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TWICE GIFTED

Diagnosed with cirrhosis, this sick alcoholic got sobriety—plus a lifesaving liver transplant.

TODAY IS SUNDAY, my favorite day of the week. Things are usually peaceful, and I always get that wonderfully humbling, it's amazing to be alive, feeling. I am happy to say that very few days go by without that feeling.

Sunday used to be pretty wild in the old days. That is what I call my drinking days, the old days. It was the last day of the weekend, finishing up a few days of partying with my friends. I never went anywhere that was not a party, and if in doubt about the occasion, I'd think of a good one and bring the party with me. I cannot remember a time without booze in my life. Even when I was young and didn't drink myself, liquor was always around. I do remember a time at the beginning of my drinking, thinking to myself that I was not and would never become an alcoholic, knowing in a very personal way exactly how an alcoholic lived. I was a teenager then, and I figured I was just having fun and could control everything about my drinking. By the time I actually reached legal drinking age, I had definitely gone beyond weekend party drinking, and Sunday once again became the first day of the week, soon to become a week of daily drinking.

During my young adulthood, drinking was the way

I related to others. I did not know anyone who did not drink, and all of my interests, friendships, and more intimate relationships revolved completely around drinking. Over the years, by all appearances, I grew up and got a life, but it was only a façade. I never did mature other than in the physical way. I appeared normal on the outside. I knew I drank and so did everyone else, but I behaved pretty well and, only by chance, managed to stay out of harm's way, except for a few occasions. Looking back now, the picture of my life before I got sober looks like a long series of unfinished matters. Through the years I had quit on everything that ever mattered: college, going for promotions, relationships—at least the relationships that demanded any work.

Then a few things began to change. Some years before I finally gave up drinking, my body started to give me signals that continuing on this course might not be as carefree as it had seemed up to that point. When stomach problems began, I visited a doctor, and when queried about my drinking habits, I glossed over the idea that I overindulged. Tests were run, but no real diagnosis was ever confirmed. I was advised to maintain a healthy diet and watch alcohol intake, along with other prudent suggestions from the doctor. I was still young, and I thought to myself that just giving my body a break, by slowing down, would allow me to bounce back. Over the next few years I had quite a few episodes of feeling sick, and of course having never attended to the real problem, my drinking was still escalating. When my symptoms started to multiply, I finally had to consider the real possibility that drinking was the cause of all my health problems. For very

brief moments I somehow realized that giving up the booze was probably in my future. With that realization came fear and so many questions. How will I live? What will I do with my life? Certainly a life without booze meant I would not have fun, and surely I would not be fun.

Up until the moment I realized I might have to give up drinking, I had believed I was perfectly happy. I had a fine life, a good job, a nice place to live, a car, friends, all the things I thought I needed in life. Ideas of getting help to quit drinking had surfaced but were fleeting and never grew into anything like reaching out. My health had finally taken a serious turn for the worse. I was frequently unable to get out of bed even to go to work, and strange new problems were exhibiting themselves with regularity. I resolved to divorce myself from the bottle, but trying to stop alone was disastrous. During the dry periods, I was very weak and sick. Then at times I would drink, and it was out of control. I would isolate and binge; those last drunks ended in episodes of uncontrollable shaking, dry heaves, and even hallucinations. At the end I was scared and suffering, and I felt as though I were absolutely alone in the world.

A series of circumstances brought me to a new doctor. I had to see a doctor because once again I had become fearfully ill, and I was unable to work. My stomach was distended, and my ankles were swollen nearly twice their normal size due to fluid retention. The whites of my eyes had yellowed from jaundice, I had spiderly broken veins all over my body, my skin itched all over and took on an eerie greenish-gray appearance. My blood had apparently thinned, because

the lightest touch would cause a terrible bruise and even a small scratch would bleed for a very long time. Dark marks appeared on my face and arms, my hair began to fall out, and because I had no appetite at all, I was very weak and extremely fatigued. The new physician took one look at my appearance and my blood test results, and asked if I drank. I said that I used to but had abstained for quite a while. This was a blatant lie.

In reality the only person who was being fooled was me. My new doctor explained that I had a disease called cirrhosis of the liver. How far it had progressed was hard to tell, but by the symptoms I was having and the results of my tests, the disease seemed fairly advanced. The picture he painted was very bleak. As the disease worsened, I would become sicker and weaker, and finally there would be a slow and painful progression, usually ending in a fatal episode of bleeding into the stomach or lapsing into a coma and death. With that, he referred me to a special clinic, not an ordinary group of doctors but a liver transplant clinic.

The initial interview with this group of doctors made it clear that if I wanted to live, I was going to have to prove that alcohol was no longer going to be part of my life. I was thirty-seven years old at the time, a relatively young woman for what was happening to my body. I was suddenly very afraid of dying, and I was desperate.

I had attended A.A. meetings prior to that time, but the words of the doctors had somehow, finally, begun to clear the way. At the meeting that first night more of what the people in A.A. were saying started to pass through my ears, and into my head, and finally into my

heart. The members of Alcoholics Anonymous offered me a gift, a gift of life. I found myself willing, and after some weeks of just showing up, I began to believe that this program could work for me. The next six months were spent in A.A. meetings every single day, at least one, sometimes two or three. I found a wonderful, patient sponsor who helped me to work the steps and practice the principles.

During the six months of evaluation by the clinic, I was given a blood test at least weekly, sometimes randomly, to validate that I was not drinking. I had weekly meetings with the psychiatrist on the transplant team. My family members attended some of those meetings, and the doctor also had contact with my sponsor. Another mandate was that I enter some type of psychotherapy with a professional, either group or individual sessions. This too was not something I would have chosen for myself, but it has turned out to be a very positive force in my life. At the time of the evaluation, there had to be evidence that I was doing everything possible to assure my continued sobriety. After a six-month period I was officially listed as a candidate for a liver transplant.

By the time my name was placed on the transplant waiting list, I had become very sick. My liver had progressively continued to shut down, and the official wait had really just begun. I had no way of knowing how long it would be before a suitable organ would become available or how long it would be before I rose to the top of the list. At times I felt resentful of the selection process, the tests, the close supervision of my A.A. program, and the seemingly endless wait. Unquestionably it was only because of the program of

Alcoholics Anonymous that I was able to let go of that resentment. I actually found an abundance of peace and serenity during those months preceding the surgery. After another six months I was given a second chance and a second gift of life. The surgery itself was a wonderful success, and my recuperation was unmarked by setbacks.

Some years have passed, and as I look back from the clarity of this moment, I know that the way here for me could not have been by an easier path. I would not willingly have stopped the course my life was on. I needed harsh reality to see the damage that alcohol abuse causes, in so many ways. I needed to be forced into acceptance and humility.

My physical being has certainly undergone a transformation, but the major transformation has been spiritual. The hopelessness has been replaced by abundant hope and sincere faith. The people of Alcoholics Anonymous have provided a haven where, if I remain aware and keep my mind quiet enough, my Higher Power leads me to amazing realizations. I find joy in my daily life, in being of service, in simply being. I have found rooms full of wonderful people, and for me each and every one of the Big Book's promises have come true. The things that I have learned from my own experience, from the Big Book, and from my friends in A.A.—patience, acceptance, honesty, humility, and true faith in a Power greater than myself—are the tools I use today to live my life, this precious life.

Today my life is filled with miracles big and small, not one of which would ever have come to pass had I not found the door of Alcoholics Anonymous.