

A VISION OF RECOVERY

A feeble prayer forged a lasting connection with a Higher Power for this Mic-Mac Indian.

I THOUGHT I WAS DIFFERENT because I'm an Indian." I heard that statement from many Natives at my early A.A. meetings. I would only shrug and say to myself: You think you're different, what about me? I'm a red-headed Indian.

I grew up on a reservation in Canada. As a young fellow, I was a proud Mic-Mac Indian. My family had a reputation: They were hard drinkers, violent and tough, and I was proud of this. I was told that my grandfather had been the chief of our band, but he had to step down because he went to jail for shooting a man. Jail was almost a badge of honor in my family, or so it seemed to me. As a small boy, I remember standing on top of a case of beer (there were always lots around the house), saying to myself: In a few years I will be this tall.

There were times, though, when I witnessed my father's rages and I was full of fear. I swore that I would not be like him, but I didn't see that alcohol and the rages were related.

I always thought I was different. On many occasions I wished I had black hair like my friends. Mic-Mac was the language in our home, but I would not speak it. All my family spoke Mic-Mac, but when they

spoke to me, I would answer in English. I believed I couldn't speak Mic-Mac as well as my parents, so I resolved not to speak it at all.

I was ten years old when I had my first drink of alcohol. On New Year's Eve I stole two glasses of vodka from my parents. I can't say that it did what it was supposed to do, for I got deathly sick, threw up, and had diarrhea. The next day I was full of fear that my parents would find out. I learned my lesson for a while.

A few years later, in junior high school, a few friends and I got a bottle of rum from a bootlegger. I got really drunk, and it was great. I remember having a feeling of complete freedom. I drank for the next fifteen years. Drinking became a major part of my life and I thought it was normal. Then came the violence, the fighting, the illegal acts, and the image of "the tough guy." My family was proud of me, and some relatives would actually encourage me.

I spent a number of years in and out of juvenile correctional facilities, and after my eighteenth birthday, I began spending time in county jail. I actually got a high when I came home, knowing that my friends and relatives would respect me more because I had been in jail and was becoming a man.

While in a juvenile detention center about 500 miles from my home, I received word that my mother was dying of cancer. I was able to get a pass and return home to spend time with her. One evening my family asked me if I would stay home with my mother and give her the medicine she was required to take. I had already had a few drinks and was anxious to get out and party with my friends, but I reluctantly

agreed to stay. Self-pity set in, and all I could think of was the good time I could have been having. I got very impatient with my mother, and when she refused to take her medicine, I almost forced it into her mouth; then I left to join my friends. The next morning I woke up in county jail, about 100 miles from home. I had attempted a break-and-enter, and was caught by the police.

That very evening, as I sat in jail, my mother died. I was allowed out for the funeral, and I still recall how alone I felt, even when I was with my family. I felt shame and remorse, and for years to come I believed I was somehow responsible for my mother's death. This incident haunted me for years. Alcohol would take it away for a while, but the remorse always returned. I tried to comfort myself by saying that my lifestyle was a part of my destiny just like many of my family members, but this did not remove the remorse.

I can remember only one good thing that happened during this time. As my mother lay dying, I talked to her in the Mic-Mac language. She seemed so happy, and she told me that it sounded beautiful to hear me speaking Mic-Mac. I cherish this memory.

I was to meet a young girl and have a son. Proud, I named him after myself, and my drinking slowed down for a little while. One day I promised my son that "tomorrow" I would take him to the movies. I really meant it from the bottom of my heart, and I was looking forward to it. That night I took a drink, and it led to many more. The next day I was hung-over, and even though I had promised to go to the movies that afternoon, I took a drink to fix myself up. That drink

was followed by many more, and I justified them by telling myself: My son is so young, he will never remember the movie. The day after the promised movie I was guilty and remorseful, and felt I was just no good. I faced my son, only to hear him talking excitedly about going to a movie. I couldn't say anything, for the movie was no longer playing. I left his mother to explain.

The next few years saw me living back in the old home with my father, as my girl had left me, taking my son. My drinking escalated even more, as did the guilt, remorse, and fear. I was hospitalized for dehydration, had a mild stroke, spent a week in a psychiatric ward, and suffered a number of alcoholic seizures. I lost the trust of my family and friends. They simply could not rely on me for anything. I would stop for a while, but I always drank again.

I can certainly identify with our co-founder Bill W. when he says on page 4 of the Big Book: “. . . the old fierce determination to win came back.” I would take a drink, and then I knew everything was going to be all right. I was going to clean up my act; everything was going to change—you'll see. It didn't; nothing changed. I tried so many ways of beating the game: I went to church and took a pledge; I went to a Native sweat lodge; I would do something so I would be put in jail; I vowed to stay away from hard liquor. Nothing worked. Then came the pills to stop the shakes and get off the sauce for a while.

One evening during a party at my home, an argument led to fighting, as usual. One of my brothers stabbed me in the back with a knife, and I fell to the floor unconscious. I came to in the hospital. They told

me that one lung had collapsed, and they had a drain in my lung that came out the side of my body. The very next day some friends came to visit me, bringing a bottle of liquor. I still had that pride. I was still the tough guy. I lay there in bed with tubes draining my lung and smoked cigarettes and drank liquor. Later, in A.A., I had the nerve to question Step Two and wonder why I had to be “restored to sanity.”

I can honestly say that nothing worked for me until I joined Alcoholics Anonymous. Eventually I ended up in a treatment center, and after a twenty-eight-day program, I began attending A.A. meetings on a regular basis. The treatment center introduced me to the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, and I left there knowing that the only hope for me was the Twelve Steps.

I was told that A.A. is a spiritual program and that I had better have a Higher Power. I knew nothing of God or Higher Powers, and I began trying to find one. At first I thought that since I was a Native, maybe I should practice the Native traditional ways. Then I thought maybe I should go to the church on the reservation. Then I believed that if I went to enough A.A. meetings and just sat there, I would have a vision and achieve recovery. One day a member asked me if I believed that there actually was a Higher Power. I did believe there was a God of some sort or another. He told me that was enough. He said with that belief and attending meetings, I would find a Higher Power of my own understanding. Today I am thankful for that advice.

After three months in A.A., I returned home one evening after a meeting to hear the music and laughter of a party next door. Some of my drinking buddies

were at that party, and I just knew I was going to end up there. I did not want to drink, yet the party was like a magnet. I was full of fear as I ran across the street to a pay telephone. I called my sponsor, but there was no answer. Panic set in as I ran home. In the house I went into my bedroom and sat on the side of the bed. I looked up and said these words: "Well, Buddy, I guess there's just you and me." Believe it or not, it worked; those simple words worked. Something happened: A little peace came over me, anxiety left, and then I lay down and fell asleep. I slept well that night, the first good sleep in a long time. That feeble request to God worked. I was honest and really wanted God's help. From that day on, I knew that I had found a Higher Power and that He would help me.

Over the next few months my life slowly began to change as I worked on Step One of our recovery program. I listened to speakers and began a Big Book study with an older member. In Mic-Mac folklore there are little people we call Bugalademuj's. They live in the mountains, but they often sneak into our homes to play tricks on us, usually at night so we won't see them. When I noticed that Chapter 4 of the Big Book, "We Agnostics," had appeared to change, I told A.A. members that the Bugalademuj's were fooling around with my Big Book. You know what—they are still at it today.

I now understand that the spiritual malady should be my main concern and that the more faith I have, the fewer problems I will have. Today I have more faith than I ever had, and as my faith grows, my fears lessen.

For a guy who has spent years in jails, hospitals, psychiatric wards, a guy who just could not stop drinking, there was only one answer—Alcoholics Anonymous and the Twelve Steps. I was very fortunate that I was steered in the right direction. A dramatic change has taken place in my life. Soon I hope to celebrate my second anniversary of continuous sobriety. In two years my whole life has changed. Today I sponsor others. I understand the word *compassion*, and I feel it. I am working on Step Eight at the present time, and I just know that more happiness is to come into my life as I “trudge the Road of Happy Destiny.”

GUTTER BRAVADO

Alone and unemployable, he was given two options by the court, get help or go to jail, and his journey toward teachability began.

I WAS BORN in a major midwestern city at the tail end of the baby boom. My parents were not well-to-do, but they were employed and pursuing the American dream in the mid-1950s. Dad was an ex-policeman who had put himself through law school and worked with banks and as a real estate broker. Mom had graduated from a well-known East Coast college, majoring in journalism, and moved west to marry my father and raise a family. Both were children of hard-working European immigrants.

Growing up, my big brother and I went to church on Sundays and attended parochial schools. We had plenty to eat and more than just the basic necessities of life. I was a smart but mischievous kid, and at some point I decided it was easier to lie than to suffer the consequences of my pranks. Dad was big on law and order but especially didn't like liars. We often had conflicts. Other than this, my early childhood was a relatively happy one.

Eventually my brother went off to college, and I started venturing into the world on my own. I enjoyed my friends and our many adventures. This is where my first experiments with alcohol began. Sharing a few

beers or a stolen bottle with friends on Friday nights was my approach to maturity and adulthood. In school I developed the reputation of never quite working up to my potential. I felt the world took things much too seriously. Where I saw myself as fun-loving and happy-go-lucky, others saw irresponsibility and insolence. A rebellious nature soon started to surface.

In the mid-sixties I had the opportunity to visit my brother, who had a fellowship at a university in California. These were heady times, and my experiences there left a lasting impression on me. There was music in the air and dancing in the streets. Little wonder that after returning to the Midwest I soon became a discipline problem. Disillusioned with what I saw as the mundane trivialities of school, I found it harder and harder to concentrate. I longed for the carefree life. By the fall of 1968, after leaving three different schools, I decided I'd had enough. So I quit the books, packed my guitar, left home, and headed back to the West Coast filled with the optimism of youth and intending to make a life for myself.

My tiny grubstake soon started to run out, and work was hard to find. I panhandled a little but found I was too proud for it or, more likely, not hungry enough. I began living hand-to-mouth, but my survival skills were not as sharp as I thought. In warmer weather I camped in the woods near the coastal highway. The barking of the sea lions made it hard to sleep. With winter approaching, I roamed the waterfront and the streets, sleeping in storerooms and seedy hotels or flopping with migrant farm workers in town for their off-season.

What had begun as an adventure was turning into a

nightmare. My moments of escape from this uncomfortable reality came when I persuaded someone to share their wine or vodka. With a drink in me, my confidence returned, my direction seemed clear-cut, and I reveled in lofty plans and dreams for the future. Drinking to escape became as important as eating to survive. All of the gutter bravado and determination crumbled when, in the end, I ran up against the law. The authorities sent me packing back to the Midwest with nothing more than the clothes on my back.

Arriving home, I dazzled my friends with exaggerated tales of exotic people and strange happenings, some of them true. We went straight out drinking, and I picked up right where I left off. Always the object was to go out and “get wasted.” Though I sometimes had trouble holding my liquor, I was willing to try harder. I felt the key to successful drinking was the same as it is in musicianship—practice, practice, practice.

After an attempt at college, I sought employment, often with a hangover. The jobs I found I considered to be menial. I did not yet know that all work is honorable. The maintenance crews, the electroplating, the factory work, and the pharmaceutical industry (after emptying the trash, I started on the shelves) were all on my résumé. My thievery, tardiness, and absenteeism, the reasons for my dismissals, weren't on my résumé. I was becoming generally dissatisfied, but I did not know that the problem was within me. I wanted some of the finer things in life, but upon realizing they took effort, I dismissed them as trappings of the establishment. Watching out for a bag of money by the side of the road was more my idea of planning for the future.

In spite of my drinking, I managed to save a little money. With my first thousand dollars I bought a motorcycle. With this I purchased a lifestyle more than a means of transportation. For years afterward I lived the biker lifestyle. At times raw and exciting, my existence revolved around building and drag racing motorcycles. Ride hard, live fast, and die young were the new rules. Weekdays I spent bar-hopping the neighborhoods. Weekends would find me in the clubs downtown. As the years passed, my circle of friends grew smaller. Some died accidentally, some were killed, some went to jail, and some just developed the good sense to get out and grow up. These were the ones I didn't understand. I sure wasn't making any new friends, so more and more I found myself a loner.

In the mid-seventies I was hired by the steel industry, a union job at good pay. Soon I bid to a craft job and started learning the electrical trade. The work was hot, dirty, and dangerous. Everyone worked swing shift and at the end of my turn, I felt as if I had survived an ordeal. The first stop was the tavern on top of the hill. Many times there was no second stop. Liquor was not the only recreational substance available there, and I was no stranger to any of them. This was where I got my first bar tab, so no matter how broke I was, I could always stop in for drinks after work. While the guys around me were buying homes, raising families, and otherwise living responsibly, I was already having trouble keeping my utilities on and my car running. I saw to it that I paid my bar tab, however.

My life became the pursuit of intoxication. After a few drinks I felt more normal and in control. I

changed from a furtive loner into a party animal. My jokes were funnier, the girls were prettier, I shot better pool, and the juke box played better tunes. I could look people in the eye and mingle with the best of them.

Every so often I took work-related college courses. Spending time with normal people, I began to see how wild I had become. My cherished individualism was turning into isolationism. I had a growing uneasiness that I was in a vicious circle. I had no friends—only acquaintances. This fact was underscored by the bullet holes in my car, courtesy of one acquaintance I had double-crossed. My only sense of relief was in the bottle, but even that was beginning to fail me. My dreams had long since faded, my direction was unclear, my confidence lost, and the drinking would not restore them as it once had. Personal hygiene became an afterthought. There were times when I would try to live without drinking, but it was difficult, often ending at the most inappropriate times. I cleaned up for special occasions such as holidays, funerals, job interviews, and court dates, only to fail in the final hour, snapping back to the bottle like a rubber band. Planned abstinence was extremely stressful.

The downward spiral of my life began making smaller circles. My driving record included many accidents and a ticket list that would raise a policeman's eyebrows. When I carried insurance, it was high risk. I grew sneakier and less outwardly defiant. Despite breaking laws routinely for years, I stayed out of big trouble for the most part. A few times they almost had me, but I managed to scam on technicalities

or I got yet another break. Finally an indiscretion committed years earlier came back to haunt me. I was about to have a forced encounter with the federal judicial system. I began to feel like a clown juggling too many balls. Each ball represented a problem I was keeping up in the air. My arms were weary and I knew I couldn't keep on much longer, but I was not about to give up. My pride and ego wouldn't let me. Bosses, judges, co-workers, lawyers, car notes, bar tabs, loan sharks, utility payments, landlords, my girlfriend, people I had double-crossed—I looked to all these as the source of my problems, while overlooking the most basic problem: my drinking and myself. I'd known for a long time that I desperately wanted off this merry-go-round, but I had no idea how to do it.

The judge had no trouble coming up with a few ideas, however. I got house arrest with electronic monitoring and strictly supervised probation with random urinalysis for openers. Five years in the penitentiary waited after that. I still played the angles, until it became clear to the authorities that I could not live up to the conditions of my probation. It didn't matter what the consequences were—I couldn't not drink, and I gave up trying. When the court eventually called me in for my violations, they gave me two choices: get help or go to jail. After careful thought I chose the first. Now either they were going to send me someplace, or I could send myself. I chose the second, and they gave me a week to make arrangements. Procrastinating to the end, it took me three. This is when, once again, desperate, cornered, and at my lowest, I said the only prayer I still knew: "God help

me—if you get me out of this one, I'll never do it again." My life was finally out of my control.

No longer the party animal, I was broke and my rent was overdue. I had dirty dishes piled in the sink and moldy pots on the stove. Bags of garbage and bottles were lined up by the door and the toilet had stopped. Piles of stolen junk were sitting on the floor. I had been wearing my clothes much too long and, except for a box of macaroni and cheese or a pot pie, I was not eating. When a knock came at the door, I would run into the bathroom and peep out the window to see who was coming to get me. Not drinking wasn't an option, but drinking didn't help. Such was my condition as I left the house to check myself into the hospital for my day of reckoning.

Outside of being very nervous, I don't remember much about admissions because I was so loaded at the time. After a few hours I began to feel safer. My apprehension slowly turned to relief. Maybe they could help me after all. I had no idea how sick I was to become. The first five of my seventeen days in detox were hell. I could do little more than lie in bed. It had been years since I was sober that long. After a week I felt a little better and began surveying my surroundings. I started my own counter-evaluations. I found the doctors and nurses to be knowledgeable and professional, but I sensed that while they knew much about alcoholism, they had learned it in books—they had not lived it. I did not need knowledge. I needed solutions. No one but the hopeless really knew what it felt like to exist without hope. The skeptic in me came out, searching for every loophole and excuse to pick things apart and to divert attention from my

condition. My initial optimism was beginning to waver. Was this all there was?

However, there was one man on the staff who seemed different. He seemed very comfortable and at ease with a bit of a knowing sparkle in his eye. This guy was clearly not as stuffy as the rest, and when he told me his story, I was surprised to find it very similar to mine—only his was no secret. He mentioned being a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. How could it be that he obviously had the respect of the staff after having lived a life of crime? How could it be that he was a lot like me but had made it back? Here was someone who was sober, yet cool; humble, yet firm in his convictions; serious, but not without a sense of humor. This was one to whom I could relate and maybe even trust. He may have saved my life just by being there, and to this day he doesn't even know it.

Over the next few days I was still not talking much, but I was listening and watching. I learned more about how Alcoholics Anonymous works and met more of its members. I found out it was not something they left at the hospital as they went home; it was a way of life. I found out it was spirituality, not religion. I saw them enjoying themselves, and they all agreed on one thing: If I wanted to change my life as they had changed theirs, I could, as long as I became willing to do what they did. I became fascinated. Here I was, the scum of the earth, yet they came to me and invited me to join them. I started to feel that if I was ever going to try something different, I'd better do it now. It might be my last chance. After all, I still had to deal with the authorities, and I had nothing

to lose by playing along. So I read their book, I started to work their steps, and (with the door closed and the lights out) I asked for a little help from a Higher Power as they suggested. Finally, they highly recommended that I attend their meetings—especially the first night out.

I walked out of there on a sunny afternoon. I intended to go to a meeting that night, but I also had ten dollars in my pocket and a reason to celebrate. I was sober for twenty-two days, and I was feeling pretty good about myself. Soon my old instincts began to take over. Sunny day. Ten bucks. Celebration. Feeling good. Before I knew it, I was walking into the back door of one of my old watering holes. The smell of alcohol hit me when I entered, and my mouth watered. I sat down at the bar. I ordered my usual ginger wash. Couldn't I make it just one day without drinking? At this last question I realized that yes, since I put it that way, I probably could make it just one day without drinking. Besides, I was going to a meeting that night and who knows, they might have breathalyzers there. I put down my dollar, got off that stool, and walked back out the door. After all, I could drink tomorrow if I wanted to—and that's just what I planned to do.

At my first meeting that night the people fulfilled their responsibility—they made me welcome. I met others like me and it felt good. Maybe this thing was for real. So I went to another meeting, and I got the same feeling. Then another meeting. The tomorrows came and went, and to this day, I still haven't found it necessary to take another drink. That was well over six years ago.

The meetings gave me what my sponsor likes to call one of the most important words in the Big Book: A.A. put a “we” in my life. “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol. . . .” I no longer had to be alone. Fellowship and activity kept me coming back long enough to work the Twelve Steps. The more I did, the better I felt. I started hanging out with my sponsor and some active people at the meetings. They showed me how gratitude is something that is demonstrated, not talked about—gratitude is action. They suggested I was lucky to still have a car, even though it was a junker; therefore, I might consider taking the less fortunate to meetings. They reminded me you can’t teach anything to a know-it-all, so remain teachable. When old behaviors started to creep back in, they called me on it. When life just didn’t feel right, they talked about developing faith and relying on my Higher Power. They told me lack of power was my dilemma and that there is a solution. I took to A.A. immediately and believed like a child that if I leveled my pride enough to thoroughly follow their path, I’d get what they had. And it worked. Starting out, I just wanted to keep the authorities off my back. I never bargained for this program’s changing the course of my life or showing me the way to freedom and happiness.

Still very impatient, I wanted the whole deal right away. That’s why I related so well to the story about a wide-eyed new person and an oldtimer. When the newcomer approached the oldtimer, envying his accomplishments and many years of sobriety, the oldtimer slapped down his hand like a gavel and said, “I’ll trade you even! My thirty years for your thirty

days—right now!” He knew what the newcomer had yet to find out: that true happiness is found in the journey, not the destination.

So today I’m much more comfortable with life, as Alcoholics Anonymous has promised, and I know they’re right when they say it keeps getting better. My circumstances have steadily improved as my spiritual life grows and matures. Words cannot begin to describe the feelings in my heart as I sometimes ponder how much my life has changed, how far I’ve come, and how much there is yet to discover. And though I’m not sure where my journey may take me next, I know I’ll owe it to the grace of God and to three words of the Twelve Steps: continue, improve, and practice.

Oh, and one more thing they told me: Humility is the key.

(10)

EMPTY ON THE INSIDE

She grew up around A.A. and had all the answers—except when it came to her own life.

I SPENT MY LIFE “acting as if”—either acting as if I knew (I didn’t ask teachers questions in school; they might find out I didn’t know the answer) or acting as if I didn’t care. I always felt as though everyone else had been given the directions to life and I had been somewhere else when God was handing them out. To me, you either knew how to do something or you didn’t. You could play the piano, or you couldn’t. You were a good ballplayer, or you weren’t.

I don’t know where I learned the attitude that it wasn’t all right not to know, but it was a certainty in my life, and it almost killed me. The concept of set a goal, work for the goal, achieve the goal was foreign to me. You either “had it” or you didn’t, and if you didn’t, you couldn’t let on—you might look bad. I never once stopped to consider that others might really have to work hard for what they had. Gradually my attitude translated into contempt for those who did know—leave it to an alcoholic to look down on someone who is successful!

My father joined Alcoholics Anonymous when I was seven. Many of my childhood Friday nights were spent at open A.A. meetings because we couldn’t

afford a babysitter (I was the kid sitting over in the corner with a book). What effect did it have? I knew that being alcoholic meant you couldn't drink any more and that you had to go to A.A. As my drinking career began, I was always careful not to utter the "A" word in connection with my name. At my house I would have been handed a meeting schedule. Besides, I knew that A.A. was all old guys that drank coffee, smoked, and ate donuts—I had been there. (Looking back, I'm sure most of those "old guys" were barely thirty.) So no A.A. for me. That would mean not drinking. And when I drank, life changed.

I was fifteen the first time I got drunk. I can tell you where I was, who I was with, what I was wearing. It was an important day for me. Within a year I was a poster child for adolescent treatment of alcoholism. My grades plunged, my friends changed, I wrecked a car, my appearance went downhill, I was suspended from school. (When I first got sober, I wondered why my parents never checked me into treatment. Then I remembered they didn't have adolescent treatment centers when I was a teen. As a matter of fact, I still have ceramics Dad made me in the psychiatric ward, because when *he* was drinking, they didn't have treatment centers.) I was always ready with a promise to do better, to try harder, to apply myself, to live up to my potential. Potential—now there is the curse of every budding alcoholic.

I managed to graduate somehow and went on to college, where I promptly flunked out. I couldn't make it to class. Hindsight has shown me two reasons for this. First, if someone else had a free period, I tagged along with them. I thought that I had to be

with my friends all the time. I was afraid that if they spent any time without me, they might begin to wonder, Why do I hang out with her anyway? They might realize they had a better time without me. And then they might tell other people, who would tell other people, and I'd be alone.

Second, social conversation was a skill that I never acquired. When I met someone, I felt totally inadequate. To me, when I said "Hi, my name is _____," there followed a deafening silence, as if they were thinking, So? How did people have conversations anyway? How did they meet and then begin to talk as if they had known each other for years? For me it was one more thing that it wasn't all right not to know. So I kept drinking. When I drank, it didn't matter.

It's important to interject here that I loved to drink. Drinking put me into the middle of life. I was a social drinker—drinking made me extremely social. I didn't particularly like drinking with other women; I drank with the big boys. I always had a tremendous capacity for alcohol, and I learned to shoot an excellent game of pool, which made me quite popular in the local tavern scene. At one point I even had my own motorcycle. When I read "Bill's Story" in the Big Book and he said, "I had arrived," I knew what he meant.

For fourteen years my drinking took me places I never meant to go. First I moved south, since I knew the town I grew up in was my problem. (I once heard a guy remark in a meeting that there are three or four states that should just post signs on their borders: "This state doesn't work either!") I did the things women do. My first marriage was really a one-night

stand that lasted five years—I certainly couldn't admit that I had made a mistake. We had two children and I wanted out, but to leave would have meant taking responsibility. I just drank until he threw me out. Then it was his fault the marriage failed.

At one point before moving home, I lost a job that meant a lot to me, as the direct result of my drinking. For the first time, I went to a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous and said, "I am an alcoholic." When I had gone to meetings with my dad I always just said, "I'm with him." I called my father and told him I went to a meeting. Within a week he mailed me a box containing the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, a tape of his A.A. talk, a couple of meditation books, a copy of *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, and a few other odds and ends. I think he had been saving up for the day I was willing.

So, divorced, I moved back home. Within a year I was under arrest for child endangerment. I had left my sleeping children home alone and gone to drink. They were removed from my custody and placed with my mother. Then started my rounds of the treatment centers. I could talk a good game. After all, I had grown up with A.A. I was the one the counselors asked to talk to other women who were reluctant to leave their kids long enough to go into treatment. I could give the whole speech: "We can't be good mothers if we're not sober." The problem was, inside, I was relieved that my kids had to live with my mom. It was too hard to be a parent. But I couldn't tell people that—they might think I was a bad mom.

And I *was* a bad mom. I was a terrible mom. No, I didn't beat them, and of course I told them I loved

them. But the message my kids got from me was “Yes, I love you; now go away.” They had to be practically invisible in their own home. I had absolutely nothing to give them emotionally. All they wanted was my love and attention, and alcoholism robbed me of the ability to give it. I was empty on the inside.

While I was in treatment, my dad died and I inherited almost enough money to kill myself. I got to drink the way I wanted to for 2½ years. I’m sure I got here faster because of it.

Near the end, I was living in an attic apartment; the money was long gone. It was November, cold and gray. When I woke up at 5:30, it was gray outside. Was it 5:30 a.m. or 5:30 p.m.? I couldn’t tell. I looked out the window, watching people. Were they going to work? Or coming home? I went back to sleep. When I woke again, it would either be light or dark. Opening my eyes, after what seemed like hours, it was only 5:45. And gray. I was twenty-eight years old.

I finally got on my knees and asked God for help. I couldn’t go on the way I was living. I had been in the apartment since August and hadn’t bothered to unpack. I wasn’t bathing. I couldn’t answer my phone. I couldn’t show up on weekends to visit my kids. So I prayed. Something made me go dig through a box, and I found the Big Book my father had sent me years earlier (I always tell new people to buy the hardcover version—for some reason they are harder to throw away). I read “Bill’s Story” again. This time it made sense. This time I could identify. I slept, holding the book like a teddy bear. I woke up feeling rested for the first time in months. And I didn’t want to drink.

I would love to tell you that I have been sober ever

since, but that is not the case. I didn't want to drink that day, but I took no action to insure against it. You see, I believe that we get more than one "moment of grace" from God—but it is up to us to seize the moment by taking action. But I heeded the voice that said, "You may as well drink. You know you're going to."

For the next few days every time I went to my favorite watering hole, I was surrounded by people talking about sobering up. My bartender wanted to quit drinking. The guy I was shooting pool with talked about going back to A.A. Someone next to me at the bar was talking about being at the local clubhouse for A.A.'s. I did stop drinking (sort of) for a few months but eventually went on the bender that would end it all.

By the end of two weeks of drinking, nobody was speaking to me, so I headed south, where I was sure they all missed me. There was no homecoming parade. People barely remembered me, and by the end of a week, I was out of money. I couldn't even book a plane ticket home. I had less than one dollar, and I had one of *those* hangovers. I knew if I tried to sit in the airport bar long enough for someone to buy me a drink, it would be obvious that was my intent, and my pride couldn't bear the thought of being asked to leave. I briefly considered mugging a little old lady and stealing her purse, but I knew I would end up picking on the one who was still in shape.

If there had been one more dollar, I might not be sober today. Once I was drinking, I always had a plan, but that day, by the grace of God, I was out of plans. I didn't have one single better idea. I called Mom, told

her where I was, and asked her to fly me home. She later told me she almost didn't do it, but she was afraid they'd never see me again.

She deposited me at the local detox center, where she told me I could go in or not but that she was done with me. I was on my own. Detox gave me the same message. I thought they should send me on to a treatment center—thirty days of hot meals and rest was sounding pretty good to me—but they told me I already knew everything treatment was going to teach me, that I should go do it and save the bed for someone who needed it. I have been sober ever since. I was finally accountable for my own recovery. I was responsible for taking the action. One of my favorite games had always been making it someone else's job to see that I got my work done. That game was over.

I had never expected to live to see thirty. Suddenly I was 29½ and showing no signs of dying anytime soon. I knew in my heart that I would live whether I drank or not, and that no matter how bad it was, it could always get worse. Some people get sober because they're afraid to die. I knew I would live, and that was far more terrifying. I had surrendered.

The first night out of detox I went to a meeting, and the woman speaking commented that alcoholism had taken her to the point where she didn't want to work and didn't want to care for her daughter, she just wanted to drink. I couldn't believe it! That was me! She became my first sponsor, and I came back.

The second night I sat in what I now call the "new guy chair"—second row, against the wall (if you sit in back they know you're new, and if you sit in front you might have to talk to someone). When it came time to

hold hands and pray at the end of the meeting, I had no hand to hold on one side. I remember thinking “I will never fit in here” and hanging my head. I felt my hand being taken—someone in front of me had taken the time to be sure that the circle was complete. To this day I don’t know who it was, but that person is the reason I came back the next night—that person saved my life. And I kept coming back.

The local clubhouse had a noon Big Book meeting every day, and I went, every day. Not to get sober, mind you, and certainly not to learn about what was in the book. Here was my thinking: I knew you were supposed to read your Big Book every day, and they went around the room reading an entire chapter, so that should count, right? This also took up nearly thirty minutes, so it was less likely that I would get called on to talk. And the meeting was at noon, which left my nights free. I figured out all of that with my keen alcoholic mind!

Luckily, I forgot that God is in charge of results. I was finally taking action, and my motives didn’t matter. I thought I’d go through the Big Book once, then “graduate” to discussion meetings, but there was a lot of laughter in that room, so I kept going. I was not one of those people who walked into meetings and said, “Thank God, I’m home.” I did not particularly want what they had; I just didn’t want what I had anymore—that was the humble beginning I needed.

The convenience of the noon meeting meant that I went to two meetings every day; I had nothing else to do at night. I began to notice people there with several years of sobriety—my own laziness had thrown me in with some of the most active people in

Alcoholics Anonymous. What I found out was that people who attend Big Book meetings on a regular basis tend to read the book and do what it says.

When I was two weeks sober, a man's nine-year-old daughter was killed by a drunk driver, and three days later he was at a meeting saying he had to believe it wasn't for nothing. That maybe one alcoholic would get sober because of it. As I left that day, I found myself wondering what would have happened if that had been my kids, or me? What would they remember about me? A feeling came over me (I know now it was gratitude), and I realized that I could call my children right then and tell them I loved them. That I could show up when I said I would. That my word could be worth something to them. That even though I might always just be "mom who comes over on the weekends," I could be a good weekend mom. I had a chance to move forward with them, forging a relationship built on a foundation of God and Alcoholics Anonymous, rather than always trying to make up for the past. One year later I was able to share with that man that maybe it hadn't been for nothing, because my life changed that day.

By the time a month passed, my feet were firmly planted in Alcoholics Anonymous. And I kept coming back. I cannot begin to list all the wonderful things that have happened in my years here. My kids were four and six when I got sober, and they have "grown up" in A.A. I brought them to open meetings, and the people there gave them what I couldn't in the early days—love and attention. Gradually they became part of my life again, and today I have custody of my children.

I remarried in Alcoholics Anonymous, to a man who believes in A.A. the way I do. (I knew we were off to a good start when he didn't get angry that I stood him up to go on a Twelfth Step call.) We agreed to never be higher than third on each other's list, with God always first and Alcoholics Anonymous second. He is my partner and my best friend. We both sponsor several people, and our house is filled with love and laughter. Our telephone never stops ringing. We share the joy of a common solution.

We have had some tough times. Our son is the third generation of A.A.'s in my family. After a suicide attempt at age fourteen, we found out he too was an alcoholic. After his one year in A.A., it's hard to tell what will happen, but we trust Alcoholics Anonymous, even on the days we don't trust our son. Our daughter is a beautiful, confident teenager who has found her own path to God without having to drink. She is the product of the love and faith of Alcoholics Anonymous.

I still have a sponsor and a home group today. I am a member of Alcoholics Anonymous in good standing. I learned how to be a good A.A. member by watching good A.A. members and doing what they do. I learned how to have a good marriage by watching people with good marriages and doing what they do. I learned how to be a parent by watching good parents and doing what they do. And I finally have the freedom of believing that it is all right not to know.

GROUNDED

Alcohol clipped this pilot's wings until sobriety and hard work brought him back to the sky.

I AM AN ALCOHOLIC. I am part Comanche Indian and grew up poor but in a loving home until alcoholism took both of my parents. Then the divorces came, three for each parent, and I learned the anger that is such a part of alcoholic family life. I vowed I would never be an alcoholic. Active in my Indian community, I saw what the alcohol did there also, and I was repelled and disgusted by it.

I graduated from high school at seventeen and immediately left to join the marine corps. I found a home there, relishing the tough discipline, camaraderie, and esprit de corps. I excelled and was one of three who were promoted upon graduation from boot camp. Four and a half years later I was given an opportunity to go into flight training. Success at the end of the eighteen-month period would mean pilot wings and an officer's commission. Again I excelled. Although most of my peers had college educations and fear of failure constantly plagued me, I graduated near the top of my class.

I excelled at something else also. Drinking was encouraged; the pilot persona was one of hard, gutsy flying with equally hard drinking, and attendance at

happy hour was considered a duty. I did not need any encouragement and reveled in the squadron camaraderie, good-natured joking, and competition at these events.

One year into my training, I reported for the final phase and met a young beauty. I was drunk the night I met her, and she would have nothing to do with me, but I could never have approached her without the false courage the alcohol gave me. The next day I saw her again, this time sober, and we began to date. I graduated from flight training on her twentieth birthday, and she pinned my gold wings and my second lieutenant bars on me. We were married two weeks later. We have just celebrated our thirty-fifth anniversary, and she is the most wonderful person I could ever have found.

We immediately had two young sons, and I left to go to war in Vietnam. Thirteen months later I returned. I spent 11½ years total time in the marine corps before deciding to get out because of the family separation my military career required. I had seen enough family chaos to know that I could never allow that to occur in my own family, so reluctantly, even painfully, I resigned my commission and joined a major airline. I had gained a reputation in the marines I was proud of. I had many accomplishments to my credit, a good combat record with decorations, and skill as a pilot.

Slowly I worked my way up within the airline structure and finally became a captain after twenty years. It had been a strife-ridden company, and our family endured some tough times. During one of the lengthy labor strikes, we adopted a baby girl. She completed

our family. Nearly half Chippewa Indian, she was a beautiful baby of seventeen days when we took her home with us.

My drinking continued to escalate, but I did not believe I was any different from my drinking comrades. I was very wrong. I had two charges of driving under the influence, years apart, which I wrote off to bad luck, and I paid handsome legal fees to get the charges reduced. This was years before the Federal Aviation Administration began cross-checking drivers' records against pilot licenses.

One night, after a hard afternoon and late evening of drinking, I and my two fellow flight crew members were arrested. We were charged with violation of a federal law that prohibits the operation of a common carrier while impaired. It had never been used against airline pilots before. I was devastated. Suddenly I was thrust into an experience beyond my worst nightmare.

I arrived home the next day, sick at heart and unable to look my wife in the face. Ashamed and destroyed, I saw two doctors that day and was diagnosed as an alcoholic. I was in treatment that night, going in with only the clothes on my back. The news media had picked up the story, and it was blared all over the world, on all the major television networks, and my shame and humiliation were beyond words. All the light in my life had gone out, and I entertained the idea of suicide. I could not envision ever smiling again or having a day with a bright horizon. I was hurting more than I ever knew a human could hurt, and I just wanted the pain to end.

I became notorious in commercial aviation, and the media had a field day with me. I lost my FAA med-

ical certificate because of my diagnosis of alcoholism, and the FAA issued an emergency revocation of all my licenses. I thought about my parents (now both dead), my Indian people, and all those I had previously considered alcoholics, and I knew I had become exactly what I vowed I would never become.

I learned my career was over via the six o'clock news one week after entering treatment. I refused to watch TV, but my fellow patients kept me informed. I was the lead story on the news for weeks. I was joke fodder for the late-night TV comics as they ridiculed me, my profession, and my airline.

I also learned I was going to federal prison. The sentence was mandatory if convicted, and there was no doubt in my mind that I would be. With nothing left, I dedicated myself to learning about recovery. I fervently believed that the key to my sobriety, and hence my survival, lay in the power of all I was being taught, and I spent no idle moments in treatment. I worked as hard as I had worked to earn my wings, but this time my life was at stake. I struggled to regain a spiritual connection as I underwent one legal crisis after another.

I got out of treatment determined to complete ninety A.A. meetings in ninety days but was afraid my court date would interfere, so I completed my ninety meetings in sixty-seven days. I went through an intense, media-covered three-week trial. On most evenings after the day in court, I sought refuge in A.A. meetings and renewed my strength for the coming day. Recovery and all I had learned allowed me to handle things much, much differently than my two co-defendants. Many spoke of my serenity throughout

this experience of horror, which surprised me. Inside I did not feel what others seemed to see.

I was found guilty and sentenced to sixteen months in federal prison. My two codefendants received twelve-month sentences and chose to remain free pending appeals, while I chose to go into prison and get it over. I had learned how to live life on life's terms and not my own. From somewhere back in my high school days, I remembered a poem that says something to the effect of, "Cowards die a thousand deaths, a brave man only once," and I wanted to do what had to be done. I was terrified of walking into prison but told my children that I could not come out the back door until I walked through the front. I remembered that courage was not the absence of fear; it was the ability to continue in the face of it.

On the day I entered prison, nine of my fellow pilots began making our family's house payments, which they did for nearly four years. After my release from prison, I made four attempts to get them to let us take over, and they refused each time. So many came to help us from places we could never have imagined.

I served 424 days in the federal prison system. I started an A.A. meeting in prison, which was opposed by the prison administration, and they hassled us weekly as we came together to meet. The weekly meeting was a quiet oasis in the desert, a few moments of serenity in a prison full of bedlam.

My prison term was followed by three years of probation, which restricted my travel and had thirteen other conditions. Upon release from prison, no longer a pilot, I returned to the same treatment center where

I had once been a patient, and worked full-time with other alcoholics. Pay was minimal, but I found I was effective at reaching others, and I wanted desperately to pay back some of what so many had given me. I did that for twenty months.

For a long time I did not consider flying again, but I could not purge the dream of doing so from my heart. One of my meditation books had said, "Before any dream can come true, there must first be a dream." I had been told if I wanted to fly again, I would have to begin at the very bottom, with a private license, even though I had previously held the highest license the FAA awarded, the air transport pilot license. I studied for and took all the lengthy FAA written examinations. I had to go back and relearn things I had learned thirty years before and had long since forgotten. I had, unexpectedly, been able to reacquire my FAA medical certificate after proving the quality of my sobriety for more than two years.

The trial judge had put sanctions on me that made it impossible for me to fly again because of my age. My lawyer had become my friend and worked for three years after my conviction without taking a cent from me. He was one more person who entered my life in a manner I could only ascribe to some kind of Divine Providence. He took a motion to the judge to lift the sanctions, and the tears came flooding down my cheeks when he called to let me know the judge had approved it. With the lifting of those sanctions, the impossible became slightly less impossible. An extraordinary amount of work was left to do, but at least the attempt could now be made.

None of my friends thought it possible to regain

licenses literally from the ground up, but I had learned how to do many things one day at a time, one small step at a time, so I went after the licenses in exactly that manner. Had I chosen to view the whole panorama of licensing requirements, I would have quit; they were simply too overwhelming. But one day and one thing at a time they were doable. So I did them.

I knew no one would ever hire me to fly passengers. I was an ex-con, a convicted felon, a drunk. I had doubts as to whether anyone would even allow me to fly cargo. It took several months for the FAA to process my licenses and mail them to me. On the exact day they arrived, another miracle occurred. I received a phone call from the head of the pilot union, who informed me that the president of the airline had decided personally to reinstate me. I had not pursued the legal grievance process I was entitled to, because I knew my actions could never be defended or excused. I had steadfastly accepted responsibility, in front of TV cameras and in the treatment center, because my recovery demanded rigorous honesty.

It was almost beyond my ability to believe that the president of the airline could ever consider having me work for them again. I marveled at the courage of such a man and such an airline. What if I relapsed? What if I flew drunk again? The media would have a field day. For days afterward, as I awoke each morning, my first thought was that it had only been a dream, that it could not possibly have occurred.

Almost four years after my arrest and the explosive devastation of my life, I signed my back-to-work agreement. Restored to full seniority, given the retire-

ment I had lost, and once again an airline pilot! A large crowd gathered to watch me sign the document.

So much had happened in my life. I lost almost everything I had worked to acquire. My family had suffered public shame and humiliation. I had been the object of scorn, shame, and disgrace. Yet much more had also happened; every loss had been replaced with rewards. I had seen the promises of the Big Book come true in a magnitude I could never have imagined. I had gotten sober. I had regained my family, and we were once again close and loving. I had learned how to use the Twelve Steps and to live the wonderful program that was founded so many years ago by two drunks.

It took several years, but I learned to be grateful for my alcoholism and the program of recovery it forced me into, for all the things that had happened *to* me and *for* me, for a life today that transcends and far exceeds anything I had previously known. I could not have that today if I had not experienced all the yesterdays.

My back-to-work agreement said I would retire as a copilot. But the miracles in this program have never ceased for me, and last year I was notified that the president of my airline had granted permission for me to once again be a captain.

I retired at age sixty, and I checked out as a 747 captain, which means my final year at my airline concluded in the left seat. The circle, so sacred to my Indian people, will once again have been completed.

I take little credit for all that has happened. I suited up and showed up, but the process of A.A., the grace of a loving God, and the help of so many around me

have been far more responsible for all the events in my life. Today one of my sons has more than 3½ years of sobriety after nearly losing his life to alcohol and drugs. He is truly one more miracle in my life for which I am so deeply grateful.

I have returned to my Indian people once again after a long shame-filled absence. I am dancing again and returning to the old ways I left behind. I have spoken at two Native American A.A. conventions, something I never thought I'd see when I was a youngster growing up. Adversity truly introduces us to ourselves. But we need never deal with our adversities alone as long as we can find another alcoholic in a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous.

(12)

ANOTHER CHANCE

Poor, black, totally ruled by alcohol, she felt shut away from any life worth living. But when she began a prison sentence, a door opened.

I AM AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN alcoholic. I don't know when I became an alcoholic, but I do believe I became one because I drank too much too often.

I always blamed my drinking on being poor, or on anything other than the truth—that I liked what booze did for me, that when I had a drink I was as big and had as much as the next person. I would never admit that I was drinking too much or spending money that I should have used to buy food for my two little boys.

As time went on, I drank more. I was not able to hold a job—no one wants a drunk around. I was always able to get a boyfriend who had a drinking joint or sold whiskey, but it didn't last long. I would embarrass everyone by coming in drunk or passing out. Then it got to the place where I couldn't drink without getting in jail. On one of these trips, the judge must have thought I was worth saving, for instead of sending me to jail, he sent me to A.A. for one month.

I went to A.A. At least, my body went. I hated every minute of it. I couldn't wait until the meeting was over to get a drink. I was afraid to drink before the meeting. I thought if they smelled whiskey on my breath,

they would lock me up, and I couldn't live without my bottle. I hated that judge for sending me to a place with all those drunks. I wasn't an alcoholic!

Oh, I might drink too much at times—everyone I knew drank. But I don't remember that any of them ever went to sleep in joints and woke up with no shoes on in the winter or fell out of chairs. But I did. I don't remember any of them getting put out in the winter because they didn't pay their rent. But to me, whiskey meant more than a home for my sons.

Things got so bad, I was afraid to go on the street, so I turned to Mothers' Aid. That was one of the worst things that could have happened to an alcoholic woman. I would wait for the mailman each month, like any good mother, but as soon as he handed me my check, I put on my best dress and went looking for my alcoholic friend. Once I started drinking, I didn't care that the rent wasn't paid or that there was no food in the house or that my boys needed shoes. I would stay out until my money was gone. Then I would go home full of remorse, and wonder what I was going to do until I got my next check.

In time, I began to go out and forget the way back home. I would wake to find myself in some beat-up rooming house, where roaches were crawling over everything. Then the time came when I couldn't afford whiskey, so I turned to wine. Finally I got so low-down, I was ashamed of my friends' seeing me, so I went to the worst joints I could find. If it was daylight, I would go down alleys to make sure no one saw me.

I felt that I didn't have anything to live for, so I tried suicide many times. But I would always wake up in the psychiatric ward to begin another long treat-

ment. After a while I found that the psycho ward was a good place to hide when I had taken something stolen to the pawnshop. I thought if the cops did come to the hospital, the doctors would tell them I was crazy and didn't know what I was doing. But then one good doctor told me there was nothing wrong with me except drinking too much. He said if I came back again, they would send me to the state hospital. I didn't want that, so I stopped going to the psycho ward.

Now I had gotten to the place where I would wake up with black eyes and not know where I got them, or wake up with a lot of money and not know where I got it. Later I found out that I went into stores and stole clothes, then sold them. One morning I woke up with a thousand dollars. I was trying to remember where it came from, when two of the biggest cops I ever saw walked in and took me to jail. It came out that I had sold a woman a fur coat. The cops had picked her up, and she told them she had bought it from me. I got out on bail right away, but when I went to trial, the judge gave me thirty days. When my thirty days were up, I started back on my rounds. I didn't last long. They tell me that I killed a man during that period, but I can't remember anything. It was a total blackout for me. Because I had been drunk, the judge gave me only a twelve-year sentence in prison.

By the grace of God, I only served three years. It was there that I really found out what A.A. was. I had rejected A.A. on the outside, but now it came to me in prison. Today I thank my Higher Power for giving me another chance at life and A.A. and being able to try and help some other alcoholic. I have been home for a year and have not taken a drink in four years.

Since I have been in A.A., I have more friends than I ever had in my life—friends who care about me and my welfare, friends who don't care that I am black and that I have been in prison. All they care about is that I am a human being and that I want to stay sober. Since I've been home, I have been able to gain the respect of my two sons again.

The only thing that bothers me is that there are only about five African-Americans in A.A. in my city. Even those don't take part in A.A. functions as I would like to see them do. I don't know if it's force of habit or something else that keeps them in one place, but I do know that in A.A. there is much work to do, and none of us can do it standing still.

I do think that some of the African-Americans here—and other places too—are afraid to go to other meetings. I just want to say that you don't have to be afraid, because no one at any A.A. meeting will bite you. There are no color bars in A.A. If you give us a try, you will see that we are really human beings, and we will welcome you with open arms and hearts.

I'm writing this during an A.A. convention, where I have spent the weekend with nothing but white people. They haven't eaten me yet! I have not seen a black face but mine since I've been here, and if I didn't look in the mirror, I wouldn't know that I *was* black, because these people treat me as one of them, which I am. We all have the same sickness, and in helping one another, we are able to stay sober.

(13)

A LATE START

“It’s been ten years since I retired, seven years since I joined A.A. Now I can truly say that I am a grateful alcoholic.”

I AM A SEVENTY-FIVE-YEAR-OLD alcoholic. For fifty-five of those seventy-five years I led what is known as a normal middle-class life. Alcohol had as little part in it as candied yams—nice when there but unmissed when absent. The home in which I grew up included two loving parents, one older brother, a constant flow of house pets, riding horses, and friends who were welcomed. Discipline in our house was strict but not out of line with the thinking prevalent during the first quarter of the twentieth century; certainly I don’t consider that I was in any way abused. I attended private school and later a midwestern college. I married, had children, worked, experienced the pain of the death of my parents and of a child. Knew, too, the pleasure of real friends and financial success. I enjoyed horseback riding, swimming, tennis, and had quiet evenings filled with children, books, and friends.

What happened to me somewhere between the ages of fifty-five and sixty-three? I’ve no idea! Was life too much? Did some latent gene suddenly take on a fierce life of its own? I don’t know. What I do know is that at sixty-five I was a crawling, dirty maggot of a woman, willing to tarnish all I’d worked for and to

desecrate every dear relationship I had. I know too that through a wonderful set of God-guided circumstances and people, I was led to the only possible course of behavior that will keep me sane, sober, constructive, and happy.

I was twenty when I had my first drink, and although I liked the taste, I didn't like the way it made me feel. I didn't drink again until I was in my early thirties and thought it made me seem cool and sophisticated. During these early years, a couple of drinks were enough, and I often nursed one Scotch on the rocks for a full evening. When I was thirty-five, my twelve-year-old son was diagnosed with an incurable cancer and within a few months my husband demanded a divorce. For the following five years while my son lived, I seldom drank and never drank alone. Agony, fear, hurt, and exhaustion did not make me a drunk. Happiness opened that door much, much later.

During my mid-forties, my interest in alcohol began to gain momentum. Although I had continued to work, I had otherwise isolated myself to care for my son and his younger sister, each of whom required a special dose of stability, love, and security. Soon after my son's death, I made a decided effort to reenter the adult world. My debut encouraged my drinking. It was not yet obsessive, but drinking became more and more a part of my daily life. I no longer entertained without serving cocktails and seldom attended gatherings where liquor wasn't provided. I always managed to find the post-activity drinking crowd whether it was after dog obedience training or an oil painting class. During my late forties, it was not unusual for me to have a drink alone in the evening, although there were

still many days when I didn't drink at all. Any event was an occasion for excessive celebration, and there were increasingly frequent weekends when I drank myself to a hangover-creating high. Nevertheless, it was during this period that I received a major job promotion.

I was forty-nine when my second husband and I were married. Years before, we had dated through high school and two years of college but then were separated by World War II. Each of us had married elsewhere, divorced, and thirty years later we met by chance. We had ten years of laughter, sharing, and wonderment well laced with martinis and Scotch on the rocks. By the time I was sixty, anyone wise in the ways of alcoholism would have known I was in for big trouble. Happy plans dissolved into pouts, arguments began, and meals burned. Hurricanes of anger rushed through our once-happy cottage. We agreed we were drinking too much. We tried the switch technique, the time control schedule, the drink-only-on-weekends ploy. Nothing worked. Between us we were badly damaging our budget. My husband lost his job, and then for two harrowing years I watched him die of alcoholism. But I learned nothing from his death, and my drinking escalated as I bottle-fed my sorrow.

My early sixties saw me drunk every night and more and more frequently calling in sick or for personal leave. Life was pure and unadulterated hell! At work, I was often shaking so badly that I hesitated to give dictation because I would have to sign the letters. I made every possible excuse to meet someone for a "business luncheon" so that I could have a drink or two. As my alcoholism accelerated, my absenteeism

increased and my productivity diminished. I bounced checks, pawned silver, mourned, and I continued my drinking.

Finally on one cold winter day, I called Alcoholics Anonymous, and that evening two ladies took me to a meeting. We had a twenty-five-minute ride in the car, and I remember how good it was to talk about my fear and shakes, how kind they were without encouraging my self-pity. I remember being given a cup of coffee I could hardly handle and hearing impossible promises that would materialize if I would only make the impossible commitment. I did want to stop. The ladies suggested that I go to a women's meeting the next night, and I did. I had a drink first, of course, and when it came time to identify myself, I stated that my brain told me I was an alcoholic but the rest of me didn't believe it. The next night it snowed, and I stayed home and drank. That was the end of my first try at A.A.

Some months later I invited my daughter and son-in-law for dinner to celebrate her birthday. They found me sprawled across the living room floor, passed out cold. What a mournful birthday present! It took very little persuasion to convince me to go into the detoxification program at the local hospital. I knew I was in trouble; I was ashamed and heartbroken that I had caused her such hurt. Seven days in detox and eight weeks of really good help from a psychologist, and I was dry, sober, and ready to face the world again. The doctor strongly suggested that I participate in the local A.A. program, but I would have none of it. I was cured—I needed no further help.

A year and a half later I retired. I was enjoying my

new freedom and gave myself permission to have a drink only when I was dining out. That worked so well that I made a new rule: I could have a cocktail before dinner and an after-dinner drink. Then I made a rule that said I could serve alcohol to my friends in my home. That of course is the rule that sent me spinning right back down into fearful drunkenness. I was worse than before. My self-imposed hell was in my own home. Unbathed, in the same nightclothes day after day, afraid of the phone, the doorbell, and the darkness. If the clock said six, I wouldn't know whether it was morning or evening. Days ran into each other in an agonizing blur. I crawled to bed, drank when I came to, and sat shivering in fear of some unknown tragedy that I thought was about to descend on me. I remember wailing because I couldn't make coffee, sitting curled in a corner trying to sort out how I could commit suicide without making a mess. I might have tried, but I was afraid no one would find me before I started to stink.

Once again my daughter came to my rescue, and I checked into the detox program at the hospital. This time I was there for ten days. During that time, A.A. meetings were made available at the hospital. I was genuinely touched by the fact that they were led by a young man in a leg cast and on crutches, especially when I realized that he came as a volunteer. And twice before I left, I was given a leave of absence to attend local A.A. meetings.

Others have stated that they eagerly embraced the A.A. program. Unlike them, I did not enter the rooms willingly, nor did I find myself immediately at home. However, I had no other option. There was no escape

route that I had not tried, none that had not led to another failure. I was sixty-nine years old. I had neither time nor health to waste. For six months I didn't drink, attended meetings, and sometimes read the Big Book. I went to meetings exactly on time, sat quietly, and left as soon as the meeting closed. In no way was I a part of the group. I was not impressed by the sayings and didn't really believe the messages I heard. Then one day I was called on to share, and I proceeded to explode. I announced that in no way was I a "grateful alcoholic," that I hated my condition, that I did not enjoy the meetings, and that I did not leave the meetings refreshed. I found neither ease nor growth in the Fellowship.

My healing began with the arrogance of that statement. One of the women came to me after the meeting and told me I was about to "go out." She offered to help me find a sponsor and led me to exactly the person I needed. This lady had nineteen years of sobriety and, even more important, a wealth of experience in helping and guiding alcoholics through the steps of A.A. By no means do I intend to imply that I leaped with pleasure into the program. I stalled and resented and refused to accept each step as it came up. I felt challenged by each new concept and resentful toward my sponsor, who seemed intent on reducing me to abject stupidity. It was years before I realized that I resented the changes the program asked me to make, not my sponsor.

With the patience of unconditional love, she led me to acknowledge first that I was powerless over my alcoholism; then that others before me had conquered their illness. That there had to be some source of help

higher than any one of us and that, together, we were a well of strength on which any one of us could draw. From that point it was not hard to venture into the realization that a Power greater than any one of us existed, and with that understanding I found direction to my own special Higher Power. On that spiritual foundation I began to build a new life.

The Third Step was the most difficult for me. But having completed it, I found that I could face or untangle the other steps if, and when, I could remember to relax, trust the program, and implement the step rather than fight it. Accepting my Higher Power did not fully change my attitude of resistance. It just made yielding to instruction a more rational and acceptable mode of behavior. For each step, I still had to go through the process of recognizing that I had no control over my drinking. I had to understand that the steps of Alcoholics Anonymous had helped others and could help me. I had to realize that if I did want sobriety, I had better do the steps whether I liked them or not. Every time I ran into trouble, I ultimately found that I was resisting change.

My mentor had to remind me that A.A. is not just a project. A.A. offers me an opportunity to improve the quality of my life. I came to recognize that there is always a deeper and wider experience awaiting me. Early in my growth I remember thanking my sponsor for the hours and hours she had given me. She said, "Don't you think that you will do the same for someone else some day?" I replied, "I will never be responsible to or for anyone else ever again." That refusal to make any kind of repayment to the program delayed my offering to be of service in any capacity

and consequently delayed my maturing process. Not until two years had passed was I willing to act as group secretary. It was four years before I was willing to sponsor anyone. Today it is with real gratitude that I am allowed into the lives of a few women. My own understanding is broadened and deepened by their influence in my life. As the newcomer and I examine each step, both she and I receive new insight and find an additional facet to this jewel of sobriety. I'm proud now to be a part of the Fellowship that showed me the path up and out of hell. Now I am eager to share my experience as others have shared theirs with me.

Small miracles keep offering new opportunities just when I need change and growth. New friends have shown me hidden truths in those sayings that I once found so shallow. The lessons of tolerance and acceptance have taught me to look beyond exterior appearances to find the help and wisdom so often lurking beneath the surface. All my sobriety and growth, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, are dependent upon my willingness to listen, understand, and change.

During my fifth year, as a part of my annual personal inventory, I realized that I had not succeeded in developing a spiritual depth in my program. I had accepted what I was taught but had not gone in search of the private growth that I saw in others. I watched for and found people who take the program with them as they live, work, and play in the real world. Through their leadership, by precept and example, I am finding the daily excitement essential to my development as a person and to my contact with my Higher Power.

I approached Alcoholics Anonymous with fear and hesitation. Then, urged by the dread of what was be-

hind me, I took tiny delicate steps onto this new path. When I found the footing was firm, each tentative move brought me a little nearer to trust. Confidence grew, faith in my Higher Power expanded, and I came to recognize a light I had not known existed. Something within me shifted and welcomed a new source of strength, understanding, tolerance, and love. That selfish, withdrawn woman who announced that she would “never be responsible to or for anyone ever again” now finds sincere warmth in just being available. I count it a privilege to help another drunk.

It’s been ten years since I retired, seven years since I joined A.A. Now I can truly say that I am a grateful alcoholic. Had I not become a drunk, I would have become another sober but sad statistic. At seventy-five I would be a lonely, unproductive old woman, watching TV, doing needlepoint, in my home without friends, and sinking further and further into an old age depression. As it is, A.A. has filled my days with friends, laughter, growth, and the feeling of worth that is rooted in constructive activity. My faith in, and contact with, my Higher Power shines more brightly than I dreamed it could. Those promises I thought were impossible are a viable force in my life. I am free to laugh all of my laughter, free to trust and be trusted, free to both give and receive help. I am free from shame and regret, free to learn and grow and work. I have left that lonely, frightening, painful express train through hell. I have accepted the gift of a safer, happier journey through life.

FREEDOM FROM BONDAGE

Young when she joined, this A.A. believes her serious drinking was the result of even deeper defects. She here tells how she was set free.

THE MENTAL TWISTS that led up to my drinking began many years before I ever took a drink, for I am one of those whose history proves conclusively that my drinking was “a symptom of a deeper trouble.”

Through my efforts to get down to “causes and conditions,” I stand convinced that my emotional illness has been present from my earliest recollection. I never did react normally to any emotional situation.

The medical profession would probably tell me I was conditioned for alcoholism by the things that happened to me in my childhood. And I am sure they would be right as far as they go, but A.A. has taught me I am the result of the *way I reacted* to what happened to me as a child. What is much more important to me, A.A. has taught me that through this simple program I may experience a change in this reaction pattern that will indeed allow me to “match calamity with serenity.”

I am an only child, and when I was seven years old, my parents separated very abruptly. With no explanation at all, I was taken from my home in Florida to my grandparents’ home in the Midwest. My mother went to a nearby city to go to work, and my father,

being an alcoholic, simply went. My grandparents were strangers to me, and I remember being lonely, terrified, and hurt.

In time I concluded that the reason I was hurt was because I loved my parents, and I concluded too that if I never allowed myself to love anybody or anything, I could never be hurt again. It became second nature for me to remove myself from anything or anybody I found myself growing fond of.

I grew up believing that one had to be totally self-sufficient, for one never dared to depend on another human being. I thought that life was a pretty simple thing; you simply made a plan for your life, based upon what you wanted, and then you needed only the courage to go after it.

In my late teens I became aware of emotions I'd not counted on: restlessness, anxiety, fear, and insecurity. The only kind of security I knew anything about at that time was material security, and I decided that all these intruders would vanish immediately if I only had a lot of money. The solution seemed very simple. With cold calculation I set about to marry a fortune, and I did. The only thing this changed, however, was my surroundings, and it was soon apparent that I could have the same uncomfortable emotions with an unlimited checking account that I could on a working girl's salary. It was impossible for me to say at this point, "Maybe there is something wrong with my philosophy," and I certainly couldn't say, "Maybe there is something wrong with *me*." It was not difficult to convince myself that my unhappiness was the fault of the man I had married, and I divorced him at the end of a year.

I was married and divorced again before I was twenty-three years old, this time to a prominent band leader—a man whom many women wanted. I thought this would give me ego-strength, make me feel wanted and secure, and alleviate my fears, but again nothing changed inside me.

The only importance in all of this lies in the fact that at twenty-three I was just as sick as I was at thirty-three, when I came into A.A. But at that time I apparently had no place to go because I had no drinking problem. Had I been able to explain to a psychiatrist the feelings of futility, loneliness, and lack of purpose that had come with my deep sense of personal failure at this second divorce, I seriously doubt that the good doctor could have convinced me that my basic problem was a spiritual hunger. But A.A. has shown me this was the truth. And if I had been able to turn to the church at that time, I'm sure they could not have convinced me my sickness was within myself, nor could they have shown me that the need for self-analysis that A.A. has shown me is vital if I am to survive. So I had no place to go. Or so it seemed to me.

I wasn't afraid of anything or anybody after I learned about drinking. It seemed right from the beginning that with liquor I could always retire to my little private world where nobody could get at me to hurt me. It seems only fitting that when I did finally fall in love, it was with an alcoholic, and for the next ten years I progressed as rapidly as is humanly possible into what I believed to be hopeless alcoholism.

During this time, our country was at war. My husband was soon in uniform and among the first to go overseas. My reaction to this was identical in many

respects to my reaction to my parents leaving me when I was seven. Apparently I'd grown physically at the customary rate of speed, and I had acquired an average amount of intellectual training in the intervening years, but there had been no emotional maturity at all. I realize now that this phase of my development had been arrested by my obsession with self, and my egocentricity had reached such proportions that adjustment to anything outside my personal control was impossible for me. I was immersed in self-pity and resentment, and the only people who would support this attitude or who I felt understood me at all were the people I met in bars and the ones who drank as I did. It became more and more necessary to escape from myself, for my remorse and shame and humiliation when I was sober were almost unbearable. The only way existence was possible was through rationalizing every sober moment and drinking myself into complete oblivion as often as I could.

My husband eventually returned, but it was not long until we realized we could not continue our marriage. By this time I was such a past master at kidding myself that I had convinced myself I had sat out a war and waited for this man to come home, and as my resentment and self-pity grew, so did my alcoholic problem.

The last three years of my drinking, I drank on my job. The amount of willpower exercised to control my drinking during working hours, diverted into a constructive channel, would have made me president, and the thing that made the willpower possible was the knowledge that as soon as my day was finished, I could drink myself into oblivion. Inside, though, I was

scared to death, for I knew that the time was coming (and it couldn't be too remote) when I would be unable to hold that job. Maybe I wouldn't be able to hold any job, or maybe (and this was my greatest fear) I wouldn't care whether I had a job or not. I knew it didn't make any difference where I started, the inevitable end would be skid row. The only reality I was able to face had been forced upon me by its very repetition—I *had to drink*; and I didn't know there was anything in the world that could be done about it.

About this time I met a man who had three motherless children, and it seemed that might be a solution to my problem. I had never had a child, and this had been a satisfactory excuse many times for my drinking. It seemed logical to me that if I married this man and took the responsibility for these children that they would keep me sober. So I married again. This caused the comment from one of my A.A. friends, when I told my story after coming into the program, that I had always been a cinch for the program, for I had always been interested in mankind—I was just taking them one man at a time.

The children kept me sober for darn near three weeks, and then I went on (please God) my last drunk. I've heard it said many times in A.A., "There is just one good drunk in every alcoholic's life, and that's the one that brings us into A.A.," and I believe it. I was drunk for sixty days around the clock, and it was my intention, literally, to drink myself to death. I went to jail for the second time during this period for being drunk in an automobile. I was the only person I'd ever known personally who had ever been in jail,

and I guess it is most significant that the second time was less humiliating than the first had been.

Finally, in desperation, my family appealed to a doctor for advice, and he suggested A.A. The people who came knew immediately I was in no condition to absorb anything of the program. I was put in a sanitarium to be defogged so that I could make a sober decision about this for myself. It was here that I realized for the first time that as a practicing alcoholic, I had no rights. Society can do anything it chooses to do with me when I am drunk, and I can't lift a finger to stop it, for I forfeit my rights through the simple expedient of becoming a menace to myself and to the people around me. With deep shame came the knowledge too that I had lived with no sense of social obligation nor had I known the meaning of moral responsibility to my fellow men.

I attended my first A.A. meeting eight years ago, and it is with deep gratitude that I'm able to say I've not had a drink since that time and that I take no sedation or narcotics, for this program is to me one of complete sobriety. I no longer need to escape reality. One of the truly great things A.A. has taught me is that reality too has two sides; I had only known the grim side before the program, but now I had a chance to learn about the pleasant side as well.

The A.A. members who sponsored me told me in the beginning that I would not only find a way to live without having a drink, but that I would find a way to live without *wanting* to drink, if I would do these simple things. They said if you want to know *how* this program works, take the first word of your question—the “H” is for honesty, the “O” is for open-mindedness,

and the “W” is for willingness; these our Big Book calls the essentials of recovery. They suggested that I study the A.A. book and try to take the Twelve Steps according to the explanation in the book, for it was their opinion that the application of these principles in our daily lives will get us sober and keep us sober. I believe this, and I believe too that it is equally impossible to practice these principles to the best of our ability, a day at a time, and still drink, for I don’t think the two things are compatible.

I had no problem admitting I was powerless over alcohol, and I certainly agreed that my life had become unmanageable. I had only to reflect on the contrast between the plans I made so many years ago for my life with what really happened to know I couldn’t manage my life drunk or sober. A.A. taught me that *willingness to believe* was enough for a beginning. It’s been true in my case, nor could I quarrel with “restore us to sanity,” for my actions drunk or sober, before A.A., were not those of a sane person. My desire to be honest with myself made it necessary for me to realize that my thinking was irrational. It had to be, or I could not have justified my erratic behavior as I did. I’ve been benefited from a dictionary definition I found that reads: “Rationalization is giving a socially acceptable reason for socially unacceptable behavior, and socially unacceptable behavior is a form of insanity.”

A.A. has given me serenity of purpose and the opportunity to be of service to God and to the people about me, and I am serene in the infallibility of these principles that provide the fulfillment of my purpose.

A.A. has taught me that I will have peace of mind in

exact proportion to the peace of mind I bring into the lives of other people, and it has taught me the true meaning of the admonition “happy are ye who know these things *and do them.*” For the only problems I have now are those I create when I break out in a rash of self-will.

I’ve had many spiritual experiences since I’ve been in the program, many that I didn’t recognize right away, for I’m slow to learn and they take many guises. But one was so outstanding that I like to pass it on whenever I can in the hope that it will help someone else as it has me. As I said earlier, self-pity and resentment were my constant companions, and my inventory began to look like a thirty-three-year diary, for I seemed to have a resentment against everybody I had ever known. All but one “responded to the treatment” suggested in the steps immediately, but this one posed a problem.

This resentment was against my mother, and it was twenty-five years old. I had fed it, fanned it, and nurtured it as one might a delicate child, and it had become as much a part of me as my breathing. It had provided me with excuses for my lack of education, my marital failures, personal failures, inadequacy, and of course, my alcoholism. And though I really thought I had been willing to part with it, now I knew I was reluctant to let it go.

One morning, however, I realized I had to get rid of it, for my reprieve was running out, and if I didn’t get rid of it I was going to get drunk—and I didn’t want to get drunk anymore. In my prayers that morning I asked God to point out to me some way to be free of this resentment. During the day, a friend of mine

brought me some magazines to take to a hospital group I was interested in. I looked through them. A banner across one featured an article by a prominent clergyman in which I caught the word *resentment*.

He said, in effect: “If you have a resentment you want to be free of, if you will pray for the person or the thing that you resent, you will be free. If you will ask in prayer for everything you want for yourself to be given to them, you will be free. Ask for their health, their prosperity, their happiness, and you will be free. Even when you don’t really want it for them and your prayers are only words and you don’t mean it, go ahead and do it anyway. Do it every day for two weeks, and you will find you have come to mean it and to want it for them, and you will realize that where you used to feel bitterness and resentment and hatred, you now feel compassionate understanding and love.”

It worked for me then, and it has worked for me many times since, and it will work for me every time I am willing to work it. Sometimes I have to ask first for the willingness, but it too always comes. And because it works for me, it will work for all of us. As another great man says, “The only real freedom a human being can ever know is doing what you ought to do because you want to do it.”

This great experience that released me from the bondage of hatred and replaced it with love is really just another affirmation of the truth I know: I get everything I need in Alcoholics Anonymous—and everything I need I get. And when I get what I need, I invariably find that it was just *what I wanted all the time*.

A.A. TAUGHT HIM TO HANDLE SOBRIETY

“God willing, we . . . may never again have to deal with drinking, but we have to deal with sobriety every day.”

WHEN I HAD been in A.A. only a short while, an oldtimer told me something that has affected my life ever since. “A.A. does not teach us how to handle our drinking,” he said. “It teaches us how to handle sobriety.”

I guess I always knew that the way to handle my drinking was to quit. After my very first drink—a tiny glass of sherry my father gave me to celebrate the New Year when I was thirteen—I went up to bed, dizzy with exhilaration and excitement, and I prayed I wouldn’t drink anymore!

But I did, when I reached college age. Much later, when I progressed to full-blown alcoholism, people told me I should quit. Like most other alcoholics I have known, I *did* quit drinking at various times—once for ten months on my own and during other interludes when I was hospitalized. It’s no great trick to stop drinking; the trick is to *stay* stopped.

To do that, I had come to A.A. to learn how to handle sobriety—which is what I could not handle in the first place. That’s why I drank.

I was raised in Kansas, the only child of loving parents who just drank socially. We moved frequently.

In fact, I changed schools every year until high school. In each new place, I was the new kid—a skinny, shy kid—to be tested and beaten up. As soon as I had begun to feel accepted, we moved again.

By the time I reached high school, I was an over-achiever. An honor student in college, I became editor of the yearbook. I sold my first article to a national magazine while still an undergraduate. I also began to drink at fraternity parties and beer busts.

Upon graduation I ventured to New York to pursue my writing career. I landed a good job with a company publication and was moonlighting on other magazines. Regarded as something of a “boy wonder,” I began to see myself that way. I also began visiting bars after work with my older associates. By age twenty-two, I was a daily drinker.

Then I joined the navy and was commissioned as an ensign to write speeches for admirals. Later I went to sea, serving as gunnery officer on a destroyer escort and emerging a lieutenant commander. I also got into my first disciplinary trouble caused by drinking, on two separate occasions.

In the last year of my navy service, I was married to a lovely, lively girl who enjoyed drinking. Our courtship was mainly in bars and night spots when my ship was in New York. On our honeymoon we had iced champagne by the bedside day and night.

The pattern was set. By twenty-nine I was having trouble coping with life because of my drinking. Neurotic fears plagued me, and I had occasional uncontrollable tremors. I read self-help books. I turned to religion with fervor. I swore off hard liquor and turned to wine. I got sick of the sweetness and turned to ale.

It wasn't strong enough, so I added a shot of vodka—and was right back to worse trouble than before. I began sneaking drinks when playing bartender for guests. To cure my dreadful hangovers, I discovered the morning drink.

The early promise of the “boy wonder” faded, and my career began to drift. Although my ambition still flickered, it now took the form of fantasizing. My values became distorted. To wear expensive clothes, to have bartenders know what to serve me before I ordered, to be recognized by headwaiters and shown to the best table, to play gin rummy for high stakes with the insouciance of a riverboat gambler—these were the enduring values in life, I thought.

Bewilderment, fear, and resentment moved into my life. And yet my ability to lie outwardly and to kid myself inwardly grew with every drink I took. Indeed, I *had* to drink now to live, to cope with the demands of everyday existence. When I encountered disappointments or frustrations—as I did more and more frequently—my solution was to drink. I had always been oversensitive to criticism and was acutely so now. When I was criticized or reprimanded, the bottle was my refuge and comfort.

When I was faced with a special challenge or social event—such as an important business presentation or a dinner party—I had to fortify myself with a couple of belts. Too often I would overdo it and behave badly at the very time I wanted to be at my best! For instance, the fiftieth wedding anniversary of my wife's parents was the occasion for a huge family reunion at our home. Despite my wife's entreaties to take it easy, I arrived home in bad shape. I remember being dragged,

drink in hand, from under the grand piano, where I had hidden, to be locked in my room in disgrace.

Above all, I was suffering inner pain because my performance and my accomplishments in life failed to live up to my own expectations of myself. I *had* to anesthetize that pain with alcohol. Of course, the more I drank, the more unrealistic my expectations became and the poorer my performance, and the gap widened. So the need to drink grew still greater.

At age forty I developed a large lump in my pot-belly, and I feared it was a tumor. The doctor pronounced it a badly enlarged liver and said I had to quit drinking. I did. I went on the wagon, with no outside help and with no real difficulty—except that I didn't enjoy life without drinking. I had to cope with the demands of everyday living without my comforter, my anesthetic, my crutch. And I didn't like it.

So when my liver had recovered after ten months, I resumed drinking. At first, just one drink, on occasion. Then drinks came more frequently but were carefully spaced out. Soon my drinking was as bad as ever—all day long every day. But I was trying frantically to control it. And it had gone underground now, because everyone knew I shouldn't be drinking. Instead of drinking in fancy bars and clubs, I had to carry a bottle of vodka in my briefcase, duck into public toilets, and gulp from the bottle, trembling, in order to keep from falling apart.

Over the next two years I sickened rapidly. The enlargement of my liver degenerated into cirrhosis. I vomited every morning. I could not face food. I suffered frequent blackouts. I had severe nosebleeds. Bruises appeared mysteriously over my body.

I became so weak, I could barely drag myself around.

My employer gave me one warning, then another. My children avoided me. When I awoke in the middle of the night with shakes and sweats and fears, I would hear my wife weeping quietly in bed beside me. My doctor warned me that if I kept on, I might have esophageal hemorrhaging and die. But now all choice was gone. I had to drink.

What my doctor had warned me about finally happened. I was attending a convention in Chicago and carousing day and night. Suddenly I began vomiting and losing rectally great quantities of blood. Hopeless now, I felt it would be better for my wife, my children, and everyone in my life if I went ahead and died. I found myself being lifted onto a stretcher and whisked away in an ambulance to a strange hospital. I awoke next day with tubes in both arms.

Within a week I was feeling well enough to go home. The doctors told me that if I ever took another drink, it might be my last. I thought I had learned my lesson. But my thinking was still confused, and I was still unable to deal with everyday living without help. Within two months I was drinking again.

In the next half-year I experienced two more esophageal hemorrhages, miraculously surviving each one by a hair. Each time, I went back to drinking—even smuggling a bottle of vodka into the hospital as soon as the blood transfusions had ceased. My doctor finally declared he could no longer be responsible for me and sent me to a psychiatrist who practiced in the same suite of offices. He happened to be, by the grace of God, Dr. Harry Tiebout, the psychiatrist who probably knew more about alcoholism than any other in

the world. At that very time he was a nonalcoholic trustee on the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous.

It was the late Dr. Tiebout, then, who persuaded me to seek help through A.A. I acquired a sponsor and began attending meetings but continued to drink. Within a few days I found myself drying out on a drunk farm. While there, I read the Big Book and the Grapevine and began the slow road back to health and sanity through the recovery program of A.A.

As the sober days grew into sober months and then into sober years, a new and beautiful life began to emerge from the shambles of my former existence. The relationship between my wife and me was restored to a love and happiness that we had not known even *before* my alcoholism became acute. (She no longer weeps in the night.) As our children grew up, I was able to be a father to them when they most needed one. My company advanced me rapidly once my reliability was established again. Regaining my health, I became an avid jogger, sailor, and skier.

All these things and many, many more, A.A. gave me. But above all, it taught me how to handle sobriety. I have learned how to relate to people; before A.A., I could never do that comfortably without alcohol. I have learned to deal with disappointments and problems that once would have sent me right to the bottle. I have come to realize that the name of the game is not so much to stop drinking as to *stay sober*. Alcoholics can stop drinking in many places and many ways—but Alcoholics Anonymous offers us a way to stay sober.

God willing, we members of A.A. may never again

have to deal with drinking, but we have to deal with sobriety every day. How do we do it? By learning—through practicing the Twelve Steps and through sharing at meetings—how to cope with the problems that we looked to booze to solve, back in our drinking days.

For example, we are told in A.A. that we cannot afford resentments and self-pity, so we learn to avoid these festering mental attitudes. Similarly, we rid ourselves of guilt and remorse as we “clean out the garbage” from our minds through the Fourth and Fifth Steps of our recovery program. We learn how to level out the emotional swings that got us into trouble both when we were up and when we were down.

We are taught to differentiate between our wants (which are never satisfied) and our needs (which are always provided for). We cast off the burdens of the past and the anxieties of the future, as we begin to live in the present, one day at a time. We are granted “the serenity to accept the things we cannot change”—and thus lose our quickness to anger and our sensitivity to criticism.

Above all, we reject fantasizing and accept reality. The more I drank, the more I fantasized everything. I imagined getting even for hurts and rejections. In my mind's eye I played and replayed scenes in which I was plucked magically from the bar where I stood nursing a drink and was instantly exalted to some position of power and prestige. I lived in a dream world. A.A. led me gently from this fantasizing to embrace reality with open arms. And I found it beautiful! For, at last, I was at peace with myself. And with others. And with God.

APPENDICES

- I The A.A. Tradition
- II Spiritual Experience
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I

THE A.A. TRADITION

To those now in its fold, Alcoholics Anonymous has made the difference between misery and sobriety, and often the difference between life and death. A.A. can, of course, mean just as much to uncounted alcoholics not yet reached.

Therefore, no society of men and women ever had a more urgent *need* for continuous effectiveness and permanent unity. We alcoholics see that we must work together and hang together, else most of us will finally die alone.

The “12 Traditions” of Alcoholics Anonymous are, we A.A.’s believe, the best answers that our experience has yet given to those ever-urgent questions, “How can A.A. best function?” and, “How can A.A. best stay whole and so survive?”

On the next page, A.A.’s “12 Traditions” are seen in their so-called “short form,” the form in general use today. This is a condensed version of the original “long form” A.A. Traditions as first printed in 1946. Because the “long form” is more explicit and of possible historic value, it is also reproduced.

THE TWELVE TRADITIONS

One—Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.

Two—For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.

Three—The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.

Four—Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.

Five—Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

Six—An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.

Seven—Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.

Eight—Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.

Nine—A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.

Ten—Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.

Eleven—Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films.

Twelve—Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

THE TWELVE TRADITIONS
(The Long Form)

Our A.A. experience has taught us that:

1.—Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a great whole. A.A. must continue to live or most of us will surely die. Hence our common welfare comes first. But individual welfare follows close afterward.

2.—For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience.

3.—Our membership ought to include all who suffer from alcoholism. Hence we may refuse none who wish to recover. Nor ought A.A. membership ever depend upon money or conformity. Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an A.A. group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation.

4.—With respect to its own affairs, each A.A. group should be responsible to no other authority than its own conscience. But when its plans concern the welfare of neighboring groups also, those groups ought to be consulted. And no group, regional committee, or individual should ever take any action that might greatly affect A.A. as a whole without conferring with the trustees of the General Service Board. On such issues our common welfare is paramount.

5.—Each Alcoholics Anonymous group ought to be a spiritual entity *having but one primary purpose*—that of carrying its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

6.—Problems of money, property, and authority may easily divert us from our primary spiritual aim. We think, therefore, that any considerable property of genuine use

to A.A. should be separately incorporated and managed, thus dividing the material from the spiritual. An A.A. group, as such, should never go into business. Secondary aids to A.A., such as clubs or hospitals which require much property or administration, ought to be incorporated and so set apart that, if necessary, they can be freely discarded by the groups. Hence such facilities ought not to use the A.A. name. Their management should be the sole responsibility of those people who financially support them. For clubs, A.A. managers are usually preferred. But hospitals, as well as other places of recuperation, ought to be well outside A.A.—and medically supervised. While an A.A. group may cooperate with anyone, such cooperation ought never go so far as affiliation or endorsement, actual or implied. An A.A. group can bind itself to no one.

7.—The A.A. groups themselves ought to be fully supported by the voluntary contributions of their own members. We think that each group should soon achieve this ideal; that any public solicitation of funds using the name of Alcoholics Anonymous is highly dangerous, whether by groups, clubs, hospitals, or other outside agencies; that acceptance of large gifts from any source, or of contributions carrying any obligation whatever, is unwise. Then too, we view with much concern those A.A. treasuries which continue, beyond prudent reserves, to accumulate funds for no stated A.A. purpose. Experience has often warned us that nothing can so surely destroy our spiritual heritage as futile disputes over property, money, and authority.

8.—Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever non-professional. We define professionalism as the occupation of counseling alcoholics for fees or hire. But we may employ alcoholics where they are going to perform those services for which we might otherwise have to engage nonalcoholics. Such special services may be well recom-

pensed. But our usual A.A. "12 Step" work is never to be paid for.

9.—Each A.A. group needs the least possible organization. Rotating leadership is the best. The small group may elect its secretary, the large group its rotating committee, and the groups of a large metropolitan area their central or intergroup committee, which often employs a full-time secretary. The trustees of the General Service Board are, in effect, our A.A. General Service Committee. They are the custodians of our A.A. Tradition and the receivers of voluntary A.A. contributions by which we maintain our A.A. General Service Office at New York. They are authorized by the groups to handle our over-all public relations and they guarantee the integrity of our principal newspaper, the A.A. Grapevine. All such representatives are to be guided in the spirit of service, for true leaders in A.A. are but trusted and experienced servants of the whole. They derive no real authority from their titles; they do not govern. Universal respect is the key to their usefulness.

10.—No A.A. group or member should ever, in such a way as to implicate A.A., express any opinion on outside controversial issues—particularly those of politics, alcohol reform, or sectarian religion. The Alcoholics Anonymous groups oppose no one. Concerning such matters they can express no views whatever.

11.—Our relations with the general public should be characterized by personal anonymity. We think A.A. ought to avoid sensational advertising. Our names and pictures as A.A. members ought not be broadcast, filmed, or publicly printed. Our public relations should be guided by the principle of attraction rather than promotion. There is never need to praise ourselves. We feel it better to let our friends recommend us.

12.—And finally, we of Alcoholics Anonymous believe

that the principle of anonymity has an immense spiritual significance. It reminds us that we are to place principles before personalities; that we are actually to practice a genuine humility. This to the end that our great blessings may never spoil us; that we shall forever live in thankful contemplation of Him who presides over us all.

II

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

The terms “spiritual experience” and “spiritual awakening” are used many times in this book which, upon careful reading, shows that the personality change sufficient to bring about recovery from alcoholism has manifested itself among us in many different forms.

Yet it is true that our first printing gave many readers the impression that these personality changes, or religious experiences, must be in the nature of sudden and spectacular upheavals. Happily for everyone, this conclusion is erroneous.

In the first few chapters a number of sudden revolutionary changes are described. Though it was not our intention to create such an impression, many alcoholics have nevertheless concluded that in order to recover they must acquire an immediate and overwhelming “God-consciousness” followed at once by a vast change in feeling and outlook.

Among our rapidly growing membership of thousands of alcoholics such transformations, though frequent, are by no means the rule. Most of our experiences are what the psychologist William James calls the “educational variety” because they develop slowly over a period of time. Quite often friends of the newcomer are aware of the difference long before he is himself. He finally realizes that he has undergone a profound alteration in his reaction to life; that such a change could hardly have been brought about by himself alone. What often takes place in a few months could seldom have been accomplished by years of self-discipline. With few exceptions our members find that they have tapped an unsuspected

inner resource which they presently identify with their own conception of a Power greater than themselves.

Most of us think this awareness of a Power greater than ourselves is the essence of spiritual experience. Our more religious members call it "God-consciousness."

Most emphatically we wish to say that any alcoholic capable of honestly facing his problems in the light of our experience can recover, provided he does not close his mind to all spiritual concepts. He can only be defeated by an attitude of intolerance or belligerent denial.

We find that no one need have difficulty with the spirituality of the program. *Willingness, honesty and open mindedness are the essentials of recovery. But these are indispensable.*

"There is a principle which is a bar against all information, which is proof against all arguments and which cannot fail to keep a man in everlasting ignorance—that principle is contempt prior to investigation."

—HERBERT SPENCER

III

THE MEDICAL VIEW ON A.A.

Since Dr. Silkworth's first endorsement of Alcoholics Anonymous, medical societies and physicians throughout the world have set their approval upon us. Following are excerpts from the comments of doctors present at the annual meeting* of the Medical Society of the State of New York where a paper on A.A. was read:

Dr. Foster Kennedy, neurologist: "This organization of Alcoholics Anonymous calls on two of the greatest reservoirs of power known to man, religion and that instinct for association with one's fellows . . . the 'herd instinct.' I think our profession must take appreciative cognizance of this great therapeutic weapon. If we do not do so, we shall stand convicted of emotional sterility and of having lost the faith that moves mountains, without which medicine can do little."

Dr. G. Kirby Collier, psychiatrist: "I have felt that A.A. is a group unto themselves and their best results can be had under their own guidance, as a result of their philosophy. Any therapeutic or philosophic procedure which can prove a recovery rate of 50% to 60% must merit our consideration."

Dr. Harry M. Tiebout, psychiatrist: "As a psychiatrist, I have thought a great deal about the relationship of my specialty to A.A. and I have come to the conclusion that our particular function can very often lie in preparing the way for the patient to accept any sort of treatment or outside help. I now conceive the psychiatrist's job to be the task of breaking down the patient's inner resistance so that which is inside him will flower, as under the activity of the A.A. program."

* 1944.

Dr. W. W. Bauer, broadcasting under the auspices of The American Medical Association in 1946, over the NBC network, said, in part: "Alcoholics Anonymous are no crusaders; not a temperance society. They know that they must never drink. They help others with similar problems . . . In this atmosphere the alcoholic often overcomes his excessive concentration upon himself. Learning to depend upon a higher power and absorb himself in his work with other alcoholics, he remains sober day by day. The days add up into weeks, the weeks into months and years."

Dr. John F. Stouffer, Chief Psychiatrist, Philadelphia General Hospital, citing his experience with A.A., said: "The alcoholics we get here at Philadelphia General are mostly those who cannot afford private treatment, and A.A. is by far the greatest thing we have been able to offer them. Even among those who occasionally land back in here again, we observe a profound change in personality. You would hardly recognize them."

The American Psychiatric Association requested, in 1949, that a paper be prepared by one of the older members of Alcoholics Anonymous to be read at the Association's annual meeting of that year. This was done, and the paper was printed in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* for November 1949.

(This address is now available in pamphlet form at nominal cost through most A.A. groups or from Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163, under the title "Three Talks to Medical Societies by Bill W."—formerly called "Bill on Alcoholism" and earlier "Alcoholism the Illness.")

IV

THE LASKER AWARD

In 1951 the Lasker Award was given Alcoholics Anonymous. The citation reads in part as follows:

“The American Public Health Association presents a Lasker Group Award for 1951 to Alcoholics Anonymous in recognition of its unique and highly successful approach to that age-old public health and social problem, alcoholism . . . In emphasizing alcoholism as an illness, the social stigma associated with this condition is being blotted out . . . Historians may one day recognize Alcoholics Anonymous to have been a great venture in social pioneering which forged a new instrument for social action; a new therapy based on the kinship of common suffering; one having a vast potential for the myriad other ills of mankind.”

V

THE RELIGIOUS VIEW ON A.A.

Clergymen of practically every denomination have given A.A. their blessing.

Edward Dowling, S.J.,* of the Queen's Work staff, says, "Alcoholics Anonymous is natural; it is natural at the point where nature comes closest to the supernatural, namely in humiliations and in consequent humility. There is something spiritual about an art museum or a symphony, and the Catholic Church approves of our use of them. There is something spiritual about A.A. too, and Catholic participation in it almost invariably results in poor Catholics becoming better Catholics."

The Episcopal magazine, *The Living Church*, observes editorially: "The basis of the technique of Alcoholics Anonymous is the truly Christian principle that a man cannot help himself except by helping others. The A.A. plan is described by the members themselves as 'self-insurance.' This self-insurance has resulted in the restoration of physical, mental and spiritual health and self-respect to hundreds of men and women who would be hopelessly down and out without its unique but effective therapy."

Speaking at a dinner given by John D. Rockefeller Jr. to introduce Alcoholics Anonymous to some of his friends, Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick remarked:

"I think that psychologically speaking there is a point of advantage in the approach that is being made in this movement that cannot be duplicated. I suspect that if it is wisely handled—and it seems to be in wise and prudent hands—there are doors of opportunity ahead of this project that may surpass our capacities to imagine."

* Father Ed, an early and wonderful friend of A.A., died in the spring of 1960.

VI

HOW TO GET IN TOUCH WITH A.A.

In the United States and Canada, most towns and cities have A.A. groups. In such places, A.A. can be located through the local telephone directory, newspaper office, or police station, or by contacting local priests or ministers. In large cities, groups often maintain local offices where alcoholics or their families may arrange for interviews or hospitalization. These so-called intergroup associations are found under the listing "A.A." or "Alcoholics Anonymous" in telephone directories.

At New York, USA, Alcoholics Anonymous maintains its international service center. The General Service Board of A.A. (the trustees) administers A.A.'s General Service Office, A.A. World Services, Inc., and our monthly magazine, the A.A. Grapevine.

If you cannot find A.A. in your locality, visit our Web site: www.aa.org; or a letter addressed to Alcoholics Anonymous, Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163, USA, will receive a prompt reply from this world center, referring you to the nearest A.A. group. If there is none nearby, you will be invited to carry on a correspondence which will do much to insure your sobriety no matter how isolated you are.

Should you be the relative or friend of an alcoholic who shows no immediate interest in A.A., it is suggested that you write the Al-Anon Family Groups, Inc., 1600 Corporate Landing Parkway, Virginia Beach, VA 23456, USA.

This is a world clearing house for the Al-Anon Family Groups, composed largely of the wives, husbands and friends of A.A. members. This headquarters will give the location of the nearest family group and will, if you wish, correspond with you about your special problems.

VII

THE TWELVE CONCEPTS (SHORT FORM)

A.A.'s Twelve Steps are principles for personal *recovery*. The Twelve Traditions ensure the *unity* of the Fellowship. Written by co-founder Bill W. in 1962, the *Twelve Concepts for World Service* provide a group of related principles to help ensure that various elements of A.A.'s service structure remain responsive and responsible to those they serve.

The "short form" of the Concepts, which follows, was prepared by the 1974 General Service Conference.

- I. Final responsibility and ultimate authority for A.A. world services should always reside in the collective conscience of our whole Fellowship.
- II. The General Service Conference of A.A. has become, for nearly every practical purpose, the active voice and the effective conscience of our whole Society in its world affairs.
- III. To insure effective leadership, we should endow each element of A.A.—the Conference, the General Service Board and its service corporations, staffs, committees, and executives—with a traditional "Right of Decision."
- IV. At all responsible levels, we ought to maintain a traditional "Right of Participation," allowing a voting representation in reasonable proportion to the responsibility that each must discharge.
- V. Throughout our structure, a traditional "Right of Appeal" ought to prevail, so that minority opinion will be heard and personal grievances receive careful consideration.
- VI. The Conference recognizes that the chief initiative and active responsibility in most world service matters should be exercised by the trustee members of the Conference acting as the General Service Board.

- VII. The Charter and Bylaws of the General Service Board are legal instruments, empowering the trustees to manage and conduct world service affairs. The Conference Charter is not a legal document; it relies upon tradition and the A.A. purse for final effectiveness.
- VIII. The trustees are the principal planners and administrators of overall policy and finance. They have custodial oversight of the separately incorporated and constantly active services, exercising this through their ability to elect all the directors of these entities.
- IX. Good service leadership at all levels is indispensable for our future functioning and safety. Primary world service leadership, once exercised by the founders, must necessarily be assumed by the trustees.
- X. Every service responsibility should be matched by an equal service authority, with the scope of such authority well defined.
- XI. The trustees should always have the best possible committees, corporate service directors, executives, staffs, and consultants. Composition, qualifications, induction procedures, and rights and duties will always be matters of serious concern.
- XII. The Conference shall observe the spirit of A.A. tradition, taking care that it never becomes the seat of perilous wealth or power; that sufficient operating funds and reserve be its prudent financial principle; that it place none of its members in a position of unqualified authority over others; that it reach all important decisions by discussion, vote, and, whenever possible, by substantial unanimity; that its actions never be personally punitive nor an incitement to public controversy; that it never perform acts of government, and that, like the Society it serves, it will always remain democratic in thought and action.

A.A. Pamphlets

44 Questions
A.A. Tradition—How It Developed
Members of the Clergy Ask About A.A.
Three Talks to Medical Societies by Bill W.
Alcoholics Anonymous as a Resource for the Health Care Professional
A.A. in Your Community
Is A.A. for You?
Is A.A. for Me?
This Is A.A.
A Newcomer Asks . . .
Is There An Alcoholic in the Workplace?
Questions and Answers on Sponsorship
A.A. for the Woman
A.A. for the Native North American
A.A. and the Gay/Lesbian Alcoholic
Can A.A. Help Me Too?—Black/African Americans Share Their Stories
A.A. for the Older Alcoholic—Never Too Late
The Jack Alexander Article
Letter to a Woman Alcoholic
Young People and A.A.
A.A. and the Armed Services
The A.A. Member—Medications and Other Drugs
Do You Think You're Different?
Is There an Alcoholic in Your Life?
Inside A.A.
The A.A. Group
G.S.R.
Memo to an Inmate
The Twelve Steps Illustrated
The Twelve Traditions Illustrated
The Twelve Concepts Illustrated
Let's Be Friendly With our Friends
How A.A. Members Cooperate
A.A. in Correctional Facilities
A Message to Correctional Facilities Administrators
A.A. in Treatment Facilities
Bridging the Gap
If You Are a Professional
A.A. Membership Survey
A Member's-Eye View of Alcoholics Anonymous
Problems Other Than Alcohol
Understanding Anonymity
The Co-Founders of Alcoholics Anonymous
Speaking at Non-A.A. Meetings
A Brief Guide to A.A.
What Happened to Joe
It Happened to Alice
(Two above are full-color, comic-book-style pamphlets)
Too Young?
(Above is a cartoon pamphlet for teenagers)
It Sure Beats Sitting in a Cell
(Above is an illustrated pamphlet for inmates)

*Complete order forms available from A.A. General Service Office:
Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163*