

(17)

WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

This young alcoholic stepped out a second-story window and into A.A.

I GOT SOBER while I was still in college. Once, outside of a meeting, I overheard a conversation between another sober student and a woman who lived in the town where I went to school. She was explaining why so many local residents disliked the students. She described the common perception of students as arrogant and self-centered, and went on to tell the following story.

“I am a nurse and I work in the emergency room. Two years ago a student was brought in by ambulance in the middle of the night. He had gotten drunk, walked through a second-story window, and fallen twenty feet headfirst into a concrete window well. He was brought in covered with blood. His head had swollen to the size of a watermelon. He kept swearing at the nurses and doctors, telling them to keep their hands off of him, and threatening to sue them. He was, without a doubt, the single most obnoxious person I have ever met.”

At that point I interrupted her. “That was me,” I said. “That was my last drunk.” I had walked through that window when I was nineteen years old.

How had I gotten there? I had always been a “good kid” growing up, the kind of son other mothers loved.

I was at the top of my classes academically and had been in almost no trouble for the first seventeen years of my life. I would like to say that was because of my well-developed moral fiber; in fact, much of it was a result of fear. My earliest memories included threats by my parents to throw me out onto the street for the slightest acts of disobedience. The thought of being forced to live on the street is pretty terrifying for a six-year-old. Those threats, coupled with a fair amount of physical punishment, kept me frightened and obedient.

As I grew older, however, I made a plan. I would be dutiful until I graduated from high school. Then I would escape to college, secure my economic future, and never go home again. Just after my eighteenth birthday, I left for college. I was, I thought, finally free. I was in for a rude awakening.

Like many alcoholics, I had spent much of my life feeling different, as though I just didn't quite fit in. I covered those feelings and my low self-esteem by being one of the smartest people in any group, if not the smartest. Additionally, I became a performer in crowds, always ready with a quick joke to point out the humor in any situation. I managed to bring a great deal of laughter into my life.

I went to a college filled with people who had also spent their entire lives at or near the top of their academic classes. Suddenly, I was no longer special. To make matters worse, many of them had what I only dreamed of—money. My family was strictly working class, struggling to get by on what my father earned. Money had always been a big issue, and I equated it with security, prestige, and worth. My father was fond

of saying that the sole purpose of life is to make money. I had classmates whose names were household words that connoted wealth. I was ashamed, ashamed of my family and ashamed of myself. My shaky confidence crumbled. I was terrified of being found out. I knew that if others discovered who I really was, they wouldn't like me and I would be left alone, worthless and alone.

Then I discovered alcohol. I had tried it a few times in high school, but never enough to get drunk. I knew that getting drunk meant being out of control. My escape plan required that I always keep my wits about me. I was too afraid to be out of control. When I got to college, however, that fear left me. In order to fit in, I pretended, at first, that I had as extensive a drinking history as any of my classmates. It was not long before my history surpassed everyone's.

My drinking career was short and destructive, and my alcoholic progression was very fast. I got drunk for the first time in October. By November people were willing to wager money that I could not go one week without a drink. (I won and, in celebration, drank myself sick.) By January I was a daily drunk and by April a daily drug user as well. I didn't last too long.

As I look back on that period, I realize how true it is that one of the primary differences between alcoholics and nonalcoholics is that nonalcoholics change their behavior to meet their goals and alcoholics change their goals to meet their behavior. Everything that had been important to me, all of my dreams, goals, and aspirations, were swept away in a wave of booze. I realized quickly that I could not drink and function at any high level. That did not matter. I was

willing to give up anything so that I could keep drinking. I went from being a solid A student to nearly flunking out of school, from being anointed a class leader to being shunned as a pariah. I almost never went to class and did little of the required reading. I never attended any of the many cultural events sponsored by the college. I forsook everything that makes college worthwhile in favor of drinking. Occasionally, some sliver of pride would work its way through the chaos, resentment, and fear and cause me to look at my life. But the shame was too great, and I would drive it back down with bottles of vodka and cases of beer.

Because my college was fairly small, it did not take long for me to come to the attention of the college deans. It was under their watchful eyes that I first agreed to enter counseling. While the administration saw this as an opportunity to help a troubled student, I saw it as a bargain. I would go to counseling to make them happy, and they would owe me one. Not surprisingly, the counseling had no effect. My daily drinking continued unabated.

About a year later I realized that I was in trouble. I had failed a class during the winter term (I had rarely attended and had not turned in the term paper on which 50 percent of our grade was based). The spring term was looking equally bleak. I was enrolled in a class that I had attended only once. I had not written any of the required papers or bothered to show up for the midterm examination. I was bound for failure and expulsion. My life had become unmanageable, and I knew it.

I went back to the dean who had guided me into

counseling and, for the first time, admitted to myself and to someone else that I had a problem with alcohol. I didn't think I was an alcoholic. I wasn't even sure what that was. But I knew my life was out of control. The dean allowed me to withdraw from that class the day before the final exam on one condition—I had to enter a treatment center. I agreed.

A few days went by. With the pressure lifted, my life did not look so unmanageable. In fact, it looked as if I was back in the saddle. So, I thanked the dean for his help but told him that I would be okay on my own. I did not go to a rehab. Two weeks later I walked through a second-story window.

After insulting the emergency room personnel, I slipped into unconsciousness, where I remained for five days. I awoke in a neck brace with complete double vision. My parents were furious. I was flown home and the future looked bleak. God's timing, however, is impeccable.

My college had a long history of drinkers, including Dr. Bob. At the time of my accident, the deans were assessing how to respond to student alcohol abuse and were waiting to try out their latest idea. Alcoholics Anonymous. I was the test case. They told me in no uncertain terms that I would never get back into this college unless I went to A.A. Under that pressure, I went to my first meeting.

Looking back, that may have been the first healthy decision I ever made with respect to alcohol. One definition of a bottom is the point when the last thing you lost or the next thing you are about to lose is more important to you than booze. That point is different for everyone, and some of us die before we get there.

For me, though, it was clear. I was willing to do anything to get back into school.

I went to my first A.A. meeting with absolutely no idea what A.A. was about. I am from a large Irish Catholic family and have had several relatives in and out of the program. A.A., like prison, was shameful, however, and was never discussed. I also had no idea what alcoholism was. I remember a girlfriend once told me that her mother had a drinking problem but that she was not an alcoholic. Curious, I asked what the difference was. "An alcoholic," she told me, "is someone who needs to drink alcohol every day, even if it is only one drink. A person with a drinking problem does not have to drink every day but once she starts, she cannot stop." By that definition, I was an alcoholic with a drinking problem.

I was surprised by my first meeting. It was in a church and, whatever I had expected, it was not this. The room was filled with well-dressed, smiling, happy people. No rancid coats or three-day beards. No bloodshot eyes, wheezing coughs, or shaky hands, but laughter. Someone was talking about God. I was sure I was in the wrong place.

Then a woman introduced herself and said that she was an alcoholic. I knew then I was in A.A. She spoke about feelings, of insecurity replaced by confidence, fear replaced by faith, resentment replaced by love, and despair replaced by joy. I knew those feelings. I had insecurity, fear, resentment, and despair. I could not believe it. Here was a person who was happy. It seemed like a long time since I had seen one of those.

After the meeting, people welcomed me with open arms and gave me their telephone numbers. The dis-

cussion meeting was followed by a speaker meeting, where I had my first awakening in A.A. The speaker said, "If you're an apple, you can be the best apple you can be, but you can never be an orange." I was an apple all right, and for the first time I understood that I had spent my life trying to be an orange. I looked around at a room filled with apples and, if I was understanding the speaker, most of them were no longer trying to be oranges.

My progress in A.A., however, was slow. I refused to go to meetings outside of my neighborhood, which meant that I went only Tuesday and Thursday nights. I always felt better after a meeting. I remember times when something upsetting would happen on a Friday and I would tell myself, "I wish it were Tuesday so I could go to the meeting." No matter how many suggestions I heard and how many rides were offered, however, I simply would not go to meetings on those other nights.

People gave me many other good suggestions as well. They suggested that I stay out of relationships. I was young and single, and I rejected this idea out of hand. For the first year I bounced from one sick relationship to another. They suggested that I get a sponsor. I had no idea what a sponsor was and was too proud to ask, but I was sure I didn't need one. After all, I was smarter than the rest of these people. They might need someone to tell them how to run their lives, but double vision, neck brace, and all, I was doing just fine on my own. People suggested that I find a Higher Power. I was not fooled. I knew when they said Higher Power they meant God. And I knew that God waited for me to step out of line just once so

that he could take his revenge. I wanted no part of God.

With this resistance I plodded along for a few months. Whenever people asked me how I was doing, I would say, "Fine, just fine," no matter how hard I was crying inside. Then I reached the crossroads. I was sober about six months, and I was not getting any better. I contemplated suicide almost every day. My emotions swung between paralyzing despair and murderous rage, often in the space of a single moment. I was not happy, joyous, or free. I was miserable, and I was sick of it.

I decided I had had enough. I went to my Tuesday night meeting, fully intent on sharing honestly. I arrived at the meeting and no one else was there. This meeting, which routinely numbered twenty people, was empty. I waited for a few minutes and was preparing to leave, when a man whom I barely knew walked through the door. He suggested that he and I have a meeting. I was sure it was a bad idea. He asked me how I was doing. That was all I needed. The pain, fear, misery, anger, loss, resentment, and despair came pouring out. For the next forty-five minutes I talked at this man, who continued to nod his head, smile, and say, "Yeah, I remember feeling that way." For the first time I made completely honest contact with another human being. I showed someone who I really was, without fear of rejection. I took an action that was designed to make me feel, rather than just look, better. I was met with acceptance and love.

When I had finished talking, he told me something simple: "You don't have to drink over it." What an idea! I had thought that situations made me drink. If

I was angry, I drank. If I was happy, I drank. Bored or excited, elated or depressed, I drank. Here was a man telling me that, independent of my life situation, I did not have to drink. If I stuck with A.A., I could stay sober under any and all conditions. He gave me hope, and in many ways, he symbolized the door through which I finally walked into Alcoholics Anonymous.

I began to change. I began to pray. I became actively involved in working the steps. I had previously dismissed them as the tools of mental inferiors; now I embraced them as the rungs on the ladder to salvation. I began working with a sponsor and became active in my home group. I did not understand how making coffee or cleaning up after meetings could have anything to do with staying sober, but older members told me that service would keep me sober, so I tried it. It worked.

My life began to change. Just before my first anniversary, I was readmitted to my college. I arrived back on campus terrified. All I had known there was drinking. How was I ever going to stay sober under these conditions? The answer was simple—I threw myself into A.A. Some very loving people took me under their wings. I had the opportunity to perform a fair amount of Twelfth Step work with other students, and by the time I graduated, there was a thriving A.A. community at that school.

After graduation I attended law school. I arrived to find an A.A. that was very different from that to which I had grown accustomed. I was sure I would get drunk because “those people weren’t doing it right!” My sponsor back at college, aware of my propensity for finding fault, assured me that if my new friends were

not “doing it right,” it was my obligation to show them how. So I did. Driven by fear and conceit, I set out to remake A.A. in my image. I am certain that if membership had depended upon being liked, I would have been expelled.

After some time I called my sponsor to report my progress. He stopped me short with a simple question: “These people who aren’t doing it right, are they staying sober?” I admitted that, despite their failings, they were staying sober. “Good,” he said. “You have told them what A.A. is. Now it’s time for you to listen to figure out how they are staying sober.” I followed that suggestion and began to listen. Slowly but surely, some wisdom and humility began to creep in. I became more teachable. I found God working all around me where previously I was sure I had been alone. When I opened my eyes enough to see the miracle, I found that it was right in front of my face. I was growing in God’s love.

I was fortunate to have an opportunity to spend time abroad during law school. That was something I had dreamed of doing while drinking, but when push came to shove, I drank. Now sober, I have been in meetings in probably a dozen countries and have always been amazed at the message that transcends all linguistic and cultural differences. There is a solution. Together, we can live soberly, joyously, and freely.

My life has been one of great joy. I am now thirty-three years old, and God willing, in one month I will celebrate my fourteenth sober A.A. anniversary. I am surrounded by loving friends on whom I depend and who depend on me. I have reconciled with my parents, from whom I had been estranged. My life is

filled with laughter again, something that alcohol had taken away.

I was married shortly after my ninth anniversary to a loving woman. One week before my twelfth anniversary, our son was born. Through him I learned more about unconditional love, the value of wonder, and the sheer joy of being alive. I have a wonderful job that (most days) I appreciate. I am active in A.A. service work and have both a sponsor and several sponsees with whom it is a privilege to work. All of those are gifts from God. I express my gratitude by enjoying them.

I once knew a woman who was crying before a meeting. She was approached by a five-year-old girl who told her, "You don't have to cry here. This is a good place. They took my daddy and they made him better." That is exactly what A.A. did for me; it took me and it made me better. For that I am eternally grateful.