

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.