

For years I was sure the worst thing that could

happen to a nice guy like me would be that I would turn out to be an alcoholic. Today I find it's the best thing that has ever happened to me. This proves I don't know what's good for me. And if I don't know what's good for me, then I don't know what's good or bad for you or for anyone. So I'm better off if I don't give advice, don't figure I know what's best, and just accept life on life's terms, as it is today—especially my own life, as it actually is. Before A.A. I judged myself by my intentions, while the world was judging me by my actions.

Acceptance has been the answer to my marital problems. It's as though A.A. had given me a new pair of glasses. Max and I have been married now for thirty-five years. Prior to our marriage, when she was a shy, scrawny adolescent, I was able to see things in her that others couldn't necessarily see—things like beauty, charm, gaiety, a gift for being easy to talk to, a sense of humor, and many other fine qualities. It was as if I had, rather than a Midas touch which turned everything to gold, a magnifying mind that magnified whatever it focused on. Over the years as I thought about Max, her good qualities grew and grew, and we married, and all these qualities became more and more apparent to me, and we were happier and happier.

But then as I drank more and more, the alcohol seemed to affect my vision: Instead of continuing to see what was good about my wife, I began to see her defects. And the more I focused my mind on her defects, the more they grew and multiplied. Every defect I pointed out to her became greater and greater. Each time I told her she was a nothing, she receded a little

more into nowhere. The more I drank, the more she wilted.

Then, one day in A.A., I was told that I had the lenses in my glasses backwards; “the courage to change” in the Serenity Prayer meant not that I should change my marriage, but rather that I should change myself and learn to accept my spouse as she was. A.A. has given me a new pair of glasses. I can again focus on my wife’s good qualities and watch them grow and grow and grow.

I can do the same thing with an A.A. meeting. The more I focus my mind on its defects—late start, long drunkalogs, cigarette smoke—the worse the meeting becomes. But when I try to see what I can add to the meeting, rather than what I can get out of it, and when I focus my mind on what’s good about it, rather than what’s wrong with it, the meeting keeps getting better and better. When I focus on what’s good today, I have a good day, and when I focus on what’s bad, I have a bad day. If I focus on a problem, the problem increases; if I focus on the answer, the answer increases.

Today Max and I try to communicate what we feel rather than what we think. We used to argue about our differing ideas, but we can’t argue about our feelings. I can tell her she ought not to think a certain way, but I certainly can’t take away her right to feel however she does feel. When we deal in feelings, we tend to come to know ourselves and each other much better.

It hasn’t been easy to work out this relationship with Max. On the contrary, the hardest place to work this program has been in my own home, with my own children and, finally, with Max. It seems I should have learned to love my wife and family first; the newcomer

to A.A., last. But it was the other way around. Eventually I had to redo each of the Twelve Steps specifically with Max in mind, from the First, saying, “I am powerless over alcohol, and my homelife is unmanageable by me,” to the Twelfth, in which I tried to think of her as a sick Al-Anon and treat her with the love I would give a sick A.A. newcomer. When I do this, we get along fine.

Perhaps the best thing of all for me is to remember that my serenity is inversely proportional to my expectations. The higher my expectations of Max and other people are, the lower is my serenity. I can watch my serenity level rise when I discard my expectations. But then my “rights” try to move in, and they too can force my serenity level down. I have to discard my “rights,” as well as my expectations, by asking myself, How important is it, really? How important is it compared to my serenity, my emotional sobriety? And when I place more value on my serenity and sobriety than on anything else, I can maintain them at a higher level—at least for the time being.

Acceptance is the key to my relationship with God today. I never just sit and do nothing while waiting for Him to tell me what to do. Rather, I do whatever is in front of me to be done, and I leave the results up to Him; however it turns out, that’s God’s will for me.

I must keep my magic magnifying mind *on* my acceptance and *off* my expectations, for my serenity is directly proportional to my level of acceptance. When I remember this, I can see I’ve never had it so good. Thank God for A.A.!