

PART II

THEY STOPPED IN TIME

Among today's incoming A.A. members, many have never reached the advanced stages of alcoholism, though given time all might have.

Most of these fortunate ones have had little or no acquaintance with delirium, with hospitals, asylums, and jails. Some were drinking heavily, and there had been occasional serious episodes. But with many, drinking had been little more than a sometimes uncontrollable nuisance. Seldom had any of these lost either health, business, family, or friends.

Why do men and women like these join A.A.?

The seventeen who now tell their experiences answer that question. They saw that they had become actual or potential alcoholics, even though no serious harm had yet been done.

They realized that repeated lack of drinking control, when they really wanted control, was the fatal symptom that spelled problem drinking. This, plus mounting emotional disturbances, convinced them that compulsive alcoholism already had them; that complete ruin would be only a question of time.

Seeing this danger, they came to A.A. They realized that in the end alcoholism could be as mortal as cancer; certainly no sane man would wait for a malignant growth to become fatal before seeking help.

Therefore, these seventeen A.A.'s, and hundreds of thousands like them, have been saved years of infinite suffering. They sum it up something like this: "We didn't wait to hit bottom because, thank God, we could see the bottom. Actually, the bottom came up and hit us. That sold us on Alcoholics Anonymous."

(1)

THE MISSING LINK

He looked at everything as the cause of his unhappiness—except alcohol.

WHEN I WAS eight or nine years old, life suddenly became very difficult. Feelings began to emerge that I did not understand. Depression crept into my life as I started to feel alone, even in crowded rooms. In fact, life didn't make much sense to me at all. It's hard to say what sparked all of this, to pinpoint one fact or event that changed everything forever. The fact of the matter was, I was miserable from early on in my life.

It was all very confusing. I remember isolating on the playground, watching all the other children laughing and playing and smiling, and not feeling like I could relate at all. I felt different. I didn't feel as if I was one of them. Somehow, I thought, I didn't fit in.

My school marks soon reflected these feelings. My behavior and attitude seemed to become troublesome to everyone around me. I soon began spending more time in the principal's office than in the classroom. My parents, perplexed by such an unhappy son, began having difficulties. My house was soon filled with the sounds of arguments and yelling about how to handle me. I found that running away from home could supply me with some sort of temporary solace. Until of

course, the police would find me and bring me back to my house and my worried parents.

About that time I started seeing therapists and specialists, each with a different theory and a different solution. They conducted special tests and interviews designed to get to the root of my troubles, and came to the conclusion that I had a learning disability and was depressed. The psychiatrist started me on some medication, and the problems in school started to clear up. Even some of the depression began to ease up for a bit. However, something still seemed fundamentally wrong.

Whatever the problem, I soon found what appeared to be the solution to everything. At age fifteen, I traveled with my family to Israel. My brother was to be bar mitzvahed atop Masada. There was no legal drinking age, so I found it quite easy to walk into a bar and order a drink. New Year's Eve fell in the middle of the trip, and since the Jewish calendar celebrates a different New Year than the Gregorian calendar, the only celebration was being held in the American sector of a university. I got drunk for the first time that night. It changed everything.

A stop at a local bar began the evening. I ordered a beer from the waitress and as I took the first sip, something was immediately different. I looked around me, at the people drinking and dancing, smiling and laughing, all of whom were much older than I. Suddenly, I somehow felt I belonged. From there, I made my way to the university, where I found hundreds of other Americans celebrating New Year's Eve. Before the night was over, I had started a fight with a number of college-aged drunken fellows and returned

to the hotel stinking drunk and riddled with bruises. Ah yes, what a grand evening it was! I fell in love that night—with a beverage.

Returning to the States, I was determined to continue with my newfound love affair. I found myself trying to convince my friends to join me, but I was met with resistance. Still determined, I set out to find new friends, friends who could help me maintain this fantastic solution to my most desperate problems. My escapades started as a weekend pursuit and progressed into a daily obsession. At first, it took several beers to get me drunk to my satisfaction. However, within three years, it took a fifth and a half of vodka, a bottle of wine, and several beers in an evening's time to satisfactorily black me out. I would obtain alcohol by any means necessary. That meant lying, stealing, and cheating. My motto was, if you felt like I did, you'd have to get drunk too.

As the feelings of hopelessness and depression progressed, so did my drinking. Thoughts of suicide came more and more frequently. It felt as if things were never going to change. Progress with my therapist came to almost a complete halt. The hopelessness was compounded by the fact that the one thing that was bringing me relief, the one thing I counted on to take the pain away, was ultimately destroying me. The end, I feared, was close.

My last semester in high school marked my bottom. It was everyday drinking then. Since I had already been accepted at college, I consciously decided to make that last semester one big party. But it was no fun at all. I was miserable. I graduated narrowly and took a job at a local garage. It was difficult to manage

my drinking and a job since they were both full time, but I concocted all kinds of lies to ensure that nothing would interfere with my drinking. After being repeatedly reprimanded at work for being late in the mornings, I made up a story to hide the fact that I was always hung over. I told my manager that I had cancer and needed to go to the doctor for treatment every morning. I would say whatever I needed to say to protect my drinking.

More often, I was having these little moments of clarity, times I knew for sure that I was an alcoholic. Times when I was looking at the bottom of my glass asking myself, Why am I doing this? Something had to give, something had to change. I was suicidal, evaluating every part of my life for what could be wrong. It culminated in one last night of drinking and staring at the problem. It made me sick to think about it, and even sicker to continue drinking it away. I was forced to look at my drinking as the chief suspect.

The next day I went to work, late as usual, and all day long I could not stop thinking about this very real problem. I could go no further. What was happening to me? Therapy hadn't fixed my life—all those sessions; I was still miserable. I might as well just kill myself, drink my way into oblivion. In one last desperate fight for a solution, I reviewed my life, searching for the missing link. Had I left out some crucial bit of information that would lead to a breakthrough, making it possible for life to become just a little more bearable? No, there was nothing. Except of course my drinking.

The next morning I went to see my therapist. I told him I'd decided to quit therapy, because after eight

years, it wasn't working. But I decided to tell him how I had been searching through my life for that missing link and had come up with only one thing I had never told him: that I drank. He began asking me questions—he asked about quantities, frequency, what I drank. Before he was even halfway through, I broke down and began sobbing. I cried, “Do you think I have a problem with drinking?” He replied, “I think that is quite obvious.” I then asked, “Do you think I'm an alcoholic?” And he answered, “You are going to have to find out for yourself.” He pulled a list of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings out of his desk drawer; he had already highlighted the young people's meetings.

He told me to go home and not drink at all for the rest of the day. He would call me at nine p.m. and wanted to hear that I hadn't taken a drink. It was rough, but I went home and locked myself in my room, sweating it out until he called. He asked if I had had a drink. I told him I had not and asked what I should do next. He told me to do the same thing tomorrow, except tomorrow I should also go to the first meeting on the list he had highlighted. The next day I went to my first meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. I was eighteen years old.

In the parking lot, I sat in my car for about fifteen minutes before the meeting started, trying to work up the courage to go in and face myself. I remember finally working up the nerve to open the door and get out, only to close the door, dismissing the notion of going into the meeting as ridiculous. This dance of indecisiveness went on about fifty times before I went

in. Had I not gone in, I believe I would not be alive today.

The room was very smoky and filled with apparently happy people. Finding a seat in the back, I sat down and tried to make sense of the format. When the chairperson asked if there were any newcomers present, I looked around and saw some hands go up, but I certainly wasn't ready to raise my hand and draw attention to myself. The meeting broke up into several groups, and I followed one group down the hall and took a seat. They opened a book and read a chapter titled "Step Seven." After the reading, they went around the table for comments, and for the first time in my life, I found myself surrounded by people I could really relate with. I no longer felt as if I was a total misfit, because here was a roomful of people who felt precisely as I did, and a major weight had been lifted. I happened to be in the last chair around the table to speak and, confused by the reading, all I could say was, "What the heck are shortcomings?"

A couple of members, realizing I was there for my first meeting, took me downstairs and sat down with me and outlined the program. I can recall very little of what was said. I remember telling these members that this program they outlined sounded like just what I needed, but I didn't think I could stay sober for the rest of my life. Exactly how was I supposed to not drink if my girlfriend breaks up with me, or if my best friend dies, or even through happy times like graduations, weddings, and birthdays. They suggested I could just stay sober one day at a time. They explained that it might be easier to set my sights on the twenty-four hours in front of me and to take on these other

situations when and if they ever arrived. I decided to give sobriety a try, one day at a time, and I've done it that way ever since.

When I entered Alcoholics Anonymous, I had done some damage physically, had a bouquet of mental quirks, and was spiritually bankrupt. I knew I was powerless over alcohol and that I needed to be open-minded toward what people suggested for recovery. However, when it came to spirituality, I fought it nearly every step of the way. Although raised in an ethnic and religious Jewish household, I was agnostic and very resistant to anyone and anything that I perceived to be imposing religious beliefs. To my surprise, Alcoholics Anonymous suggested something different.

The idea that religion and spirituality were not one and the same was a new notion. My sponsor asked that I merely remain open-minded to the possibility that there was a Power greater than myself, one of my own understanding. He assured me that no person was going to impose a belief system on me, that it was a personal matter. Reluctantly, I opened my mind to the fact that maybe, just maybe, there was something to this spiritual lifestyle. Slowly but surely, I realized there was indeed a Power greater than myself, and I soon found myself with a full-time God in my life and following a spiritual path that didn't conflict with my personal religious convictions.

Following this spiritual path made a major difference in my life. It seemed to fill that lonely hole that I used to fill with alcohol. My self-esteem improved dramatically, and I knew happiness and serenity as I had never known it before. I started to see the beauty

and usefulness in my own existence, and tried to express my gratitude through helping others in whatever ways I could. A confidence and faith entered my life and unraveled a plan for me that was bigger and better than I could have ever imagined.

It wasn't easy, and it has never been easy, but it gets so much better. Since that first meeting, my life has completely changed. Three months into the program I started college. While many of my college classmates were experimenting with alcohol for the first time, I was off at meetings and A.A. get-togethers, becoming active in service work, and developing relationships with God, family, friends, and loved ones. I rarely thought twice about this; it was what I wanted and needed to do.

Over the last seven years, nearly everything I thought I could not stay sober through has happened. Indeed, sobriety and life are full of ups and downs. Occasionally depression can creep back into my life and requires outside help. However, this program has provided me with the tools to stay sober through the death of my best friends, failed relationships, and good times like birthdays, weddings, and graduations. Life is exponentially better than it ever was before. I'm living out the life I used to fantasize about, and I have a whole lot of work still in front of me. I have hope to share and love to give, and I just keep going one day at a time, living this adventure called life.

(2)

FEAR OF FEAR

This lady was cautious. She decided she wouldn't let herself go in her drinking. And she would never, never take that morning drink!

I DIDN'T THINK I was an alcoholic. I thought my problem was that I had been married to a drunk for twenty-seven years. And when my husband found A.A., I came to the second meeting with him. I thought it was wonderful, simply marvelous, for him. But not for me. Then I went to another meeting, and I still thought it was wonderful—for him, but not for me.

That was on a hot summer evening, down in the Greenwich Village Group, and there was a little porch out there in the old meeting place on Sullivan Street, and after the meeting I went out on the steps for some air. In the doorway stood a lovely young girl who said, "Are you one of us souses too?" I said, "Oh, goodness, no! My husband is. He's in there." She told me her name, and I said, "I know you from somewhere." It turned out that she had been in high school with my daughter. I said, "Eileen, are you one of those people?" And she said, "Oh, yes. I'm in this."

As we walked back through the hall, I, for the first time in my life, said to another human being, "I'm having trouble with my drinking too." She took me by the hand and introduced me to the woman that I'm

very proud to call my sponsor. This woman and her husband are both in A.A., and she said to me, "Oh, but you're not the alcoholic; it's your husband." I said, "Yes." She said, "How long have you been married?" I said, "Twenty-seven years." She said, "Twenty-seven years to an alcoholic! How did you ever stand it?" I thought, now here's a nice, sympathetic soul! This is for me. I said, "Well, I stood it to keep the home together, and for the children's sake." She said, "Yes, I know. You're just a martyr, aren't you?" I walked away from that woman grinding my teeth and cursing under my breath. Fortunately, I didn't say a word to George on the way home. But that night I tried to go to sleep. And I thought, "You're some martyr, Jane! Let's look at the record." And when I looked at it, I knew I was just as much a drunk as George was, if not worse. I nudged George next morning, and I said, "I'm in," and he said, "Oh, I knew you'd make it."

I started drinking nearly thirty years ago—right after I was married. My first drinking spree was on corn liquor, and I was allergic to it, believe me. I was deathly sick every time I took a drink. But we had to do a lot of entertaining. My husband liked to have a good time; I was very young, and I wanted to have a good time too. The only way I knew to do it was to drink right along with him.

I got into terrific trouble with my drinking. I was afraid, and I had made my mind up that I would never get drunk, so I was watchful and careful. We had a small child, and I loved her dearly, so that held me back quite a bit in my drinking career. Even so, every time I drank, I seemed to get in trouble. I al-

ways wanted to drink too much, so I was watchful, always watchful, counting my drinks. If we were invited to a formal party and I knew they were only going to have one or two drinks, I wouldn't have any. I was being very cagey, because I knew that if I did take one or two, I might want to take five or six or seven or eight.

I did stay fairly good for a few years. But I wasn't happy, and I didn't ever let myself go in my drinking. After my son, our second child, came along, and as he became school age and was away at school most of the time, something happened. I really started drinking with a bang.

I never went to a hospital. I never lost a job. I was never in jail. And, unlike many others, I never took a drink in the morning. I needed a drink, but I was afraid to take a morning drink, because I didn't want to be a drunk. I became a drunk anyway, but I was scared to death to take that morning drink. I was accused of it many times when I went to play bridge in the afternoon, but I really never did take a morning drink. I was still woozy from the night before.

I should have lost my husband, and I think that only the fact that he was an alcoholic too kept us together. No one else would have stayed with me. Many women who have reached the stage that I had reached in my drinking have lost husbands, children, homes, everything they hold dear. I have been very fortunate in many ways. The important thing I lost was my own self-respect. I could feel fear coming into my life. I couldn't face people. I couldn't look them straight in the eyes, although I had always been a

self-possessed, brazen person. I'd brazen anything out. I lied like a trooper to get out of many scrapes.

But I felt a fear coming into my life, and I couldn't cope with it. I got so that I hid quite a bit of the time, wouldn't answer the phone, and stayed by myself as much as I could. I noticed that I was avoiding all my social friends, except for my bridge club. I couldn't keep up with any of my other friends, and I wouldn't go to anyone's house unless I knew they drank as heavily as I did. I never knew it was the first drink that did it. I thought I was losing my mind when I realized that I couldn't stop drinking. That frightened me terribly.

George tried many times to go on the wagon. If I had been sincere in what I thought I wanted more than anything else in life—a sober husband and a happy, contented home—I would have gone on the wagon with him. I did try, for a day or two, but something would always come up that would throw me. It would be a little thing—the rugs being crooked, or any silly little thing that I'd think was wrong—and off I'd go, drinking. And sneaking my drinks. I had bottles hidden all over the apartment. I didn't think my children knew about it, but I found out they did. It's surprising, how we think we fool everybody in our drinking.

I reached a stage where I couldn't go into my apartment without a drink. It didn't bother me anymore whether George was drinking or not. I had to have liquor. Sometimes I would lie on the bathroom floor, deathly sick, praying I would die, and praying to God as I always had prayed to Him when I was drinking: "Dear God, get me out of this one and I'll never do it again." And then I'd say, "God, don't pay any atten-

tion to me. You know I'll do it tomorrow, the very same thing."

I used to make excuses to try and get George off the wagon. I'd get so fed up with drinking all alone and bearing the burden of guilt all by myself, that I'd egg him on to drink, to get started again. And then I'd fight with him because he had started! And the whole merry-go-round would be on again. And he, poor dear, didn't know what was going on. He used to wonder when he'd spot one of my bottles around the house just how he could have overlooked that particular bottle. I myself didn't know all the places I had them hidden.

We have only been in A.A. a few years, but now we're trying to make up for lost time. Twenty-seven years of confusion is what my early married life was. Now the picture has changed completely. We have faith in each other, trust in each other, and understanding. A.A. has given us that. It has taught me so many things. It has changed my thinking entirely, about everything I do. I can't afford resentments against anyone, because they are the build-up of another drunk. I must live and let live. And "think"—that one important word means so much to me. My life was always act and react. I never stopped to think. I just didn't give a whoop about myself or anyone else.

I try to live our program as it has been outlined to me, one day at a time. I try to live today so that tomorrow I won't be ashamed when I wake up in the morning. In the old days I hated to wake up and look back at what last night had been like. I never could face it the next morning. And unless I had some rosy picture of what was going to happen that day, I wouldn't even

feel like getting up in the morning at all. It really wasn't living. Now I feel so very grateful not only for my sobriety, which I try to maintain day by day, but I'm grateful also for the ability to help other people. I never thought I could be useful to anyone except my husband and my children and perhaps a few friends. But A.A. has shown me that I can help other alcoholics.

Many of my neighbors devoted time to volunteer work. There was one woman especially, and I'd watch her from my window every morning, leaving faithfully to go to the hospital in the neighborhood. I said to her one day when I met her on the street, "What sort of volunteer work do you do?" She told me; it was simple; I could have done it very easily. She said, "Why don't you do it too?" I said, "I'd love to." She said, "Suppose I put your name down as a volunteer—even if you can only give one or two days?" But then I thought, well, now wait, how will I feel next Tuesday? How will I feel next Friday, if I make it a Friday? How will I feel next Saturday morning? I never knew. I was afraid to set even one day. I could never be sure I'd have a clear head and hands that were willing to do some work. So I never did any volunteer work. And I felt depleted, whipped. I had the time, I certainly had the capability, but I never did a thing.

I am trying now, each day, to make up for all those selfish, thoughtless, foolish things I did in my drinking days. I hope that I never forget to be grateful.

(3)

THE HOUSEWIFE WHO DRANK AT HOME

She hid her bottles in clothes hampers and dresser drawers. In A.A., she discovered she had lost nothing and had found everything.

MY STORY HAPPENS to be a particular kind of woman's story: the story of the woman who drinks at home. I had to be at home—I had two babies. When alcohol took me over, my bar was my kitchen, my living room, my bedroom, the back bathroom, and the two laundry hampers.

At one time the admission that I was and am an alcoholic meant shame, defeat, and failure to me. But in the light of the new understanding that I have found in A.A., I have been able to interpret that defeat and that failure and that shame as seeds of victory. Because it was only through feeling defeat and feeling failure, the inability to cope with my life and with alcohol, that I was able to surrender and accept the fact that I had this disease and that I had to learn to live again without alcohol.

I was never a very heavy social drinker. But during a period of particular stress and strain about thirteen years ago, I resorted to using alcohol in my home, alone, as a means of temporary release and of getting a little extra sleep.

I had problems. We all have them, and I thought a little brandy or a little wine now and then could certainly hurt no one. I don't believe, when I started, that I even had in mind the thought that I was drinking. I *had* to sleep, I *had* to clear my mind and free it from worry, and I *had* to relax. But from one or two drinks of an afternoon or evening, my intake mounted, and mounted fast. It wasn't long before I was drinking all day. I had to have that wine. The only incentive that I had, toward the end, for getting dressed in the morning was to get out and get "supplies" to help me get my day started. But the only thing that got started was my drinking.

I should have realized that alcohol was getting hold of me when I started to become secretive in my drinking. I began to have to have supplies on hand for the people who "might come in." And of course a half-empty bottle wasn't worth keeping, so I finished it up and naturally had to get more in right away for the people who "might come in unexpectedly." But *I* was always the unexpected person who had to finish the bottle. I couldn't go to one wine store and look the man honestly in the face and buy a bottle, as I used to do when I had parties and entertained and did normal drinking. I had to give him a story and ask him the same question over and over again, "Well, now, how many will that bottle serve?" I wanted him to be sure that I wasn't the one who was going to drink the whole bottle.

I had to hide, as a great many people in A.A. have had to do. I did my hiding in the hampers and in my dresser drawers. When we begin to do things like that with alcohol, something's gone wrong. I needed it,

and I knew I was drinking too much, but I wasn't conscious of the fact that I should stop. I kept on. My home at that time was a place to mill around in. I wandered from room to room, thinking, drinking, drinking, thinking. And the mops would come out, the vacuum would come out, everything would come out, but nothing would get done. Toward five o'clock, helter-skelter, I'd get everything put away and try to get supper on the table, and after supper I'd finish the job up and knock myself out.

I never knew which came first, the thinking or the drinking. If I could only stop thinking, I wouldn't drink. If I could only stop drinking, maybe I wouldn't think. But they were all mixed up together, and I was all mixed up inside. And yet I had to have that drink. You know the deteriorating effects, the disintegrating effects, of chronic wine-drinking. I cared nothing about my personal appearance. I didn't care what I looked like; I didn't care what I did. To me, taking a bath was just being in a place with a bottle where I could drink in privacy. I had to have it with me at night, in case I woke up and needed that drink.

How I ran my home, I don't know. I went on, realizing what I was becoming, hating myself for it, bitter, blaming life, blaming everything but the fact that I should turn about and do something about my drinking. Finally I didn't care; I was beyond caring. I just wanted to live to a certain age, carry through with what I felt was my job with the children, and after that—no matter. Half a mother was better than no mother at all.

I needed that alcohol. I couldn't live without it. I couldn't do anything without it. But there came a

point when I could no longer live with it. And that came after a three-weeks' illness of my son. The doctor prescribed a teaspoon of brandy for the boy to help him through the night when he coughed. Well, of course, that was all I needed—to switch from wine to brandy for three weeks. I knew nothing about alcoholism or the D.T.'s, but when I woke up on that last morning of my son's illness, I taped the keyhole on my door because "everyone was out there." I paced back and forth in the apartment with the cold sweats. I screamed on the telephone for my mother to get up there; something was going to happen; I didn't know what, but if she didn't get there quick, I'd split wide open. I called my husband up and told him to come home.

After that I sat for a week, a body in a chair, a mind off in space. I thought the two would never get together. I knew that alcohol and I had to part. I couldn't live with it anymore. And yet, how was I going to live without it? I didn't know. I was bitter, living in hate. The very person who stood with me through it all and has been my greatest help was the person that I turned against, my husband. I also turned against my family, my mother. The people who would have come to help me were just the people I would have nothing to do with.

Nevertheless, I began to try to live without alcohol. But I only succeeded in fighting it. And believe me, an alcoholic cannot fight alcohol. I said to my husband, "I'm going to try to get interested in something outside, get myself out of this rut I'm in." I thought I was going out of my mind. If I didn't have a drink, I had to do something.

I became one of the most active women in the community, what with P.T.A., other community organizations, and drives. I'd go into an organization, and it wasn't long before I was on the committee, and then I was chairman of the committee; and if I was in a group, I'd soon be treasurer or secretary of the group. But I wasn't happy. I became a Jekyll-and-Hyde person. As long as I worked, as long as I got out, I didn't drink. But I had to get back to that first drink somehow. And when I took that first drink, I was off on the usual merry-go-round. And it was my home that suffered.

I figured I'd be all right if I could find something I liked to do. So when the children were in school from nine to three, I started up a nice little business and was fairly successful in it. But not happy. Because I found that everything I turned to became a substitute for drink. And when all of life is a substitute for drink, there's no happiness, no peace. I still had to drink; I still needed that drink. Mere cessation from drinking is not enough for an alcoholic while the need for that drink goes on. I switched to beer. I had always hated beer, but now I grew to love it. So that wasn't my answer either.

I went to my doctor again. He knew what I was doing, how I was trying. I said, "I can't find my middle road in life. I can't find it. It's either all work, or I drink." He said, "Why don't you try Alcoholics Anonymous?" I was willing to try anything. I was licked. For the second time, I was licked. The first time was when I knew I couldn't live with alcohol. But this second time, I found I couldn't live normally without it, and I was licked worse than ever.

The fellowship I found in A.A. enabled me to face my problem honestly and squarely. I couldn't do it among my relatives; I couldn't do it among my friends. No one likes to admit that they're a drunk, that they can't control this thing. But when we come into A.A., we can face our problem honestly and openly. I went to closed meetings and open meetings. And I took everything that A.A. had to give me. Easy does it, first things first, one day at a time. It was at that point that I reached surrender. I heard one very ill woman say that she didn't believe in the surrender part of the A.A. program. My heavens! Surrender to me has meant the ability to run my home, to face my responsibilities as they should be faced, to take life as it comes to me day by day and work my problems out. That's what surrender has meant to me. I surrendered once to the bottle, and I couldn't do these things. Since I gave my will over to A.A., whatever A.A. has wanted of me I've tried to do to the best of my ability. When I'm asked to go out on a call, I go. *I'm* not going; A.A. is leading me there. A.A. gives us alcoholics direction into a way of life without the need for alcohol. That life for me is lived one day at a time, letting the problems of the future rest with the future. When the time comes to solve them, God will give me strength for that day.

I had been brought up to believe in God, but I know that until I found this A.A. program, I had never found or known faith in the reality of God, the reality of His power that is now with me in everything I do.

(4)

PHYSICIAN, HEAL THYSELF!

Psychiatrist and surgeon, he had lost his way until he realized that God, not he, was the Great Healer.

I AM A PHYSICIAN, licensed to practice in a western state. I am also an alcoholic. In two ways I may be a little different from other alcoholics. First, we all hear at A.A. meetings about those who have lost everything, those who have been in jail, those who have been in prison, those who have lost their families, those who have lost their income. I never lost any of it. I never was on skid row. I made more money in the last year of my drinking than I made in my whole life. My wife never hinted that she would leave me. Everything that I touched from grammar school on was successful. I was president of my grammar school student body. I was president of all of my classes in high school, and in my last year I was president of that student body. I was president of each class in the university, and president of *that* student body. I was voted the man most likely to succeed. The same thing occurred in medical school. I belong to more medical societies and honor societies than men ten to twenty years my senior.

Mine was the skid row of success. The physical skid row in any city is miserable. The skid row of success is just as miserable.

The second way in which, perhaps, I differ from

some other alcoholics is this: Many alcoholics state that they don't particularly like the taste of alcohol but that they liked the effect. I loved alcohol! I used to like to get it on my fingers so I could lick them and get another taste. I had a lot of fun drinking. I enjoyed it immensely. And then, one ill-defined day, one day that I can't recall, I stepped across the line that alcoholics know so well, and from that day on, drinking was miserable. When a few drinks made me feel good before I went over that line, those same drinks now made me wretched. In an attempt to get over that feeling, there was a quick onslaught of a greater number of drinks, and then all was lost. Alcohol failed to serve the purpose.

On the last day I was drinking, I went up to see a friend who had had a good deal of trouble with alcohol and whose wife had left him a number of times. He had come back, however, and he was on this program. In my stupid way I went up to see him with the idea in the back of my mind that I would investigate Alcoholics Anonymous from a medical standpoint. Deep in my heart was the feeling that maybe I could get some help here. This friend gave me a pamphlet, and I took it home and had my wife read it to me. There were two sentences in it that struck me. One said, "Don't feel that you are a martyr because you stopped drinking," and this hit me between the eyes. The second one said, "Don't feel that you stop drinking for anyone other than yourself," and this hit me between the eyes. After my wife had read this to me, I said to her, as I had said many times in desperation, "I have got to do something." She's a good-natured soul and said, "I wouldn't worry about it; probably

something will happen.” And then we went up the side of a hill where we have a little barbecue area to make the fire for the barbecue, and on the way up I thought to myself—I’ll go back down to the kitchen and refill this drink. And just then, something did happen.

The thought came to me—This is the last one! I was well into the second fifth by this time. And as that thought came to me, it was as though someone had reached down and taken a heavy overcoat off my shoulders, for that *was* the last one.

About two days later I was called by a friend of mine from Nevada City—he’s a brother of my wife’s closest friend. He said, “Earle?” and I said, “Yes.” He said, “I’m an alcoholic; what do I do?” And I gave him some idea of what you do, and so I made my first Twelfth Step call before I ever came into the program. The satisfaction I got from giving him a little of what I had read in those pamphlets far surpassed any feeling that I had ever had before in helping patients.

So I decided that I would go to my first meeting. I was introduced as a psychiatrist. (I belong to the American Psychiatric Society, but I don’t practice psychiatry as such. I am a surgeon.)

As someone in A.A. said to me once upon a time, there is nothing worse than a confused psychiatrist.

I will never forget the first meeting that I attended. There were five people present, including me. At one end of the table sat our community butcher. At the other side of the table sat one of the carpenters in our community, and at the farther end of the table sat the man who ran the bakery, while on one side sat my friend who was a mechanic. I recall, as I walked into

that meeting, saying to myself, “Here I am, a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons, a Fellow of the International College of Surgeons, a diplomate of one of the great specialty boards in these United States, a member of the American Psychiatric Society, and I have to go to the butcher, the baker, and the carpenter to help make a man out of me!”

Something else happened to me. This was such a new thought that I got all sorts of books on Higher Powers, and I put a Bible by my bedside, and I put a Bible in my car. It is still there. And I put a Bible in my locker at the hospital. And I put a Bible in my desk. And I put a Big Book by my night stand, and I put a *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* in my locker at the hospital, and I got books by Emmet Fox, and I got books by God-knows-who, and I got to reading all these things. And the first thing you know I was lifted right out of the A.A. group, and I floated higher and higher and even higher, until I was way up on a pink cloud, which is known as Pink Seven, and I felt miserable again. So I thought to myself, I might just as well be drunk as feel like this.

I went to Clark, the community butcher, and I said, “Clark, what is the matter with me? I don’t feel right. I have been on this program for three months and I feel terrible.” And he said, “Earle, why don’t you come on over and let me talk to you for a minute.” So he got me a cup of coffee and a piece of cake, and sat me down and said, “Why, there’s nothing wrong with you. You’ve been sober for three months, been working hard. You’ve been doing all right.” But then he said, “Let me say something to you. We have here in this community an organization that helps people, and

this organization is known as Alcoholics Anonymous. Why don't you join it?" I said, "What do you think I've been doing?" "Well," he said, "you've been sober, but you've been floating way up on a cloud somewhere. Why don't you go home and get the Big Book and open it at page fifty-eight and see what it says?" So I did. I got the Big Book and I read it, and this is what it said: "Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path." The word "thoroughly" rang a bell. And then it went on to say: "Half measures availed us nothing. We stood at the turning point." And the last sentence was "We asked His protection and care with complete abandon."

"Complete abandon"; "Half measures availed us nothing"; "Thoroughly followed our path"; "Completely give themselves to this simple program" rang in my swelled head.

Years earlier, I had gone into psychoanalysis to get relief. I spent 5½ years in psychoanalysis and proceeded to become a drunk. I don't mean that in any sense as a derogatory statement about psychotherapy; it's a very great tool, not too potent, but a great tool. I would do it again.

I tried every gimmick that there was to get some peace of mind, but it was not until I was brought to my alcoholic knees, when I was brought to a group in my own community with the butcher, the baker, the carpenter, and the mechanic, who were able to give me the Twelve Steps, that I was finally given some semblance of an answer to the last half of the First Step. So, after taking the first half of the First Step, and very gingerly admitting myself to Alcoholics Anonymous, something happened. And then I thought to

myself: Imagine an alcoholic admitting anything! But I made my admission just the same.

The Third Step said: “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.” Now they asked us to make a decision! We’ve got to turn the whole business over to some joker we can’t even see! And this chokes the alcoholic. Here he is powerless, unmanageable, in the grip of something bigger than he is, and he’s got to turn the whole business over to someone else! It fills the alcoholic with rage. We are great people. We can handle anything. And so one gets to thinking to one-self, Who is this God? Who is this fellow we are supposed to turn everything over to? What can He do for us that we can’t do for ourselves? Well, I don’t know who He is, but I’ve got my own idea.

For myself, I have an absolute proof of the existence of God. I was sitting in my office one time after I had operated on a woman. It had been a long four- or five-hour operation, a large surgical procedure, and she was on her ninth or tenth post-operative day. She was doing fine, she was up and around, and that day her husband phoned me and said, “Doctor, thanks very much for curing my wife,” and I thanked him for his felicitations, and he hung up. And then I scratched my head and said to myself, What a fantastic thing for a man to say, that I cured his wife. Here I am down at my office behind my desk, and there she is out at the hospital. I am not even there, and if I was there the only thing I could do would be to give her moral support, and yet he thanks me for curing his wife. I thought to myself—What *is* curing that woman? Yes, I put in those stitches. The Great Boss

has given me diagnostic and surgical talent, and He has loaned it to me to use for the rest of my life. It doesn't belong to me. He has loaned it to me and I did my job, but that ended nine days ago. What healed those tissues that I closed? I didn't. This to me is the proof of the existence of a Somethingness greater than I am. I couldn't practice medicine without the Great Physician. All I do in a very simple way is to help Him cure my patients.

Shortly after I was starting to work on the program, I realized that I was not a good father, I wasn't a good husband, but, oh, I was a good provider. I never robbed my family of anything. I gave them everything, except the greatest thing in the world, and that is peace of mind. So I went to my wife and asked her if there wasn't something that she and I could do to somehow get together, and she turned on her heel and looked me squarely in the eye, and said, "You don't care anything about my problem," and I could have smacked her, but I said to myself, "Grab on to your serenity!"

She left, and I sat down and crossed my hands and looked up and said, "For God's sake, help me." And then a silly, simple thought came to me. I didn't know anything about being a father; I didn't know how to come home and work weekends like other husbands; I didn't know how to entertain my family. But I remembered that every night after dinner my wife would get up and do the dishes. Well, I could do the dishes. So I went to her and said, "There's only one thing I want in my whole life, and I don't want any commendation; I don't want any credit; I don't want anything from you or Janey for the rest of your life

except one thing, and that is the opportunity to do anything you want always, and I would like to start off by doing the dishes.” And now I am doing the darn dishes every night!

Doctors have been notoriously unsuccessful in helping alcoholics. They have contributed fantastic amounts of time and work to our problem, but they aren't able, it seems, to arrest either your alcoholism or mine.

And the clergy have tried hard to help us, but we haven't been helped. And the psychiatrist has had thousands of couches and has put you and me on them many, many times, but he hasn't helped us very much, though he has tried hard; and we owe the clergy and the doctor and the psychiatrist a deep debt of gratitude, but they haven't helped our alcoholism, except in a rare few instances. But—Alcoholics Anonymous has helped.

What is this power that A.A. possesses? This curative power? I don't know what it is. I suppose the doctor might say, “This is psychosomatic medicine.” I suppose the psychiatrist might say, “This is benevolent interpersonal relations.” I suppose others would say, “This is group psychotherapy.”

To me it is God.

(5)

MY CHANCE TO LIVE

A.A. gave this teenager the tools to climb out of her dark abyss of despair.

I CAME THROUGH the doors of Alcoholics Anonymous at age seventeen, a walking contradiction. On the outside, I was the portrait of a rebellious teenager, with miles of attitude to spare. On the inside, I was suicidal, bloodied, and beaten. My stride spoke of a confidence I didn't feel. My dress was that of a street-tough kid you didn't want to mess with. Inside I was trembling with fear that someone would see through my defenses to the real me.

If you saw who I really was, you would turn away in disgust or use my many weaknesses to destroy me. One way or the other I was convinced I'd be hurt. I couldn't allow that to happen, so I kept the real me veiled behind a force field of rough-edged attitude. How I got to this place is still a mystery to me.

I grew up in a loving middle-class home. We had our problems—what family doesn't? But there was no abuse, verbal or physical, and it certainly couldn't be said my parents didn't do the best they could by me. My grandfathers were alcoholic, and I was raised on stories of how it had ravaged their lives and the lives of those around them. Nope, I didn't want to be an alcoholic.

In my early teen years I began to be bothered by

feelings that I didn't fit in. Until this point, I had ignored the fact that I wasn't one of the "in" crowd. I thought if I tried hard enough I would fit in sooner or later. At fourteen I stopped trying. I quickly discovered the soothing effects of a drink. Telling myself I would be more careful than my unfortunate grandparents, I set out to feel better.

Drinking released me from the suffocating fear, the feelings of inadequacy, and the nagging voices at the back of my head that told me I would never measure up. All of those things melted away when I drank. The bottle was my friend, my companion, a portable vacation. Whenever life was too intense, alcohol would take the edge off or obliterate the problem altogether for a time.

Blackouts became my goal. Though it may sound strange, they never frightened me. My life was ordered by school and by home. When I blacked out, I simply went on autopilot for the remainder of the day. The thought of going through my teen years without a single memory of its passing was very appealing.

I hadn't given up on life, just childhood. Adults had it made. They made all the rules. Being a kid stunk. If I could hold out until I was eighteen, everything would turn around. I had no idea at the time how true those words would prove to be.

Diving headfirst into what remained of the subculture left over from the sixties, I took "party till you throw up" to new levels. I liked drinking. I liked the effect alcohol had on me. I didn't like throwing up at all. I soon discovered there were other substances I could take that would help me "control" my drinking.

A little bit of this or that, and I could nurse a drink all night. Then I had a good time and didn't throw up.

In no time at all I had arrived, or so I thought. I had a bunch of friends to hang around with. We did exciting things: skipping school, taking road trips, drinking were all a part of this new life. It was great for a while. Getting hauled into the principal's office or being questioned by the police, things I would have been ashamed of before, were badges of honor. My ability to come through these events without giving away information or being unnerved brought me respect and trust among my peers.

Outwardly I was a young woman who was comfortable with herself. Yet ever so slowly these actions that I knew deep down were wrong started eating holes in me. My first reaction was to drink more. The outcome wasn't what I expected. I continued to raise my intake without the desired effect. Blackouts became few and far between. It didn't seem to matter how much I drank or in what combination with other substances; I could no longer find the relief I sought.

Life at home was falling apart around me. Every time I turned around I'd done something to make my mother cry. At school they were looking for ways to be rid of me. The vice principal made it a point to explain his position to me in no uncertain terms: "Straighten up, or you are out on your ear. For good."

I started the painful spiral to my bottom a scant two years into my drinking career. Knowing I had to graduate, I made adjustments to my lifestyle to stay in school. I watched as my friends continued to have fun. A depression settled over me, encasing me in a gray haze. I couldn't skip school anymore; my boyfriend

came home from boot camp with another girl; my mother was still crying, and it was all my fault.

There were several attempts at suicide. I'm grateful to say I wasn't very good at it. Then I decided since I wasn't having fun anymore, I'd quit drinking and using. I mean, why waste good booze if you're going to feel just as bad drunk as sober? I held no hope for feeling better when I stopped. I just didn't want to waste the booze.

It never occurred to me that I couldn't stop. Every day I concocted some new method of staying sober: If I wear this shirt, I won't drink. If I'm with this person, or in this place, I won't drink. It didn't work. Every morning I woke up with a new resolve to stay sober. With few exceptions, by noon I was so messed up I couldn't tell you my name.

The voices in my head became even more and more vicious. With each failed attempt, my head said: See, you failed again. You knew you wouldn't feel better. You're a loser. You're never going to beat this. Why are you even trying? Just drink until you're dead.

On the rare days I managed to make it past noon, there were few brave enough to get within a hundred yards of me. I was not a nice person sober. I was angry and frightened, and I wanted you to feel as terrible as I did. A few times I had drinks pushed on me: "Here, drink this; then maybe you won't be so difficult." I always had a nasty retort, and then took what was offered. Toward the end I prayed every night for God to take me in my sleep, and I cursed Him in the morning for allowing me to live.

It was never my intention to end up in A.A. If someone mentioned perhaps I drank too much, I

laughed at them. I didn't drink any more than my friends. I never got drunk when I didn't want to—never mind that I always wanted to. I couldn't be an alcoholic. I was too young. Life was my problem. Other substances were my problem. If I could just get a handle on things, then I could drink.

I got a job as a waitress at a local pancake house. Our late hours attracted a wide variety of clientele, including some members of Alcoholics Anonymous. They were not my favorite people to wait on. They, in fact, drove me to drink. They were loud, hard to please. They table-hopped and didn't tip very well. I waited on the same bunch for six weeks in a row before finally being granted the night off.

Now, I had been thinking that my problem was insanity, and what happened on my night off clinched it: I missed this motley crew who had plagued my existence for over a month. I missed the laughter and their bright smiles. I went and had coffee with them.

Through a chain of events I choose to believe were the actions of my Higher Power, they convinced me to go to a meeting. I was told it was a special A.A. anniversary open meeting, which meant that anyone could attend. I thought to myself: What could it hurt? I wait on these people; perhaps it will help me to better understand them.

On the designated evening I arrived to find that the anniversary meeting was the following week, but they took a vote and decided I could stay. I was shocked and humbled. These people wanted me around? It was a concept I had trouble accepting. I stayed and listened, careful to let them know I didn't have a problem.

I attended the anniversary meeting the following week with no intention of ever going to another meeting. I wasn't an alcoholic. I had other problems that needed attention; then I would be okay. The next week a friend, who was admittedly an alcoholic, asked me if I was going to the meeting. My head went into hyper-speed. If this person thought I needed to go, perhaps I did. But I wasn't an alcoholic.

I attended the meeting and decided drugs were my problem. I stopped using them completely from that night forward. The result was a sharp increase in my drinking. I knew this would never do. Staggering home one night, it occurred to me that perhaps if I stopped drinking, just for a while, maybe I could get a handle on things and then I could drink again.

It took about three months for me to realize I was my problem and drinking made my problem much worse. The other substances were simply tools to control my drinking. Given a choice, I'd take a drink over the other stuff in a heartbeat. Angry doesn't begin to describe how I felt when I had to admit I was an alcoholic.

Even though I was grateful not to be nuts, as I'd first supposed, I felt cheated. All the people I saw sitting around the tables of Alcoholics Anonymous had been granted many more years of drinking than I. It just wasn't fair! Someone pointed out to me that life was rarely fair. I wasn't amused, but extending my drinking career simply wasn't an option anymore.

Ninety days sober cleared my thinking enough to make me realize I'd hit bottom. If I were to go back to drinking, it would be just a matter of time before one of two things happened: I'd succeed at suicide, or

I'd start the life of the living dead. I'd seen what the latter looked like, and real death was preferable.

At this point I surrendered. I admitted I was an alcoholic without a clue what to do about it. Many of the people around me wanted me to go to treatment, but I resisted. I didn't want the kids at school to know what was going on. If I went to treatment, they'd all know within a week. More importantly, I was afraid. I was afraid the treatment center would test me and say, "You're not an alcoholic. You're just crazy." My heart knew this wasn't true. My head took a bit more convincing. The thought of having A.A. taken away from me was terrifying. A.A. was my anchor in a sea of confusion. Anything that might pose a threat to my sense of security was quickly thrust away. I didn't have anything against treatment centers then, nor do I now. I simply didn't want to go, and I didn't.

I did stay sober. One summer with people who enjoyed life sober was all it took for me to want sobriety more than I wanted a drink. I will not tell you I did everything I was told, when I was told, how I was told, because I didn't. Like most people new to the program I set out to find an easier, softer way. As the Big Book suggests, I could not.

When I couldn't find an easier, softer way, I looked for the person with the magic wand, the one person in A.A. who could make me all better, right now. This was a frustrating task, and I finally realized that if I wanted this life, I was going to have to do what the others had done. No one made me drink, and no one was going to make me stay sober. This program is for people who want it, not people who need it.

If everyone who needed A.A. showed up, we would

be bursting at the seams. Unfortunately, most never make it to the door. I believe I was one of the lucky ones. Not just because I found this program at such a young age; I feel fortunate that I found A.A. at all. My approach to drinking brought me to the jumping-off place described in the Big Book much faster than anyone could have imagined.

I'm convinced if I had continued on my course, I wouldn't have survived much longer. I don't believe I was smarter than anyone else, as I'm often told by those who came in at a later age. It was my time, my chance to live, and I took it. If there had still been joy in my drinking or even a remote chance of the joy returning, I would not have stopped drinking when I did.

No one who drank as I did wakes up on the edge of the abyss one morning and says: Things look pretty scary; I think I'd better stop drinking before I fall in. I was convinced I could go as far as I wanted, and then climb back out when it wasn't fun anymore. What happened was, I found myself at the bottom of the canyon thinking I'd never see the sun again. A.A. didn't pull me out of that hole. It did give me the tools to construct a ladder, with Twelve Steps.

Sobriety is nothing like I thought it would be. At first it was one big emotional roller coaster, full of sharp highs and deep lows. My emotions were new, untested, and I wasn't entirely certain I wanted to deal with them. I cried when I should have been laughing. I laughed when I should have cried. Events I thought were the end of the world turned out to be gifts. It was all very confusing. Slowly things began to even

out. As I began to take the steps of recovery, my role in the pitiful condition of my life became clear.

If asked what the two most important things in recovery are, I would have to say willingness and action. I was willing to believe that A.A. was telling me the truth. I wanted to believe it was true in a way I cannot relate in words. I wanted this thing to work. Then I began to take the course of action prescribed.

Following the principles laid out in the Big Book has not always been comfortable, nor will I claim perfection. I have yet to find a place in the Big Book that says, "Now you have completed the Steps; have a nice life." The program is a plan for a lifetime of daily living. There have been occasions when the temptation to slack off has won. I view each of these as learning opportunities.

When I am willing to do the right thing, I am rewarded with an inner peace no amount of liquor could ever provide. When I am unwilling to do the right thing, I become restless, irritable, and discontent. It is always my choice. Through the Twelve Steps, I have been granted the gift of choice. I am no longer at the mercy of a disease that tells me the only answer is to drink. If willingness is the key to unlock the gates of hell, it is action that opens those doors so that we may walk freely among the living.

Over the course of my sobriety I have experienced many opportunities to grow. I have had struggles and achievements. Through it all I have not had to take a drink, nor have I ever been alone. Willingness and action have seen me through it all, with the guidance of a loving Higher Power and the fellowship of the program. When I'm in doubt, I have faith that things will

turn out as they should. When I'm afraid, I reach for the hand of another alcoholic to steady me.

Life has not heaped monetary riches upon my head, nor have I achieved fame in the eyes of the world. My blessings cannot be measured in those terms. No amount of money or fame could equal what has been given me. Today I can walk down any street, anywhere, without the fear of meeting someone I've harmed. Today my thoughts are not consumed with craving for the next drink or regret for the damage I did on the last drunk.

Today I reside among the living, no better, no worse than any of God's other children. Today I look in the mirror when putting on my makeup and smile, rather than shy away from looking myself in the eye. Today I fit in my skin. I am at peace with myself and the world around me.

Growing up in A.A., I have been blessed with children who have never seen their mother drunk. I have a husband who loves me simply because I am, and I have gained the respect of my family. What more could a broken-down drunk ask for? Lord knows it is more than I ever thought possible, and ever so much more than I deserved. All because I was willing to believe A.A. just might work for me too.

(6)

STUDENT OF LIFE

Living at home with her parents, she tried using willpower to beat the obsession to drink. But it wasn't until she met another alcoholic and went to an A.A. meeting that sobriety took hold.

I STARTED DRINKING at age eighteen, rather a late bloomer by today's standards. But after I started, the disease of alcoholism hit me with a vengeance and made up for lost time. After I had been drinking for several years and seriously wondering if I did indeed have a problem with alcohol, I read one of the "Are You an Alcoholic?" quiz-type checklists. Much relieved, I found that almost nothing applied to me: I had never lost a job, a spouse, children, or any material possessions through alcohol. The fact that my drinking hadn't allowed me to gain any of those things crossed my mind only after I came into A.A.

I can't blame one ounce of my drinking on my upbringing. My parents were loving and supportive and have been married thirty-five years. No one else in my family exhibits alcoholic drinking or alcoholic behavior. For some reason, despite the resources available to me growing up, I developed into an adult woman terrified of the world around me. I was extremely insecure, though I was careful to hide this fact. I was unable to handle and understand my emotions; I always felt as if everyone else knew what was going on and what they

were supposed to be doing, and my life was the only one that was delivered without an instruction book.

When I discovered alcohol, everything changed. I took my first real drink my first night at college. I attended what was to be the first of many, many fraternity parties. I didn't care for the beer, so I went to the vat of innocuous-looking punch. I was told it was laced with grain alcohol. I don't remember how many drinks I had, and my recollections of the actual events of the rest of the night are fuzzy, but I do remember this much: When I was drinking, I was okay. I understood. Everything made sense. I could dance, talk, and enjoy being in my own skin. It was as if I had been an unfinished jigsaw puzzle with one piece missing; as soon as I took a drink, the last piece instantly and effortlessly snapped into place.

I don't remember getting home that night, and I woke up the next morning completely dressed and in full makeup. I was sick as a dog, but I managed to crawl into the shower and prepare for my first college class. I sat through the entire class pleading with my eyes to the professor to let us out early. He kept us to the bell, and when it rang, I flew into the women's room, crashed into the first stall, and threw everything up.

The insanity of the disease had already manifested itself. I recall thinking, as I knelt retching in the stall, that this was fantastic. Life was great; I had finally found the answer—alcohol! Yes, I overdid it the night before, but I was new to this game. I only had to learn how to drink right and I was set.

I attempted to “drink right” for the next eight years. My progression was phenomenal; there is absolutely

no period in my drinking career that can be described as social drinking. I blacked out almost every time I put alcohol in my system, but I decided I could live with that; it was a small price to pay for the power and confidence alcohol gave me. After drinking for less than six months, I was almost a daily drinker.

I wound up on academic probation (I had always been on the honor roll in high school) my first semester sophomore year, and my response to that was to change my major. My life on campus revolved around parties, drinking, and men. I surrounded myself with people who drank as I did. Even though several people had already expressed their concern over my drinking, I rationalized that I was only doing what every other red-blooded college student did.

Somehow I managed to graduate, but while most of my friends were securing good jobs and abruptly stopping their boozing, I seemed to be left behind on campus. I had resolved that I, too, would now settle down and drink properly, but to my frustration I found I could not do so.

I took a pitiful sales job that paid next to nothing, so I continued to live with my parents. I kept this job for two years for one reason—it allowed me to drink with minimal interference. My pattern was to pick up a fifth of whiskey somewhere during my round of appointments and keep it under the car seat with me. When I got home in the evening, I drank at least half the fifth in front of the television set and watched reruns until I passed out. And I did this every night, by myself, for almost two years. I had become a daily, isolated drinker and was starting to get a little nervous.

My behavior at this point was textbook: I was stash-

ing bottles all over the house; sneaking drinks from my parents' small supply when I ran out; rationing the number of bottles I threw away at the same time so the trash bags wouldn't clink; refilling my parents' vodka and gin bottles with water; and so on. I had also resorted to videotaping my favorite reruns while I was watching them because I always blacked out before the ending.

About this time the TV movie *My Name Is Bill W.*, about the co-founder of A.A., was aired. Intrigued, I sat down with my whiskey and soda bottles to watch it. When Bill whipped out a flask in the car to bolster himself before a visit with his father-in-law, I heaved a sigh of relief. "Oh, I'm not that bad," I thought to myself. I then proceeded to get drunk and to black out; I don't remember any more of the movie.

My parents were at a total loss. I was going nowhere and I was irritable and hostile. Since they had no experience with alcoholism, they had no idea what was wrong with me or what to do about it, and neither did I. I knew I drank too much and that my life was miserable, but I never made the connection between those two conditions. My parents made the only suggestion that then made sense to them—they offered to help me financially if I wanted to go back to school. Seeing no other way out, I jumped at the opportunity.

I spent two years in graduate school 750 miles from home. I can honestly say I know why they call it a geographical cure. For about nine months, I was able to cut my drinking down sharply. I still drank almost every day, but not to the point of my usual stupors,

and I didn't black out very often. I was able to concentrate on my schoolwork that first year and make lots of friends. However, geographical cures are only temporary; mine lasted a little less than a year. After about ten months or so, I slowly started to slide back into my old patterns. Steadily, I worked my way back to the same quantities of whiskey I drank at home, and the blackouts returned. My grades started to drop, and my friends started to wonder. I even began watching reruns again—I had brought my homemade videotapes with me to school.

Fortunately, I managed to graduate, but I had gone nowhere. After graduation, I returned to my parents' house, as I had been unsuccessful in securing a job. I was back. I was back in my old bedroom, back to the same routine of drinking every evening until I passed out, and it was getting worse. I was starting earlier and earlier and consuming more and more liquor. I had no job, no friends; I saw no one but my parents.

I was beyond frustration at this point. Hadn't I done everything that was expected of me? Hadn't I graduated from college and gone on to earn a master's degree? I had never gone to jail, crashed any cars, or got into trouble like a real alcoholic would. When I was working, I never missed a day because of drinking. I never ran myself into debt, nor had I abused a spouse or children. Sure I drank a lot, but I didn't have a problem; how could I when I hadn't done any of the things that prove you're an alcoholic? So what was the problem? All I really wanted was a decent job so I could be independent and productive. I could not understand why life just wouldn't cut me a break.

I did odd projects around the house for my parents

to earn my keep until I took a job for a local entrepreneur. This job did not offer much opportunity for advancement, nor did it pay very well, but it got me out of the house, and it was challenging in many ways. At this point I was in a vicious battle to control my drinking. I knew that if I took only one drink, I'd lose complete control and drink until I passed out. Nevertheless, I tried day after day to beat this obsession with alcohol.

I picked up a half gallon of whiskey one day after work and drank over one-third of it in less than four hours that same night. I was so sick the next day, but I made it to work. When I got home from work, I sat on my parents' sofa and knew, *I knew*, I would start working on the half gallon again, despite the fact that I was still very ill from the night before. I also knew that I did not want to drink. Sitting on that sofa, I realized that the old "I could stop if I wanted to, I just don't want to" didn't apply here, because I did not want to drink. I watched myself get up off the sofa and pour myself a drink. When I sat back down on the sofa, I started to cry. My denial had cracked; I believe I hit bottom that night, but I didn't know it then; I just thought I was insane. I proceeded to finish the half gallon.

Six months later my boss flew me to California for a trade show. I hated working the shows, but I loved to travel, so I went. I was extremely nervous about this trip because my boss liked to party and we were flying in a guy our age from Hawaii to work the show with us. At this point I had managed to hold together thirty-one days without a drink, and I was terrified that I would give in to the temptation of being on an

all-expenses-paid trip in a fun city with two party animals. It had been very difficult for me to stay dry for thirty-one days; the obsession spoke to me every day.

I arrived late on a Friday and managed not to drink that night. The next morning at the show, I was offered the gift that changed my life. Our Hawaiian sales rep seemed frustrated; I thought he was disappointed that he hadn't managed to write an order for a couple he had just finished working with. I went over to console him. He said, no, his mood had nothing to do with the couple; instead, he explained that just this week he had lost his girlfriend, dropped out of school, lost his apartment, and also lost his full-time job. He added, "I'm an alcoholic. I've been sober for a year and a half, except I just drank again this past week. I'm a mess about it."

At that very instant, I heard one word in my head. The word was "now." I knew it meant, "Say something *now!*"

To my amazement I spoke the words, "Mike, I think I'm one too." Mike's mood instantly changed. I recognize now it was hope. We started talking. Among other things, I told him I hadn't had a drink for about a month but didn't go to A.A. When he asked why I had avoided A.A., I told him it was because I didn't think I had hit bottom. Somehow he didn't laugh but said, "You hit bottom when you stop digging." He took me to my first three A.A. meetings.

It was the second meeting that clinched my resolve to pursue sobriety. There were about thirty-five people in attendance, but the space was small, so the meeting seemed very crowded. Being from out of town, I stood up and introduced myself when asked to

by the chairperson. Later on in the meeting, the chairperson called on me to share. I got up and somehow walked over to the microphone and podium—I've never been so nervous in my life. But the words came out naturally as I described the events that led up to the meeting that night.

As I spoke, I looked around the room. More importantly, I looked at the faces of the people in the room and I saw it. I saw the understanding, the empathy, the love. Today I believe I saw my Higher Power for the first time in those faces. While still up at the podium, it hit me—this is what I had been looking for all my life. This was the answer, right here in front of me. Indescribable relief came over me; I knew the fight was over.

Later on that night, still reeling in the ecstasy of relief and hope, I remembered the afternoon in the bathroom stall at college after my first class when I was so certain I had found the answer in alcohol. I could clearly see now that had been a lie. That is the description that fits alcohol best for me; it is a lie, an evil, insidious lie. And I chased that lie for a long time—even when it was obvious that I was going nowhere and killing myself while doing it. At that A.A. meeting, when I looked out over all those faces, I finally saw the truth.

When I returned home, I threw myself into A.A. I did ninety meetings in ninety days, got a sponsor, and joined a home group. I did everything that was suggested. I made coffee, took commitments, and got involved with service. I rode the roller coaster of early sobriety; every second was worth it to get where I am today.

It is very important to my recovery to study and

work the Steps. To this day, I still make at least two Step meetings a week. I have a sponsor who guides me through the Steps gently but firmly, with a sure-handedness I hope I am able to emulate with the two women I now sponsor. The Promises have begun to materialize for me, and there's still so much work to do.

It is almost impossible to adequately describe how much the program has given me, even in just these six short years. I have been financially supporting myself in my own apartment for five years and plan to buy a house next year. I've secured a good job with a promising future—my income has increased more than 150 percent since I got sober.

But just as material losses are not necessary to indicate alcoholism, material gains are not the true indications of sobriety. The real rewards aren't material in nature. I have friends now because I know how to be a friend and I know how to nurture and encourage valuable friendships. Instead of the prolonged one-night stands I used to call my boyfriends, there is a special man in my life I've been involved with for almost five years. And, most importantly, I know who I am. I know my goals, dreams, values, and boundaries, and I know how to protect, nurture, and validate them. Those are the true rewards of sobriety, and they're what I was looking for all along. I am so grateful that my Higher Power stepped in to show me the way to the truth. I pray every day that I never turn my back on it. I came to A.A. in order to stop drinking; what I received in return was my life.

CROSSING THE RIVER OF DENIAL

She finally realized that when she enjoyed her drinking, she couldn't control it, and when she controlled it, she couldn't enjoy it.

DENIAL IS THE MOST cunning, baffling, and powerful part of my disease, the disease of alcoholism. When I look back now, it's hard to imagine I didn't see a problem with my drinking. But instead of seeing the truth when all of the "yets" (as in, that hasn't happened to me—yet) started happening, I just kept lowering my standards.

Dad was an alcoholic, and my mother drank throughout her pregnancy, but I don't blame my parents for my alcoholism. Kids with a lot worse upbringings than mine did not turn out alcoholic, while some that had it a lot better did. In fact I stopped wondering, "Why me?" a long time ago. It's like a man standing on a bridge in the middle of a river with his pants on fire wondering why his pants are on fire. It doesn't matter. Just jump in! And that is exactly what I did with A.A. once I finally crossed the river of denial!

I grew up feeling as if I was the only thing keeping my family together. This, compounded by the fear of not being good enough, was a lot of pressure for a little girl. Everything changed with my first drink at the age of sixteen. All the fear, shyness, and disease evaporated with that first burning swallow of bourbon

straight from the bottle during a liquor cabinet raid at a slumber party. I got drunk, blacked out, threw up, had dry heaves, was sick to death the next day, and I knew I would do it again. For the first time, I felt part of a group without having to be perfect to get approval.

I went through college on scholarships, work study programs, and student loans. Classes and work kept me too busy to do much drinking, plus I was engaged to a boy who was not alcoholic. However, I broke off our relationship during my senior year, after discovering drugs, sex, and rock n' roll—companions to my best friend, alcohol. I proceeded to explore all that the late sixties and early seventies offered. After backpacking around Europe, I decided to settle in a large city.

Well, I made it all right, to full-blown alcoholism. A big city is a great place to be an alcoholic. Nobody notices. Three-martini lunches, drinks after work, and a nightcap at the corner bar was just a normal day. And didn't everyone have blackouts? I used to joke about how great blackouts were because you saved so much time in transit. One minute you're here, the next minute you're there! In retrospect, making jokes, just laughing it off helped solidify my unfaltering denial. Another trick was selecting companions who drank just a little bit more than I did. Then I could always point to their problem.

One such companion led to my first arrest. If the driver of the car had only pulled over when the police lights flashed, we would have been fine. If, when I had practically talked our way out of it, the driver had kept his mouth shut, we would have been fine. But no, he started babbling about how he was in rehab. I got off

with a misdemeanor, and for years, I completely discounted that arrest because it was all his fault. I simply ignored that I had been drinking all day.

One morning while I was at work, a hospital called, telling me to get there quickly. My father was there, dying of alcoholism. He was sixty. I had seen him in hospitals before, but this time was different. With stomach sorely distended, swollen with fluids his nonfunctioning kidneys and liver could no longer process, he lingered for three weeks. Alcoholic death is very painful and slow. Seeing him die of alcoholism convinced me I could never become an alcoholic. I knew too much about the disease, had too much self-knowledge to ever fall prey. I shipped his body back home without attending the funeral. I could not even help my grandmother bury her only son, because by then I was inextricably involved in an affair mired in sex and alcohol.

Plummeting into the pitiful and incomprehensible demoralization that that relationship became, I had my first drunk driving arrest. It terrified me; I could have killed someone. Driving in a total blackout, I “came to” handing my driver’s license to the patrolman. I swore it would never happen again. Three months later it happened again. What I didn’t know then was that when I put alcohol in my body, I’m powerless over how much and with whom I drink—all good intentions drowned in denial.

I remembered joking about how most people spent their entire lives without ever seeing the inside of a jail, and here “a woman of my stature” had been arrested three times. But, I would think, I’ve never really done “hard time,” never actually spent the night in jail. Then I met Mr. Wrong, my husband-to-be, and

all that changed. I spent my wedding night in jail. Like every other time, however, it wasn't my fault. There we were, still in our wedding clothes. If he had just kept his mouth shut after the police arrived, we would have been fine. I had them convinced that he had attacked the valet because our wedding money was missing. Actually, he thought the valet had stolen the marijuana we were going to smoke. In reality, I was so drunk I had lost it.

During the interrogation of the valet in the restaurant parking lot, my husband became so violent the officer put him in the back of the patrol car. When he tried to kick out the rear windows, the policeman retaliated. I pleaded with the officer as a second policeman arrived, and both bride and groom were taken to jail. It was then that the "stolen" marijuana cigarettes were discovered, to my horror, in central booking as they catalogued my belongings. I was arrested for three felonies, including drunk and disorderly, and two misdemeanors, but it was all my husband's fault. I had practically nothing to do with it; he had a drinking problem.

I stayed in that abusive marriage for nearly seven years and continued to focus on *his* problem. Toward the end of the marriage, in my misguided attempts to set a good example for him (plus he was drinking too much of my vodka), I mandated no booze in the house. Still, why should I be denied a cocktail after returning home from a stressful day at the office just because he had a problem? So, I began hiding my vodka in the bedroom—and still did not see anything wrong with this behavior. *He* was my problem.

I accepted a transfer with a promotion (yes, my pro-

fessional life was still climbing) shortly after the divorce. Now I was sure my problems were over, except that I brought me with me. Once alone in a new place, my drinking really took off. I did not have to be a good example anymore. For the first time I realized that perhaps my drinking was getting a bit out of hand, but I knew you'd drink too if you had my stress: recent divorce, new home, new job, didn't know anyone—and an unacknowledged, progressive disease that was destroying me.

Finally, I made some friends who drank just as I did. Our drinking was disguised as fishing trips and chili cook-offs, but they were really excuses for week-long binges. After a day's drinking disguised as softball, I nicked an old woman's fender driving home. Of course, it was not my fault; she pulled out in front of me. That the accident occurred at dusk and I had been drinking since 10:00 a.m. had nothing to do with it. My alcoholism had taken me to such depths of denial and heights of arrogance that I waited for the police so they'd know it was her fault too. Well, it didn't take them long to figure it out. Once again, pulled from the car, hands cuffed behind my back, I was taken to jail. But it wasn't my fault. The old broad shouldn't have even been allowed on the road, I told myself. *She* was my problem.

The judge sentenced me to six months in Alcoholics Anonymous, and was I outraged! By now I had been arrested *five* times, but all I could see was a hard partier, not an alcoholic. Didn't you people know the difference? So I started going to those stupid meetings and identified myself as an alcoholic so you'd sign my court card, even though I couldn't possibly be an

alcoholic. I had a six-figure income, owned my own home. I had a car phone. I used ice cubes, for God's sake. Everyone knows an alcoholic, at least one that had to go to A.A., is a skid row bum in a dirty raincoat drinking from a brown paper bag. So each time you read that part in Chapter Five of the Big Book that says, "If you have decided you want what we have and are willing to go to any length to get it," my ears closed. You had the disease of alcoholism, and the last thing I wanted was to be an alcoholic.

Eventually, you talked about my feelings in the meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous until I could no longer close my ears. I heard women, beautiful, successful women in recovery, talk about the things they had done while drinking, and I would think, "I did that" or "I did worse than that!" Then I began to see the miracles that happen only in A.A. People who would nearly crawl in the doors, sick and broken, and who in a few weeks of meetings and not drinking one day at a time would get their health back, find a little job and friends who really cared, and then discover a God in their lives. But the most compelling part of A.A., the part that made me want to try this sober thing, was the laughter, the pure joy of the laughter that I heard only from sober alcoholics.

Still, the thought of getting sober terrified me. I hated the woman I had become, a compulsive, obsessive daily drinker, not dressing on weekends, always afraid of running out of alcohol. I'd start thinking about a drink by noon and would leave the office earlier and earlier. Or, promising myself that I wouldn't drink that night, I'd invariably find myself in front of the refrigerator with a drink in my hand, vowing,

Tomorrow. I won't drink tomorrow. I despised all of it, but at least it was familiar. I had no idea what sobriety felt like, and I could not imagine life without alcohol. I had reached that terrifying jumping-off point where I couldn't drink anymore but I just couldn't not drink. For almost twenty-three years I had done something nearly every day of my life to change reality to one degree or another, yet I had to try this sober thing.

To this day I am amazed at people who get sober before the holidays. I couldn't even attempt it until after the Super Bowl. One last blow-out party when I swore I wouldn't get drunk. When I put alcohol in my body, I'd lose the ability to choose how much I drank, and Super Bowl Sunday that year was no different. I ended up on someone's couch instead of my own bed and was sick to death all the next day at work. That week I had to go to a hockey game. It was a work event, so I tried to really watch my drinking, consuming only two large cups of beer which, for me, wasn't even enough to catch a buzz. And that was the beginning of my spiritual awakening. Sitting near the ice, frustrated, and pondering the fact that two tall beers didn't give me any relief, something in my head—and I know it wasn't me—said, "So why bother?" At that moment I knew what the Big Book meant about the great obsession of every abnormal drinker being to somehow, someday control *and* enjoy his drinking. On Super Bowl Sunday, when I enjoyed it, I couldn't control it, and at the hockey game when I controlled it, I couldn't enjoy it. There was no more denying that I was an alcoholic. What an epiphany!

I went to a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous the next night, knowing I wanted what you had. I sat in

that cold metal chair just as I had for the past five months and read Step One on the wall for the hundredth time. But this time I asked with all my heart for God to help me, and a strange thing happened. A physical sensation came over me, like a wave of pure energy, and I felt the presence of God in that dingy little room. I went home that night and for the first time in years I did not have to open the cupboard with the half-gallon jug of vodka in it—not that night or any night since. God had restored me to sanity, and I took Step Two the very moment I surrendered and accepted my powerlessness over alcohol and the unmanageability of my life.

I attended at least one meeting every day, emptied ashtrays, washed coffeepots, and on the day I took a thirty-day chip, a friend took me to an A.A. get-together. I was in absolute awe of the power of 2,000-plus sober alcoholics holding hands, saying the final prayer together, and I wanted to stay sober more than I wanted life itself. Returning home, I begged God on my knees to help me stay sober one more day. I told God to take the house, take the job, take everything if that's what was needed for me to stay sober. That day I learned two things: the real meaning of Step Three and to always be careful what I prayed for.

After five months of sobriety, I lost that six-figure job with the firm. The wreckage of my past had caught up with me, and I was out of work for a year. That job would have been lost whether I was drunk or sober, but thank goodness I was sober or I probably would have killed myself. When I was drinking, the prestige of the job was my self-worth, the only thing that made me worth loving. Now I was starting to love myself be-

cause A.A.'s had unconditionally loved me until I could. At five months I realized that the world might never build a shrine to the fact that I was sober. I understood that it was not the world's job to understand my disease; rather it was my job to work my program and not drink, no matter what.

At nine months of sobriety I lost the big house that I bought just to prove to you I couldn't possibly be an alcoholic. In between five and nine months, my house was robbed, I had a biopsy on my cervix, and I had my heart broken. And the miracle of all miracles was that I didn't have to drink over any of it. This from a woman who had had to drink over all of it. I was so unique and so arrogant when I got here, I think God knew that He had to show me early on that there was *nothing* a drink would make better. He showed me that His love and the power of the Steps and the Fellowship could keep me from picking up a drink one day at a time, sometimes one hour at a time, no matter what. A drink would not bring back the job, the house, or the man, so why bother?

I found everything I had ever looked for in Alcoholics Anonymous. I used to thank God for putting A.A. in my life; now I thank A.A. for putting God in my life. I found my tribe, the social architecture that fulfills my every need for camaraderie and conviviality. I learned how to live. When I asked how I could find self-esteem, you told me, "by doing worthwhile acts!" You explained the Big Book had no chapters titled "Into Thinking" or "Into Feeling"—only "Into Action." I found plenty of opportunity for action in A.A. I could be just as busy and helpful to others as I wanted to be as a sober woman in Alcoholics

Anonymous. I was never a “joiner,” but I got deeply involved in A.A. service because you told me if I did, I would never have to drink again. You said as long as I put A.A. first in my life, everything that I put second would be first class. This has proved to be true over and over again. So I continued to put A.A. and God first, and everything I ever lost was returned many times over. The career that I lost has been restored with even greater success. The house that I lost has been replaced by a townhouse that is just the right size for me. So, here I am, sober. Successful. Serene. Just a few of the gifts of the program for surrendering, suiting up, and showing up for life every day. Good days and bad days, reality is a wild ride, and I wouldn't miss it for the world. I don't question how this program works. I trust in my God, stay involved in A.A. service, go to lots of meetings, work with others, and practice the principles of the Steps to the best of my willingness each day. I don't know which of these keeps me sober, and I'm not about to try to find out. It's worked for quite a few days now, so I think I'll try it again tomorrow.

(8)

BECAUSE I'M AN ALCOHOLIC

This drinker finally found the answer to her nagging question, "Why?"

ISUPPOSE I always wondered who I was. As a child, isolated in the country, I made up stories, inventing myself along with imaginary companions to play with. Later, when we moved to a large city and I was surrounded by kids, I felt separate, like an outcast. And although I learned to go along with the cultural norm as I grew up, still, underneath, I felt different.

Alcohol helped. At least I thought it helped until I saw the oppressive thirty-year shadow it cast on my life. I discovered it in college, and although at first I didn't drink often (didn't have the opportunity), whenever I started, I drank as long as there was any alcohol around. It was a reflex. I don't remember liking the taste, but I liked that it seemed to bring me to life and get me through a date or a party able to talk. It moved me outside of that hole I felt in myself and lowered the wall I created between me and any person or situation that made me uncomfortable.

For ten years, through college and graduate school interspersed with jobs, I drank periodically, so it was easy enough to think that I was a social drinker. Looking back, I see that alcohol helped me construct an image of myself as a sophisticated metropolitan

woman, diminishing my feelings of being a backward country girl. I studied vintage wines and selected them with care to accompany the gourmet dishes I learned to make. I read about the correct drinks for various occasions. I learned to put just the tiniest whiff of dry vermouth into my martinis. Meanwhile, my tolerance for alcohol grew, so that while at first I got sick or passed out, as time went on I could hold larger quantities without any visible effects. Until the next morning's hangover.

Behind the façade, my real life seemed just out of reach. I wanted to consider myself grown up, but inside I felt small and helpless, hardly there at all. I would look at my friends—delightful, interesting, good people—and try to define myself through them. If they saw something in me that made them want to be with me, I must have something to offer. But their love for me was not a substitute for loving myself; it didn't fill the emptiness.

So I continued spinning fantasies, and now alcohol fueled my dreams. I would make great discoveries, win the Nobel Prize in medicine and in literature as well. Always the dream was somewhere else, further off, and I took a series of geographical cures in search of myself. I was offered a job in Paris and jumped at the chance. I packed my trunk, left my apartment to my boyfriend, and sailed off, thinking that at last I would find my real home, my real self.

I began to drink daily and rationalized that in France, of course, you have to have wine with meals. And after the dinner, after the wine, then there were liqueurs. My journals and letters bear witness in the deterioration of my handwriting as the evening wore

on, drinking as I wrote. It was there too that I first became dependent on alcohol. After work, on the way to the Alliance Française for classes, I'd stop at a bistro for a glass of cognac to give me courage to get me there—my need greater than the embarrassment of being a woman drinking alone in the 1950s. One vacation, I went to visit friends in Scotland, traveling slowly through the English and Welsh countryside. The bottles of cognac and Benedictine I'd brought as gifts for them I drank in little hotel rooms miles before I got there. As long as it lasted, I could stay out of the pubs.

Europe hadn't proved to be the change that would repair my life, and I started west again. It was in Cambridge that I pronounced my first resolutions about cutting down—New Year's resolutions I recycled for a dozen years while my drinking and my life kept getting worse. Alcohol had enslaved me. I was in bondage to it, although I kept assuring myself that drinking was a pleasure and a choice.

Blackouts began, vacant places in my life when hours would disappear, lost to memory. The first time was after I'd given a dinner party. The next morning I woke up without remembering that I'd told my guests good night and gone to bed myself. I searched the apartment for clues. The table was cluttered with dessert dishes and coffee cups. Bottles were empty, and the glasses too. (It was my custom to polish off any drinks that were left.) My last memory was sometime during dinner. Did we ever finish? But there were the plates. I was terrified that I'd done something horrendous, until my friends called to tell me they'd enjoyed the evening.

One time we sailed from Guadelupe to a little island for a picnic, swam to shore from the ship. After lunch, and quantities of wine, I was with a French ski instructor talking to a troop of small boys on their way home from school, trying to explain to those tropical islanders what snow is like. I remember them giggling. The next thing I knew, I was back at the camp, walking to the dining room—apparently after swimming back to the ship, sailing to the port, then taking a rickety bus across the island. I had no memory of what I had done during those hours between.

The blackouts increased, and my terror increased with them. Telephone bills would inform me that I'd made late-night calls to distant places. I could tell from the numbers whom I'd called, but what had I said? Some mornings I woke up with a stranger who had brought me home from a party the night before. These things weighed heavily on me, but I couldn't stop the drinking that had caused them. That too gnawed away any remnants of self-respect I might have had. I was incapable of controlling my drinking and my life.

I needed a drink to go anyplace—to the theater, a party, a date, and, later, to work. I would leave my apartment, lock the door, and start down the stairs, and then turn around and go back in for another drink to get me where I planned to go. I needed a drink to do anything—to write, to cook, to clean the house, to paint the walls, to take a bath.

When I passed out and fell into bed early, I woke up at four or five and had Irish coffee to start the day. I discovered that beer was better than orange juice to ease my hangover. Afraid my colleagues or students

would smell my breath at work, I was careful to keep my distance. When I got up late and rushed off to the lab, fortified only with coffee, my hands shook so badly it was impossible to weigh out the milligrams of compounds needed for an experiment. When I went out to lunch with another alcoholic, we might never get back to work that day.

Somehow I still managed to keep my job and most of my friends, social drinkers who were urging me to cut down on the alcohol. That counsel only made me mad, but I was concerned myself. I asked the therapist I was seeing, sometimes with beer in hand, would I have to stop? His answer was that we had to find out why I drank. I'd already tried but was never able to find out why until I learned the answer in A.A.—because I'm an alcoholic.

With my attempts to cut down, I stopped keeping alcohol around the house, drank up whatever was there, over and over deciding not to get more. Then on the way home after work or an evening out, I'd have to see if I could scrape together enough money for a bottle. There were liquor stores just about every block, and I rotated them so the salesmen wouldn't know how much I drank. On Sundays when the liquor stores were closed, I had to make do with beer or hard cider from the grocery.

The horrors grew. Inner horrors. On the surface it looked as though I was more or less keeping it together, but day by day I was dying inside, filled with fears I couldn't name but which shook me to the core. My worst fear was that I was an alcoholic. I wasn't sure what that was, except that I might end up down on the Bowery in New York, where I had seen drunks

curled up on the sidewalk. I made another New Year's resolution—to stop drinking entirely until I could handle it and then, I told myself, I could go back to wine and beer.

Hands trembling, body shaky, head splitting, I survived that first day until I was fairly safe in bed in an alcohol-free apartment. Somehow I made it through a couple more days, miserable in withdrawal. In spite of managing to stay dry that time, I have no doubt that resolution would have crumbled like the others and I would have been drinking again if I hadn't found A.A.

I had left the therapist who hadn't been able to tell me why I drank, and on New Year's Eve, I went to a party at the home of my new therapist. A few days later in the group, the therapist said, "You're drinking even more than I realized. You're an alcoholic. I think you should stop drinking, see a doctor, and go to A.A."

My resolution had endured three days and I protested, "I'm not an alcoholic!" That was my very last denial.

"Say it the other way," he suggested. "I am an alcoholic." It came out in a whisper, but it sounded right. I've said it thousands of times since then, and with gratitude. What I was most afraid to admit that evening was what would set me free.

The therapist told me then and there to call someone who had been in our therapy group, a doctor on the staff of a hospital alcoholism service. "I'll call her tomorrow," I said.

"Call her now." He handed me the telephone.

When I asked her if I was an alcoholic, she said that from what she'd seen of my drinking I might be and

suggested that I talk with her boss. Terrified, I made an appointment and kept it. She told me the symptoms of alcoholism, and I had them all. She gave me a list of A.A. meetings and recommended one.

I went to that meeting—a small women's group. I was scared and in withdrawal. Someone greeted me and I muttered my name aloud. Someone brought me a cup of coffee. People gave me their phone numbers and urged me to call, to pick up the telephone instead of a drink. They were warm and friendly. They said keep coming back.

And I did. For weeks I sat in the back of the rooms, silent when others shared their experience, strength, and hope. I listened to their stories and found so many areas where we overlapped—not all of the deeds, but the feelings of remorse and hopelessness. I learned that alcoholism isn't a sin, it's a disease. That lifted the guilt I had felt. I learned that I didn't have to stop drinking forever, but just not pick up that first drink one day, one hour at a time. I could manage that. There was laughter in those rooms and sometimes tears, but always love, and when I was able to let it in, that love helped me heal.

I read everything I could about this disease I have. My readings recounted the course I had lived and predicted the way I would die if I continued drinking. I had access to a good medical library, but after a while, I realized the genetics and chemistry of the disease were of no use to me as an alcoholic. All that I needed to know about it, what would help me get sober, help me recover, I could learn in A.A.

I was blessed to live in a city where there were meetings at all hours of the day and night. There I

would be safe. And there, within a few blocks of my apartment, at last I would find the self I had traveled thousands of miles in search of. The slogans on the walls, which at first made me shudder, began to impress me as truths I could live by: "One Day at a Time." "Easy Does It." "Keep It Simple." "Live and Let Live." "Let Go and Let God." "The Serenity Prayer."

Commitment and service were part of recovery. I was told that to keep it we have to give it away. At first I made the coffee and later volunteered at the intergroup office answering telephones on the evening shift. I went on Twelfth Step calls, spoke at meetings, served as group officer. Ever so gradually I began to open. Just a crack at first, with my hand on the door ready to slam it shut in a moment of fear. But my fears subsided too. I found that I could be there, open to all kinds of people from this solid base that we shared. Then I began to go back out into the world, carrying that strength with me.

I found that now I could do many things without a drink—write, answer the telephone, eat out, go to parties, make love, get through the day and the evenings. Sleep at night and get up the next morning ready to begin another day. I was amazed and proud to have gone a week without a drink, then a month. Then I lived an entire year sober, through my birthday, Christmas, problems, successes, the mixture that makes up life.

I healed physically, felt good, my senses returned. I began to hear the delicate sound of autumn leaves rattling in the wind, to feel the touch of snowflakes on my face, to see the first new leaves of spring.

Then I began to heal emotionally, to experience

feelings that had long been so deeply buried they had atrophied. For a time I floated on that pink cloud. Then I cried for a year, raged for another year. My feelings returned and then began to settle down to reasonable size.

Above all, I healed spiritually. The steps took me on that path. I had admitted I was powerless over alcohol, that my life had become unmanageable. That was what got me through the door. Then I came to believe that a Power greater than myself could restore me to sanity. And eventually, I made a decision to turn my will and my life over to the care of God as I understood God. Years before, in my search, I had explored numerous religions and dropped them because they preached a patriarchal God, which I felt never included me. Alcoholics Anonymous, I was told, is a spiritual program, not a religious one. Through my years of darkness, some spark of spirit remained in me, helped me survive until I found my way into A.A. Then, nurtured by the program, that inner spirit grew, deepened, until it filled the emptiness I had so long felt inside. Step by step I moved to a spiritual awakening. Step by step I cleared up the past and got on with the present.

A.A. is my home now, and it is everywhere. I go to meetings when I travel here or in foreign countries, and the people are family I can know because of what we share. As I write this, in my twenty-eighth year of sobriety, I am amazed to look back and remember the woman—or child—I was then, to see how far I've come out of that abyss. Alcoholics Anonymous has enabled me to move from fantasies about what I might do with my life into living it, one day at a time. In my

first move that was not a geographic, I left the city and moved to the country. I left research and became a gardener. I discovered that I am a lesbian and that I love women. I'm fulfilling a long-time dream of writing fiction that's being published. But these are things I do, aspects of the life I'm living in sobriety. The most precious discovery is who I really *am*—like all of us, a being far beyond any of the ego-selves, any of the fantasies I'd made up.

That sense of being different, which had long plagued me, disappeared when I saw the threads that run through all of us. Sharing our stories, our feelings, it is the areas where we are the same that impress me. The differences are but delightful flourishes on the surface, like different-colored costumes, and I enjoy them. But the basic ways we are human, the basic ways we simply are, stand out to me now. I came to see that we all are really one, and I no longer feel alone.

IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN WORSE

Alcohol was a looming cloud in this banker's bright sky. With rare foresight he realized it could become a tornado.

HOW CAN a person with a fine family, an attractive home, an excellent position, and high standing in an important city become an alcoholic?

As I later found out through Alcoholics Anonymous, alcohol is no respecter of economic status, social and business standing, or intelligence.

I was raised like the majority of American boys, coming from a family of modest circumstances, attending public schools, having the social life of a small midwestern town, with part-time work and some athletics. The ambition to succeed was instilled in me by my Scandinavian parents who came to this country where opportunities were so great. "Keep busy; always have something constructive to do." I did work of all kinds after school and during vacations, trying to find that which would appeal most as a goal for a life work. Then there was wartime service to interrupt my plans, and an education to be picked up after the war. After that came marriage, getting started in business, and a family. The story is not very different from that of thousands of other young men in my generation. It shows nothing or no one to blame for alcoholism.

The drive to get ahead, to succeed, kept me too busy for many years to have any great experience with social life. I would have begrudged the time or money for alcohol. In fact I was afraid to try it for fear that I would wind up like many examples I had seen of excessive drinking in the army. I was intolerant of people who drank, particularly those who drank to an extent that interfered with their on-the-job performance.

In time I became an officer and director of one of the largest commercial banks in the country. I achieved recognized and national standing in my profession, as well as becoming a director in many important institutions having to do with the civic life of a large city. I had a family to be proud of, actively sharing in the responsibilities of good citizenship.

My drinking did not start until after I was thirty-five and a fairly successful career had been established. But success brought increased social activities, and I realized that many of my friends enjoyed a social drink with no apparent harm to themselves or others. I disliked being different so, ultimately, I began to join them occasionally.

At first it was just that—an occasional drink. Then I looked forward to the weekend of golf and the nineteenth hole. The cocktail hour became a daily routine. Gradually, the quantity increased and the occasions for a drink came more frequently: a hard day, worries and pressure, bad news, good news—there were more and more reasons for a drink. Why did I want increasingly greater quantities of alcohol? It was frightening that drink was being substituted for more and more of

the things I really enjoyed doing. Golf, hunting, and fishing were now merely excuses to drink excessively.

I made promises to myself, my family, and friends—and broke them. Short dry spells ended in heavy drinking. I tried to hide my drinking by going places where I was unlikely to see anyone I knew. Hangovers and remorse were always with me.

The next steps were bottle hiding and excuses for trips in order to drink without restraint. Cunning, baffling, powerful—the gradual creeping up of the frequency and quantity of alcohol and what it does to a person is apparent to everyone but the person involved.

When it became noticeable to the point of comment, I devised ways of sneaking drinks on the side. “Rehearsals” then became a part of the pattern, stopping at bars on the way to or from the place where drinks were to be served. Never having enough, always craving more, the obsession for alcohol gradually began to dominate all my activities, particularly while traveling. Drink planning became more important than any other plans.

I tried the wagon on numerous occasions, but I always felt unhappy and abused. I tried psychiatry, but of course I gave the psychiatrist no cooperation.

I was living in constant fear that I would get caught while driving a car, so I used taxis part of the time. Then I began to have blackouts, and that was a constant worry. To wake up at home, not knowing how I got there, and to realize I had driven my car, became torture. Not knowing where I had been or how I got home was making me desperate.

It now became necessary to have noon drinks—at

first just two, then gradually more. My hours of work were flexible, so that returning to the office was not always important. Then I became careless and returned sometimes when I shouldn't have. This worried me. The last two years of my drinking, my entire personality changed to a cynical, intolerant, and arrogant person completely different from my normal self. It was at this stage of my life that resentments came in. Resenting anyone and everyone who might interfere with my personal plans and ways of doing things—especially for any interference with my drinking—I was full of self-pity.

I will never know all the people I hurt, all the friends I abused, the humiliation of my family, the worry of my business associates, or how far reaching it was. I continue to be surprised by the people I meet who say, "You haven't had a drink for a long time, have you?" The surprise to me is the fact that I didn't know that they knew my drinking had gotten out of control. That is where we are really fooled. We think we can drink to excess without anyone's knowing it. Everyone knows it. The only one we are fooling is ourselves. We rationalize and excuse our conduct beyond all reason.

My wife and I had always encouraged our children to bring their friends home at any time, but after a few experiences with a drunken father, they eliminated home as a place to entertain friends. At the time this didn't mean much to me. I was too busy devising excuses to be out with drinking pals.

It seemed to me my wife was becoming more intolerant and narrow-minded all the time. Whenever we went out, she appeared to go out of her way to keep

me from having more than one drink. What alcoholic can be satisfied with one drink? After every cocktail party or dinner party she would say she couldn't understand how I could get in such a drunken stupor on one drink. She of course didn't realize how cunning an alcoholic can be and the lengths to which he will go in finding ways to satisfy the compulsion for more and more drinks after having had the first one. Neither did I.

Finally our invitations became fewer and fewer as friends had more experience with my drinking pattern.

Two years before I joined A.A., my wife took a long trip during which she wrote me she just couldn't return unless I did something about my drinking. It was a shock of course, but I promised to stop and she returned. A year later, while we were on a vacation trip, she packed up to go home because of my excessive drinking, and I talked her out of it with the promise I would go on the wagon for at least a year. I promised, but within two months, I began again.

The following spring she left me one day without giving me any idea of where she had gone, hoping this would bring me to my senses. In a few days an attorney called on me and explained that something would have to be done, as she couldn't face returning to me as I was. Again I promised to do something about it. Broken promises, humiliation, hopelessness, worry, anxiety—but still not enough.

There comes a time when you don't want to live and are afraid to die. Some crisis brings you to a point of deciding to do something about your drinking problem—to try anything. Help you once continually

rejected, suggestions once turned aside are finally accepted in desperation.

The final decision came when my daughter, following a drunk of mine that ruined my wife's birthday, said, "It's Alcoholics Anonymous—or else!" Of course, this suggestion had been made before on a number of occasions, but like all alcoholics I wanted to handle my problem my own way, which really meant I didn't want anything to interfere with my drinking. I was trying to find an easier, softer way. By now it had become difficult to visualize a life without alcohol.

However, my low had been reached. I realized I had been going down and down. I was unhappy myself, and I had brought unhappiness to all who cared for me. Physically I couldn't take it any more. Cold sweats, jumpy nerves, and lack of sleep were becoming intolerable. Mentally, the fears and tensions, the complete change in attitude and outlook bewildered me. This was no way to live. The time for decision had arrived, and it was a relief to say yes when my family said they would call Alcoholics Anonymous for me—a relief, even though I dreaded it, feeling that this was the end of everything.

Early the next morning a man whose name I knew well, a lawyer, called on me. Within thirty minutes I knew A.A. was the answer for me. We visited most of that day and attended a meeting that night. I don't know what I expected, but I most certainly didn't visualize a group of people talking about their drinking problems, making light of their personal tragedies, and at the same time enjoying themselves.

However, after I heard a few stories of jails, sanitariums, broken homes, and skid row, I wondered if I

really was an alcoholic. After all, I hadn't started to drink early in life, so I had some stability and maturity to guide me for a while. My responsibilities had been a restraining influence. I had had no brushes with the law, though I should have had many. I had not yet lost my job or family, even though both were on the verge of going. My financial standing had not been impaired.

Could I be an alcoholic without some of the hair-raising experiences I had heard of in meetings? The answer came to me very simply in the first step of the Twelve Steps of A.A. "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable." This didn't say we had to be in jail, ten, fifty, or one hundred times. It didn't say I had to lose one, five, or ten jobs. It didn't say I had to lose my family. It didn't say I had to finally live on skid row and drink bay rum, canned heat, or lemon extract. It did say I admitted I was powerless over alcohol—that my life had become unmanageable.

Most certainly I was powerless over alcohol, and for me, my life had become unmanageable. It wasn't how far I had gone, but where I was headed. It was important to me to see what alcohol had done to me and would continue to do if I didn't have help.

At first it was a shock to realize I was an alcoholic, but the realization that there was hope made it easier. The baffling problem of getting drunk when I had every intention of staying sober was simplified. It was a great relief to know I didn't *have* to drink any more.

I was told that I must want sobriety for my own sake, and I am convinced this is true. There may be many reasons that bring one to A.A. for the first time,

but the lasting one must be to want sobriety and the A.A. way of living for oneself.

From the start I liked everything about the A.A. program. I liked the description of the alcoholic as a person who has found that alcohol is interfering with his social or business life. The allergy idea I could understand because I am allergic to certain pollens. Some of my family are allergic to certain foods. What could be more reasonable than that some people, including myself, were allergic to alcohol?

The explanation that alcoholism was a disease of a two-fold nature, an allergy of the body and an obsession of the mind, cleared up a number of puzzling questions for me. The allergy we could do nothing about. Somehow our bodies had reached the point where we could no longer absorb alcohol in our systems. The *why* is not important; the *fact* is that one drink will set up a reaction in our system that requires more, that one drink is too much and a hundred drinks are not enough.

The obsession of the mind was a little harder to understand, and yet everyone has obsessions of various kinds. The alcoholic has them to an exaggerated degree. Over a period of time he has built up self-pity and resentments toward anyone or anything that interferes with his drinking. Dishonest thinking, prejudice, ego, antagonism toward anyone and everyone who dares to cross him, vanity, and a critical attitude are character defects that gradually creep in and become a part of his life. Living with fear and tension inevitably results in wanting to ease that tension, which alcohol seems to do temporarily. It took me some time to realize that the Twelve Steps of A.A.

were designed to help correct these defects of character and so help remove the obsession to drink. The Twelve Steps, which to me are a spiritual way of living, soon meant honest thinking, not wishful thinking, open-mindedness, a willingness to try, and a faith to accept. They meant patience, tolerance, and humility, and above all, the belief that a Power greater than myself could help. That Power I chose to call God.

A willingness to do whatever I was told to do simplified the program for me. Study the A.A. book—don't just read it. They told me to go to meetings, and I still do at every available opportunity, whether I am at home or in some other city. Attending meetings has never been a chore to me. Nor have I attended them with a feeling of just doing my duty. Meetings are both relaxing and refreshing to me after a hard day. They said, "Get active," so I helped whenever I could, and I still do.

A spiritual experience to me meant attending meetings and seeing a group of people all there for the purpose of helping each other; hearing the Twelve Steps and the Twelve Traditions read at a meeting; and hearing the Lord's Prayer, which in an A.A. meeting has such great meaning—"Thy will be done, not mine." A spiritual awakening soon came to mean trying each day to be a little more thoughtful, more considerate, a little more courteous to those with whom I came in contact.

To most of us, making amends will take the rest of our lives, but we can start immediately. Just being sober will be making amends to many we have hurt by our drunken actions. Making amends is sometimes doing what we are capable of doing but failed to do

because of alcohol—carrying out community responsibilities such as community funds, Red Cross, educational and religious activities in proportion to our abilities and energy.

I was desperately in earnest to follow through and understand what was expected of me as a member of A.A. and to take each step of the twelve as rapidly as possible. To me this meant telling my associates that I had joined Alcoholics Anonymous; that I didn't know what was expected of me by A.A., but that whatever it was, it was the most important thing in life for me; that sobriety meant more to me than anything in this world. It was so important that it must come ahead of anything.

There are many short phrases and expressions in A.A. that make sound sense. "First Things First." Solve our immediate problems before we try to solve all the others and get muddled in our thinking and doing. "Easy Does It." Relax a little. Try for inner contentment. No one individual can carry all the burdens of the world. Everyone has problems. Getting drunk won't solve them. "Twenty-four hours a day." Today is the day. Doing our best, living each day to the fullest is the art of living. Yesterday is gone, and we don't know whether we will be here tomorrow. If we do a good job of living today, and if tomorrow comes for us, then the chances are we will do a good job when it arrives—so why worry about it?

The A.A. way of life is the way we always should have tried to live. "Grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference." These thoughts become part of our daily lives. They

are not ideas of resignation but of the recognition of certain basic facts of living.

The fact that A.A. is a spiritual program didn't scare me or raise any prejudice in my mind. I couldn't afford the luxury of prejudice. I had tried my way and had failed.

When I joined A.A., I did so for the sole purpose of getting sober and staying sober. I didn't realize I would find so much more, but a new and different outlook on life started opening up almost immediately. Each day seems to be so much more productive and satisfying. I get so much more enjoyment out of living. I find an inner pleasure in simple things. Living just for today is a pleasant adventure.

Above all, I am grateful to A.A. for my sobriety, which means so much to my family, friends, and business associates, because God and A.A. were able to do for me something I was unable to do for myself.

(10)

TIGHTROPE

Trying to navigate separate worlds was a lonely charade that ended when this gay alcoholic finally landed in A.A.

DRINKING WAS ALWAYS a part of my family background. All the men in my family drank; my father—and later, my brothers—were heavy drinkers. As long as a person held down a job, didn't embarrass his family or friends too frequently, and kept out of trouble, he was entitled to get drunk on a regular basis. Drinking was an adult thing to do, a part of growing up. I don't believe it ever crossed my mind that I shouldn't drink.

I was raised in a conservative religion, and I commuted to religious schools some distance from home. Because I had a quick mind and was comfortable with academics, I became something of a teacher's pet. As a result, I was a serious, shy, somewhat bookish child and teenager who found it difficult to relate to my peers. So when I went away to college, I was an alcoholic waiting to happen. My relation to alcohol was a love affair from the very beginning. Although I wasn't too thrilled with the taste, I loved the effects. Alcohol helped me to hide my fears; the ability to converse was an almost miraculous gift to a shy and lonely individual.

It was at this time that I also began to struggle with

the question of my sexuality. For me, the idea of being homosexual—the word *gay* wasn't then in common use—was unthinkable. Drinking helped me to forget and evade. Also, it provided some cover; when you are drunk, people are not surprised at an inability or disinclination to make any serious moves toward a woman. This struggle continued throughout years of unsuccessful dating and pretending.

When I eventually decided to act on my desires, the guilt and the shame—as well as the drinking—increased. Now I had to hide not only my thoughts but also my conduct. I always tried to project the image of the conservative, masculine, deep-voiced loner with the mysterious, possibly tragic, but always heterosexual love affair in the past. I wound up living two separate and distinct lives—that of the gay man with friends and interests to match and that of the straight man with a totally separate set of friends and interests.

I had to walk this tightrope while trying to build a solid professional life as well. After college I had gone on to law school, where drinking on a daily basis became the norm. I justified myself with the thought that a few drinks helped me to relax and “focus” on my studies. Somehow, I managed to do well in law school and to land several prestigious legal positions afterward. I soon learned that I could not drink during the day; if I had even one drink at lunch, the rest of the afternoon would be lost. Instead, I postponed my drinking until immediately after work and would then make up for lost time.

Work in a law firm added a third side to my already divided life. Now I had to try to maintain social relations with clients, members, and associates of the firm,

in addition to my gay and straight friends from my private lives. Needless to say, as the drinking increased, things became ever more confused. Eventually, the pressures became too great. I had formed a serious relationship and decided that I could no longer carry on the deception. Instead, I would change careers and go into teaching.

For a while things seemed to be going well. But the slide toward active alcoholism was slowly accelerating. I had had my first blackout several years before. At that time I told myself that if it ever happened again, I would stop drinking. It happened again—and again and again—but I didn't stop. I was always able to come up with some explanation, excuse, or rationalization that justified my continued drinking. In time, personality changes began to occur with regularity when I drank. I had always had a sharp tongue; when drinking, I frequently became vitriolic. At other times I could be charming and affectionate, sometimes too much so. People never knew just what I would do or say.

After a few years I was a nightly blackout drinker. My lover drank heavily as well, and I began to compare my drinking with his. I argued to myself that I could not have a problem because his drinking was worse than mine at times. In fact, I suggested that he might try A.A. When he did try this Fellowship, I did all I could to undermine his efforts to get sober—his recovery would present an obvious, if unacknowledged, threat to my drinking. Eventually, the stress became too much and we broke up, but not before I had succeeded in undermining his recovery.

The slide continued. Most of my friends were un-

willing to put up with my conduct—the verbal and sometimes physical abuse, the midnight phone calls, the forgotten invitations, and the selfish disregard of anything but my own need to drink. Those few friends who did not withdraw were forced away by my resentments and increasing paranoia. I cut people out of my life, refusing to return phone calls and ignoring them when we met by chance. By the end of my drinking, only two people were willing to have anything to do with me on a social basis, and both were heavy drinkers who were not surprised by my actions.

The cases in which disaster struck when I drank outside my home increased. I made inappropriate passes at parties, or at people at work—both men and women. At other times I awakened battered or with my watch or wallet missing, or in the company of strangers whose names I did not remember and did not want to know. There were the inevitable injuries and accidents. I was ejected from bars because I would steal tips or change from bartenders or other customers to pay for the drinks I could no longer afford. At other times I would get into arguments and be forced to leave.

In consequence, I made the seemingly logical decision not to drink outside the house. Instead, most of my drinking was now solitary. When I left work, I would have a few stiff drinks at dinner and then go home. I would stop off at the kitchen to pick up a glass, some ice, and some mixer. I would go to my bedroom, where I kept half-gallon bottles of gin and vodka, and “read” while the ice melted, the mixer ran out, and sometimes the glass broke. Every night was blackout drinking. The really bad times were when I

would have to struggle outside to a liquor store or bar late at night, weaving and trying not to stagger, because I had miscalculated and run out of alcohol.

I found it increasingly difficult to do anything more than work and drink. I was afraid to use public transportation or even to walk on the streets. My stomach was constantly upset and my doctor had diagnosed a number of intestinal disorders. Even though I rarely drank away from home, my body was covered with bruises because I often fell down during blackouts. I never wore short-sleeved shirts, even in summer, because people would ask me about the bruises. One morning I awoke with a numb leg and found that I had somehow ruptured two spinal discs while in a blackout at home.

For the last four years I lived alone in a small house. The ceiling of one room had collapsed, and plaster dust was everywhere, coating the garbage and newspapers that littered the floor. Empty food cartons, beer cans, bottles, and dirty clothes lay where they were tossed. I had gotten a cat because the mice were out of control. But I was not conscientious about cleaning up after the cat. It is not surprising that I had few visitors and neighbors tended to avoid me.

The last few months were filled with fear and self-pity. I began to contemplate suicide with increasing regularity, yet I was afraid of dying. I remember thinking that this life would go on and on, never getting better and slowly fading away to nothing.

Then I began to hear the whispers. I became convinced that there were people living in my house. I couldn't see them, except for occasional glimpses out of the corner of my eyes, and so I concluded that they

were small and somehow living in the walls or under the stairs. I could hear them plotting to kill me. There were nights when I went to bed with a knife in hand to protect myself. Other nights I locked myself in the bathroom so they couldn't get me. One night I left a shot of vodka on the mantelpiece so they would go after that and leave me alone.

Then a miracle occurred. An evening came when I decided to have one drink outside and then go straight home. I had that drink and left for my house. The next thing I remember is waking up the next morning with a stranger I had picked up in a bar. Apparently I had gone on autopilot and, in a blackout resulting from just one drink, had gone on a tear. The look of disgust and pity on the face of that stranger was the jolt I needed. I suddenly realized that my life was totally insane, that my drinking was out of control, and that I was either an alcoholic or a candidate for committal to the local asylum. Not wanting to be locked up, I decided to try Alcoholics Anonymous.

I called my former lover, and he put me in contact with an individual who took me to my first meeting. Although I can barely recall anything about that meeting, I heard two things I have never forgotten. The first was "You don't have to drink again." This was a total revelation to me. For a long time I had believed that alcohol was one of the few positive things left in my life. I looked forward to my first drink every evening and thought that alcohol was holding my life together. I had to drink to survive, let alone to have any comfort. Yet here, people who had been in the same boat were telling me that I didn't have to drink.

I don't think I believed them that night, but it gave me enough hope to avoid drinking the rest of the day.

The second thing I heard was "You don't have to be alone anymore." This too was a revelation. For years I had rejected or been rejected by friends, lovers, family, and God. I was alone and afraid. My life had narrowed to work and the bottle, and work remained in the picture only because it was necessary to enable me to buy the bottle. The isolation and loneliness that alcoholism brought weighed heavily on me, and those words lifted an immense burden of fear. Again, I'm not sure that I completely believed, but I felt hope for the first time in years.

I did not fall in love with A.A. at first glance. The man who took me to my first meeting later became my first sponsor, and he had to put up with objections, arguments, questions, and doubts—everything a trained but very muddled legal mind could throw at him. He was gentle with me. He did not push his opinions on me. He had the sense to see that I was so afraid and so used to being alone that I could not face a "hard sell" approach. He listened to my questions, answered some, and suggested that I could best answer others myself. He refused to argue but was willing to explain and share his own experiences. I had asked him to be my sponsor before I knew what he did for a living and felt I could not back out of the relationship when I discovered he was a minister.

My alcoholism and my lifestyle had led me to reject the religion and the God of my upbringing; I had never replaced them. Instead, I was an agnostic, doubting the existence of God but afraid to say so in case I was wrong. My self-pity and sense of victimiza-

tion led me to doubt that a caring God could exist; if He did, why had He given me so many problems? I was very wary of the members who talked of their spiritual lives.

My sponsor was a living damper on my intolerance. But even more, he told me that it would be all right for me to doubt God, that A.A. was not a religious program and, to belong, I did not have to adhere to any set of beliefs.

He suggested that for me a good starting point would simply be recognition of the fact that I had failed in running the world—in short, acceptance of the fact that I was not God. He also suggested that I might try occasionally to act as if I believed. Somewhere I had heard that it is easier to act yourself into a new way of thinking than to think yourself into a new way of acting, and this made sense in the context of “acting as if.”

I also thought that the people in meetings sometimes seemed too standoffish and overly concerned with their friends and acquaintances rather than with me, the newcomer. Well on my way toward developing a resentment, I expressed this to my sponsor. He suggested that I might find people more communicative if I took the coffee-making commitment for the group I had joined. Although I thought I was far too special to make coffee, I did figure that as coffee maker I would have the chance to select decent cookies, and so I agreed. My sponsor was right again. People did start to speak with me—if only to complain about the coffee and cookies. But once a conversation starts, communication frequently continues.

I started to work on the steps, and even with my

difficulty over the Third Step and “the God concept,” I began to develop a sense of trust in the A.A. group and in the ideals of the Fellowship as a manifestation of a Power greater than myself. Although for many years I did not come to an acceptance of a God who intervened personally and directly in the lives of individuals, I was able to accept the idea of a force that moved in the rooms and animated A.A. members with a sense of unconditional love. That satisfied my spiritual needs for a long time.

A later sponsor took me through Steps Eight and Nine and provided me with support during some trying times. In my third year of sobriety, I was bedridden for over a month as a result of that earlier injury to my spinal discs, my father died, a relationship ended, and the AIDS epidemic started to hit home among my friends and acquaintances. Over the course of that and the next few years, almost half of my gay friends died. I learned in that year that if I ask for help, my Higher Power will never give me anything I can't handle.

It was in this period that I started to turn to service beyond the group level. I had helped in founding the first gay A.A. group in my part of town and was elected general service representative after having served in other group offices. I knew nothing of general service at that time, and I decided to learn what it was all about so I could do a decent job and be able to pass it on to a successor as quickly as possible. After two years I went on to do a number of other service jobs for A.A.

In all these positions I never felt obligated to conceal or deny my sexuality. I have always felt that the

representatives of groups in my area were concerned only with how we carried the message of recovery, not with what I might do in my personal life.

When I first came to this Fellowship, I had lost my health and sanity, my friends, much of my family, my self-respect, and my God. In the years since, all of these have been restored to me. I no longer have the sense of impending doom. I no longer wish for death or stare at myself in the mirror with loathing. I have come to terms with my Higher Power; after more than a dozen years in the A.A. Fellowship, I was able to join a religious group and have now become active in that organization. I have a full, happy life, with friends and loving family. Recently I retired and have begun to travel throughout the world. I have attended and felt welcome at A.A. meetings wherever I have gone inside and outside the United States. Even more important, I have returned to my home group and am still asked to make coffee. I now have an extended family that is international in scope, all the members of which are joined by bonds of shared pain and joy.

FLOODED WITH FEELING

When a barrier to God collapsed, this self-described agnostic was at Step Three.

WHEN I FIRST came to A.A., I thought everyone had drunk more than I had, that everybody had gotten into more trouble. But I kept coming to meetings, and after a while, I began to hear the beginnings of their stories. I came to realize that I was on the same road. I just hadn't gone as far—yet.

I had my first drink in my senior year of high school. That first night, I slipped out of the window so my parents wouldn't hear me leave. There were four of us, and we only brought four bottles of home brew. I never made that mistake again!

The next week, a bunch of us went camping, and we brought cases of beer. We finished it all. The others drank a lot too, but I was the one who woke up in the middle of the night and started wandering around the countryside by the light of the moon. I was the one who walked for miles searching for something. I know now what I was looking for. Unlike the rest of them, I wanted another drink.

I had a great time that summer between high school and college. It revolved around drinking: drinking and football, drinking and hunting, drinking and playing pool, drinking and driving. Nothing really bad happened, but it could have. I nearly got arrested. A

friend just missed being shot. The car I was riding in stopped just before it crashed.

I don't think most moderate, social drinkers remember so clearly the night they had their first drink. I'm sure that very few of them make that date into an annual celebration by getting as drunk as possible. It was in my second year of drinking that I started saying that if you can still feel your face, you're not drunk enough. In my third year I drank homemade peach wine, and when it was gone, I had some whiskey. That night, I vomited, in a blackout.

Soon I found that I didn't get as sick on vodka. Drinking vodka was like something out of science fiction—I could be someplace one moment and instantly transported to somewhere else the next. I could never seem to find that happy balance. I remember going to a party. I started drinking, and suddenly I could talk to anybody. I was having a lot of fun, but I kept on drinking. Soon I could barely walk. A friend drove me home that night, but I sometimes drove a car when I was too drunk to walk.

I became a teacher and didn't drink too often for a while. When I did drink, I almost always got drunk. The teachers would get together a couple times a year for a poker party. I usually didn't drink anything. One time I did, and I made a fool of myself. I decided that drinking just wasn't fun anymore. I quit.

My cure for drinking was isolation. I would get up, go to work, come home, watch TV, and go to bed. It got to the point where I couldn't remember anything good that had ever happened. I couldn't imagine anything good ever happening in the future. Life had shrunk down to an endless, awful now. The depression

became so bad that only medical treatment kept me from killing myself. After seven months the doctor took me off the medication. I wasn't suicidal, but I wasn't very happy, either.

A new teacher came to my school, and I invited myself over to her place for a drink. I remember telling her, as I lifted the glass, that this might not be such a great idea but, "I believe it's worth the risk." As casually as that, I began drinking again. At the winter break she went to visit her boyfriend. I was alone again.

Two days before Christmas I went to a party. I wasn't going to drink because I had driven there and I knew that drinking and driving was a bad idea for me. I wasn't feeling particularly good or bad—just a little uncomfortable because I didn't know most of the people there. I was sitting on the couch one minute and up drinking a glass of wine the next. There was no conscious premeditation at all.

This is the point when many people say, "And I went on drinking for ten more years." Instead, an odd thing happened. A few days later a teacher came up to me at work and said that she was an alcoholic and that she was going to A.A. She had never seen me drink, so I don't know what made her do that.

The next day I asked her how often she went to meetings. "Once a week?" I asked. No. She said that she had been going nearly every day for almost six months. That seemed a little extreme, but I thought that maybe if I went to a meeting with her, it might help her out. Besides, I was lonely.

Halfway through the meeting I had the strangest idea. People were introducing themselves as alco-

holics, and I had the urge to do the same. This was peculiar because I wasn't, of course. Later, my friend asked me what I thought of the meeting. I said that I didn't really know. It was only much later I realized that for the first time in years, I felt that I belonged.

The next day we went to another meeting, and this time I did say I was an alcoholic. I went to the third meeting by myself. I was nervous. I felt as if I were about to jump out of my skin. I did something that was amazing to me. Before the meeting I stuck out my hand and introduced myself as a newcomer. I had someone to talk to. I calmed down.

From time to time I would tell the truth. I said in a meeting that I was afraid to get a sponsor because I was afraid he might ask me to do something. I left that meeting with a phone number. I called it, and sure enough, my new sponsor started leading me through the steps, using the Big Book.

I called him every day. I told him that I just didn't want to be an alcoholic. He said it didn't matter what I wanted. The question I had to answer for myself was whether I was or I wasn't. He even suggested that I could try a little controlled drinking if I wasn't sure. I knew I had never been able to do that. I didn't have to do any more "research." All I really had to do was review the drinking I had already done.

I remember telling a friend years ago that I didn't have a drinking problem, I had a stopping problem. We laughed. It was true, but there was something else going on, something that never occurred to me until I came to A.A. I didn't just have a stopping problem. I had a starting problem too. No matter how often I

stopped, or for how long, I always started drinking again.

After not drinking for three months, I was on the phone with the friend who had taken me to that first meeting. I was complaining to her about problems at work and how my sponsor didn't understand me. Later in the conversation I mentioned that even when I described myself as agnostic, I thought maybe something was watching out for me. She asked, "Isn't it about time you made a decision?"

I knew where to look in the Big Book, and I had been careful to avoid it until then. I turned to the Third Step Prayer and quietly read it to her over the phone. Nothing happened. I didn't expect anything to happen. Then, for some reason, I turned back to the words, "No one among us has been able to maintain anything like perfect adherence to these principles." They echoed in my mind.

Something happened. A barrier collapsed. Without moving or speaking, I was carried away on a flood of emotion, yet at the same time, I was completely aware of myself and my surroundings. I could hear my friend's voice asking what had happened to me. I couldn't answer. I still can't explain it.

I know that I took the Third Step (turning my will and my life over to a Higher Power) that night because I began writing a Fourth Step inventory the next day, and I continued to write until I did the Fifth Step with my sponsor. Soon I had a list of people I had harmed. I talked about each of the amends with my sponsor. By the time I had started setting things right with my family, I began to feel a lot better.

More than eleven years later it's hard to recapture

the feelings of that night. What do I believe as a result? I can say that doubting God's existence was no barrier at all to a spiritual experience. Also, I can say that having such an experience didn't lead me to any certainty about God. Alcoholics Anonymous gives me the freedom to believe and to doubt as much as I need to.

I do know that my life is different now. I haven't had a drink since I came to A.A. I have fewer resentments, and I don't spend much time thinking about the past. I've found that my experience can be of help to other people. I have come to believe that hard times are not just meaningless suffering and that something good might turn up at any moment. That's a big change for someone who used to come to in the morning feeling sentenced to another day of life. When I wake up today, there are lots of possibilities. I can hardly wait to see what's going to happen next.

I keep coming back because it works.

WINNER TAKES ALL

Legally blind but no longer alone, she found a way to stay sober, raise a family, and turn her life over to the care of God.

MY PARENTS WERE very much in love and had been married a couple of years when they decided to start a family. They were so excited when their first son was born. They owned their own small business, and with the arrival of their son their lives seemed perfect—until tragedy struck. When their son was about two years old, my parents were eating at a local restaurant, and he was dancing to the music of the juke box and having a good time. He followed some older children outside and was hit by a car. My parents carried him in an ambulance to a hospital thirty miles away, where he was pronounced dead on arrival. My parents were stricken with grief.

One miracle that brought them some joy in the midst of all the pain was that Mom found out she was pregnant. When this little girl was born, she brought them great joy. She did not take the place of her brother, but in her own right she did bring them joy. They tried again to have another little boy, but they had me instead. Not only was I a girl, but I was also born legally blind. A year or so later they finally did get the boy they wanted, and there was a big party to celebrate his birth.

From the very beginning I felt different and unwanted. At a very young age, as children do, I had to make sense out of my life, so I came to the conclusion that I was bad and God knew I was bad, so God made me handicapped to punish me. I thought that the undertow of sadness in my family was because of me. Later I realized that a part of it might have been due to my handicap, but there was still a lot of grieving going on. My father turned to alcohol and was a very angry man. When we were growing up, he was very critical. I was told things on a daily basis, like I was dumb and lazy. When I started school, I truly realized how different I was from other children. Children were very cruel and made fun of me. I could tell you many stories of times I was treated badly, and although the stories would be different, the feeling was always the same. I was not good enough, and I hurt.

Special education was mostly for the mentally retarded, so I did not get much support from my teachers, though there were two teachers who made a difference in my life. One was a third-grade teacher who got me large-print books. It felt so good that someone understood I had a problem, but that was overruled by the embarrassment I felt trying to carry those big books around. The other teacher was a freshman high school teacher who flunked me. It was as if I heard her say, "You can do better." All the other teachers just let me pass, whether I knew the material or not. When I got out of high school, I felt as if I had gotten out of some kind of prison. I graduated 150th out of a class of 152, and I felt that I was dumb.

It was during my high school years that I discovered alcohol, and my problems were over. Now I was pretty

and smart. For the first time I felt as if I fit in. I still could not see—oh well, no big deal, I felt good.

I got married and had two children. I married a man who was not or could not be honest. For several years after we were married, I did not drink. My sister went through a divorce and moved to the town I was living in. To be a good sister I went out with her, for she knew no one in the town. We went to a country western place that had a beer bust. You just paid a certain amount to get in, and you could drink all you wanted to drink. I thought I had arrived in heaven. We did this several times a week, and then she started meeting people and started dating. Well, I couldn't drive, so I started drinking more and more at home.

Several years later alcohol had control over my life. I had a tee shirt that I just loved; it said, "I used to hate myself in the morning. Now I sleep till noon." That described my feelings totally.

When my daughter had to go to the hospital, I stayed sober for the five days she was there and told myself that I had licked the alcohol problem. On the way home from the hospital, I got drunk again. I cannot tell you the number of times I tried to stop on my own. My son would look at me and say, "Mom, why do you have to drink so much?" He was about eleven years old at the time. So one night I got on my knees and said, "God, change me or let me die."

It was at this point in my life that I called Alcoholics Anonymous and asked for help. They sent two ladies over to my house. They sat with me, and I told them that I drank because my marriage was bad. One of the ladies held my hand and said, "That is not why you drink." I told them I drank because I was part

German. She patted my hand and said, “No, that’s not why you drink.” Then I told them I drank because I was legally blind. They said, “No, that’s not why you drink,” and they started to explain to me that alcoholism is a disease. They shared their stories with me and told me how alcohol had taken over their lives.

I started going to meetings, and my story sounded so dull next to some of the stories I heard. The most interesting thing I could think to tell was about the time my friends, who were also drunk, let me drive the car. I almost got us all killed—but what fun! Legally blind, drunk, and behind the wheel of a car. God was really taking care of me and the other people on the road that night; I just didn’t know it at the time.

The truth is, most of my drinking was done at home alone. I would call people and talk, and the following mornings were awful, trying to piece together what I had said. I would say things to my husband like, “Wasn’t that an interesting call last night,” hoping he would volunteer information. My hands were beginning to shake without the alcohol, yet when I got to A.A., I wasn’t sure I belonged because my drunkalog was not exciting.

Then one night at an A.A. meeting a friend said that even though he had been in jail and done lots and lots of stuff, he was no different from me. He felt the same things I felt. It was then that I knew I was not unique, that the people did understand the pain inside me.

I met a lady who had a handicapped child, and we learned so much from each other. One important thing that I learned was that *handicapped* is not a

four-letter word. *Handicapped* is not a dirty word. I learned that I was not bad—that I was one of God's special children, that God had a plan for my life. The people of A.A. showed me how my past could and would become an asset. I got a sponsor and started working the steps. The promises of the Big Book started coming true for me. The feeling of uselessness and self-pity went away, and I could see how my experiences could help others.

When I was three years sober, I made one of the most difficult decisions I had ever made. I left the marriage. I did not leave because I didn't love him. I still love him, but the marriage was not a healthy place for me to be. I found myself with two children to support. I was legally blind and had no job skills. When I moved out, I first moved into public housing for blind people. This was a shocking experience for me, but it was full of growth. For the first time in my life, I was learning to accept my handicap. Before this I would plan out my day as if I could see and then plan it out again based on the fact that my vision was limited.

Through the commission for the blind, I got involved in a program that helps blind people become self-employed. After three months of training, I moved to a city a couple of hundred miles away where I knew no one. I lived in an apartment that was about a mile from a coffee shop that I operated. I would walk to work at 6:30 a.m., carrying \$200 in opening cash on a dark road, and I was afraid. I had two people working for me, and on my second day one of them did not show up. I had never run a business before, and my three months of training just didn't seem

enough. It was a hard time for me. A lady from a major food company came by to take my grocery order, and I didn't have a clue how much coffee, bacon, or hamburger meat I needed. She shared with me what the previous manager had ordered and helped me place an order.

God only knows how we got on the subject, but she was a member of A.A. and later would become my new sponsor. She picked me up and took me to meetings. At one of the meetings, I met a guy who for the next year picked me up and drove me to work. I paid him a dollar each morning. I am sure that did not cover his gas, but it helped me to feel I was paying my way. For the first time in my life, I was now supporting myself.

This is just an example of how God works in my life. No longer did I have to drink, but it was much more than that. Everything I needed was provided. I had a God of my understanding that helped me in every aspect of my life.

In working the steps, my life changed. I think differently today; I feel different today. I am new. We have a sign at the A.A. meetings I go to that says, "Expect a Miracle." My sobriety is full of miracles. When my son filled out an application for college, I filled one out too, and was accepted. Soon I will be a senior, and I have a 3.71 grade point average. Thanks to A.A. I have come a long way from being near the bottom of my high school class. It takes me a lot longer to read the material, so I have a CCTV (I put my book under this camera and it comes out in big print on a monitor). I have a talking calculator that helped me get through statistics and a telescope that

can help me see the board. I accept help from the disabled student services and gladly make use of the volunteer notetakers.

I learned to accept the things I could not change (in this case my vision) and change the things I can (I could be grateful for and accept the visual aids instead of being embarrassed and rejecting them as I had when I was younger).

I have already told you about some of the miracles that have happened. However, there's more. I want to tell you how I feel inside. I am no longer spiritually bankrupt. It's as if I have a magic source in my life that has provided me with all I need. I just celebrated my twelfth year of sobriety a couple of months ago. When I first came to A.A., I didn't know who I was. My sponsor said, "Great—if you don't know who you are, you can become whomever God wants you to be."

Today I am doing things that I never dreamed possible. More importantly, it is the peace and serenity I feel inside that keeps me coming back. I have been through hard times in and out of sobriety, but before A.A. it didn't matter how good things got—I always had a feeling that something was wrong. Since A.A., it doesn't matter how bad things get—I always have a feeling that everything is going to be all right.

In working the Twelve Steps, my life and my old way of thinking have changed. I have no control over some of the things that happen in my life, but with the help of God I can now choose how I will respond. Today I choose to be happy, and when I'm not, I have the tools of this program to put me back on track.

ME AN ALCOHOLIC?

Alcohol's wringer squeezed this author—but he escaped quite whole.

WHEN I TRY to reconstruct what my life was like “before,” I see a coin with two faces.

One, the side I turned to myself and the world, was respectable—even, in some ways, distinguished. I was father, husband, taxpayer, home owner. I was clubman, athlete, artist, musician, author, editor, aircraft pilot, and world traveler. I was listed in *Who's Who in America* as an American who, by distinguished achievement, had arrived.

The other side of the coin was sinister, baffling. I was inwardly unhappy most of the time. There would be times when the life of respectability and achievement seemed insufferably dull—I had to break out. This I would do by going completely “bohemian” for a night, getting drunk, and rolling home with the dawn. Next day, remorse would be on me like a tiger. I'd claw my way back to respectability and stay there—until the inevitable next time.

The insidiousness of alcoholism is an appalling thing. In all the twenty-five years of my drinking, there were only a few occasions when I took a morning drink. My binges were one-night stands only. Once or twice, during my early drinking, I carried it over into the second day, and only once, that I can remember, did

it continue into the third. I was never drunk on the job, never missed a day's work, was seldom rendered totally ineffective by a hangover, and kept my liquor expenses well within my adequate budget. I continued to advance in my chosen field. How could such a man possibly be called an alcoholic? Whatever the root of my unhappiness might turn out to be, I thought, it could not possibly be booze.

Of course I drank. Everybody did in the set which I regarded as the apex of civilization. My wife loved to drink, and we tied on many a hooter in the name of marital bliss. My associates, and all the wits and literary lights I so much admired, also drank. Evening cocktails were as standard as morning coffee, and I suppose my average daily consumption ran a little more or less than a pint. Even on my rare (at first) binge nights, it never ran much over a quart.

How easy it was, in the beginning, to forget that those binges ever happened! After a day or two of groveling remorse, I'd come up with an explanation. "The nervous tension had piled up and just had to spill over." Or, "My physical plant had got a little run-down and the stuff rushed right to my head." Or, "I got to talking and forgot how many I was taking and it hit me." Always we'd emerge with a new formula for avoiding future trouble. "You've got to space your drinks and take plenty of water in between," or "Coat the stomach with a little olive oil," or "Drink anything *but* those damn martinis." Weeks would go by without further trouble, and I'd be assured I'd at last hit on the right formula. The binge had been just "one of those things." After a month it seemed unlikely that it happened. Intervals between binges were eight months.

My growing inward unhappiness was a very real thing, however, and I knew that something would have to be done about it. A friend had found help in psychoanalysis. After a particularly ugly one-nighter, my wife suggested I try it, and I agreed. Educated child of the scientific age that I was, I had complete faith in the science of the mind. It would be a sure cure and also an adventure. How exciting to learn the inward mysteries that govern the behavior of people, how wonderful to know, at last, all about myself! To cut a long story short, I spent seven years and \$10,000 on my psychiatric adventure, and emerged in worse condition than ever.

To be sure, I learned many fascinating things and many things that were to prove helpful later. I learned what a devastating effect it can have on a child to coddle him and build him up, and then turn and beat him savagely, as had happened to me.

Meanwhile I was getting worse, both as regards my inward misery and my drinking. My daily alcoholic consumption remained about the same through all this, with perhaps a slight increase, and my binges remained one-nighters. But they were occurring with alarming frequency. In seven years the intervals between them decreased from eight months to ten days! And they were growing uglier. One night I barely made my downtown club; if I'd had to go another fifty feet, I'd have collapsed in the gutter. On another occasion I arrived home covered with blood. I'd deliberately smashed a window. With all this it was becoming increasingly hard to maintain my front of distinction and respectability to the world. My personality was stretched almost to splitting in the effort;

schizophrenia stared me in the face, and one night I was in a suicidal despair.

My professional life looked fine on the surface. I was now head of a publishing venture in which nearly a million dollars had been invested. My opinions were quoted in *Time* and *Newsweek* along with pictures. I addressed the public by radio and TV. It was a fantastic structure, built on a crumbling foundation. It was tottering and it had to fall. It did.

After my last binge I came home and smashed my dining room furniture to splinters, kicked out six windows and two balustrades. When I woke up sober, my handiwork confronted me. It is impossible for me to reproduce my despair.

I'd had absolute faith in science, and only in science. "Knowledge is power," I'd always been taught. Now I had to face up to the fact that knowledge of this sort, applied to my individual case, was *not* power. Science could take my mind apart expertly, but it couldn't seem to put it together again. I crawled back to my analyst, not so much because I had faith in him, but because I had nowhere else to turn.

After talking with him for a time, I heard myself saying, "Doc, I think I'm an alcoholic."

"Yes," he said, surprisingly, "you are."

"Then why in God's name haven't you told me so during all these years?"

"Two reasons," he said. "First, I couldn't be sure. The line between a heavy drinker and an alcoholic is not always clear. It wasn't until just lately that, in your case, I could draw it. Second, you wouldn't have believed me even if I had told you."

I had to admit to myself that he was right. Only

through being beaten down by my own misery would I ever have accepted the term “alcoholic” as applied to myself. Now, however, I accepted it fully. I knew from my general reading that alcoholism was irreversible and fatal. And I knew that somewhere along the line I’d lost the power to stop drinking. “Well, Doc,” I said, “what are we going to do?”

“There’s nothing I can do,” he said, “and nothing medicine can do. However, I’ve heard of an organization called Alcoholics Anonymous that has had some success with people like you. They make no guarantees and are not always successful. But if you want to, you’re free to try them. It might work.”

Many times in the intervening years I have thanked God for that man, a man who had the courage to admit failure, a man who had the humility to confess that all the hard-won learning of his profession could not turn up the answer. I looked up an A.A. meeting and went there—alone.

Here I found an ingredient that had been lacking in any other effort I had made to save myself. Here was—*power!* Here was power to live to the end of any given day, power to have the courage to face the next day, power to have friends, power to help people, power to be sane, power to stay sober. That was seven years ago—and many A.A. meetings ago—and I haven’t had a drink during those seven years. Moreover, I am deeply convinced that so long as I continue to strive, in my bumbling way, toward the principles I first encountered in the earlier chapters of this book, this remarkable power will continue to flow through me. What *is* this power? With my A.A. friends, all I can say is that it’s a Power greater than myself. If

pressed, all I can do is follow the psalmist who said it long before me: "*Be still*, and know that I am God."

My story has a happy ending but not of the conventional kind. I had a lot more hell to go through. But what a difference there is between going through hell without a Power greater than one's self, and with it! As might have been predicted, my teetering tower of worldly success collapsed. My alcoholic associates fired me, took control, and ran the enterprise into bankruptcy. My alcoholic wife took up with someone else, divorced me, and took with her all my remaining property. The most terrible blow of my life befell me after I'd found sobriety through A.A. Perhaps the single flicker of decency that shone through the fog of my drinking days was a clumsy affection for my two children, a boy and a girl. One night my son, when he was only sixteen, was suddenly and tragically killed. The Higher Power was on deck to see me through, sober. I think He's on hand to see my son through too.

There have been some wonderful things too. My new wife and I don't own any property to speak of, and the flashy successes of another day are no longer mine. But we have a baby who, if you'll pardon a little post-alcoholic sentimentality, is right out of heaven. My work is on a much deeper and more significant level than it ever was before, and I am today a fairly creative, relatively sane human being. And should I have more bad times, I know that I'll never again have to go through them alone.

THE PERPETUAL QUEST

This lawyer tried psychiatrists, biofeedback, relaxation exercises, and a host of other techniques to control her drinking. She finally found a solution, uniquely tailored, in the Twelve Steps.

WHEN I WAS a newly minted lawyer starting out in the practice of criminal law, there were five of us in our law office. My favorite lawyer was the eccentric, disheveled, wild-eyed Irish law professor who was brilliant or crazy, depending on your point of view, constantly cleaning out his pipe bowl with a black fingernail and tossing back vodka martinis whenever he got the chance. Then there was the new but world-weary litigation lawyer who told endless tales of his former life of white wine and bouillabaisse under the Mediterranean sun as he conducted his exporting business on the Riviera. Why would he leave such an ideal, wine-drenched job in sunny climes to slog away at law school? I kept wondering. There was also a giant good-hearted bear of a man, who today is a judge, who spent more time listening and helping others than he did practicing criminal law. Into this office landed a pair of know-it-all, fast-acting, but not too experienced young lawyers: my husband and me.

Within a dozen years, three of these five promising lawyers were dead from alcoholism, struck down at the peak of their careers. The judge is still and always

has been a sober judge. And I somehow unwittingly, and even while drinking, turned into a corporate counsel and later, thankfully, became a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. The professor's kidneys gave out from one too many martinis; the exporting lawyer kept drinking until he died, despite a liver transplant; my ex-husband died in a fire on what was to be, he had said, his last drunk before going to A.A. *again*, when I was ten years sober. I have been to too many premature funerals due to our good friend alcohol.

My husband and I met and married in law school in a romantic haze of alcohol, twinkling lights, and much promise. We stood out as the only young married couple in our class. We worked and played hard, camped and hiked and skied, threw fabulous parties for our sophisticated friends, and prided ourselves on staying away from drugs. In fact, it was fear that kept me away from drugs—fear that I might not get called to the bar (that's the other bar, the legal one) if I were convicted of possession of illegal street drugs. More importantly, my best friend was wonderful, powerful alcohol, and I loved it.

Until I was four years old, I lived upstairs from a tavern, where I saw a few drunks bounced around. My mother worked for relatives who also lived over the tavern, and whoever had time looked after me. Despite my pleas, my mother married a violent man, and we moved away to a life that made my tavern life look really holy. I kept running away back to the tavern until it was demolished. I still fondly look at pictures of that place.

By the age of fourteen I had my first drunk, which ended in a minor police visit to my home. By the age

of eighteen I was a daily drinker, and by age twenty-one I had my first year-long binge in France, which I euphemistically referred to as my study year abroad. I came home very sick and drunk. A few months later I went to bed with a bottle of Scotch one night and decided I would go to law school. If you are having trouble, try something that is even more difficult, to “show them.” That was my philosophy. It was enough to drive me to drink, and it did.

At law school we used to drink a lot of beer in student pubs, debating whether rocks had souls and what was the nature of the judicial process, as though it had never been considered before. As new lawyers, my husband and I eagerly beavered in the office early in the morning before running off to court to fearlessly defend the downtrodden. Lunch was the training ground for the perpetual quest for the best martini—usually two or three of them, good for taking away the knot that by this time had permanently lodged itself in my stomach. (I didn’t know that it represented fear and that I was not a fearless defender after all.) Afternoons would be full of creative legal arguments in court. If court finished early, maybe we’d make it back to the office, maybe not.

Evenings we drank with the best of them: lawyers, writers, media types, everyone vying to tell the best stories, which of course got funnier and funnier the more we drank and the later it got. When I drank, the fear evaporated and I became articulate and apparently very, very funny—or so they said then. Years later I drank so much that I was no longer funny. But at the time, the drinks and the stories and the camaraderie were as wonderful as I was witty. We would

get home to sleep by one or two in the morning, and the next day we would be up early to start all over again. The fortitude and resilience of youth made us invincible.

Unfortunately, by the time we thought it was time to have a “real life” and maybe start a family, the marriage disintegrated. I was then twenty-eight years old, getting divorced, drinking all the time, and seeing a psychiatrist three times a week, trying to solve my problem, whatever it was.

I thought I had found part of the answer when I stumbled into a private controlled-drinking program, which helped me, during the initial thirty-day mandatory period of abstinence, to hook a very large rug, row by row, well into many late nights. “One more row!” I kept saying, gritting my teeth against a drink. My period of abstinence also helped me get a better job in the corporate world, away from all those hard-drinking criminal lawyers, and a new three-story, four-bedroom house. Just what every single woman needs! It helped me to quit the psychiatrist. During this abstinence, I also got out of a sick relationship, which reproduced the violence of my childhood.

Incredibly, I did not connect the improved manageability of my life in this short period of abstinence to the absence of booze. It didn’t matter in the long run, because unfortunately, I started to get drunk again. I recall being fixated on that first glass of wine I was allowed to drink the day my coach informed me that I was ready to start drinking in controlled fashion. My tongue was almost hanging out.

Many drunks later, I tried everything else I could

find: more therapy, different psychiatrists (it was always to be the next one who would solve my problem), biofeedback, relaxation exercises, Antabuse, lots of self-help books from Freud to Jung, to every current fad that was published or taught. All to no avail, of course, because I'd always end up drunk.

Came the day when I realized that I couldn't keep dragging myself off to work in the morning and spending half the energy of every day concealing the fact that I was a barely functioning drunk. I would go home to drink until I passed out, come to in the middle of the night terrified, listen to the radio, and get worldwide telephonitis, finally dozing off at dawn, just in time to be awakened by the alarm and start the process all over again. I gave up on relationships of any significance, saw my friends less, and stopped committing myself to most social occasions because I could never count on being sober. More and more, I just worked and went home to drink—and the drinking was starting to outstrip the working.

One day I was so hungover at lunchtime I called a friend and had a little cry. "I've tried everything and nothing works," I said, reciting my litany of doctors and different therapies. I did not remember that thirteen years earlier, when I was twenty-one years old, I had attended a few meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous after waking up one morning not knowing where I was. I had just started law school and was terrified most of the time, so I went on a binge to quell the fear, which only got worse. I have no idea what made me go to A.A. way back then. But there were no young people at the meetings, and people kept marveling at how young and fresh I looked. (No one

at A.A. said that when I came back thirteen years later.)

My friend suggested that we contact a man she knew who was a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, and I agreed to call him. "Perhaps he could call you," she said helpfully, which was the key, because by that night I was just fine and didn't need any outside help aside from a drink or two. But he kept phoning and bothering me about going to a meeting. When he told me he went to A.A. meetings three or four times a week, I thought, Poor man, he has nothing better to do. What a boring life it must be for him, running around to A.A. meetings with nothing to drink! Boring indeed: no bouncing off walls, no falling down stairs, no regular trips to hospital emergency rooms, no lost cars, and on and on.

My first meeting back at A.A. was on an unseasonably hot June night, but there was not a cool drink in sight in that church basement. The smoke could have choked a horse (today, it is much improved), and a fanatical woman with smiling bright eyes eagerly explained to me that they had this important book I should buy. Thinking that they were doing the book promotion because they needed the money, I said firmly, "I'll give you the money, but I don't want your book!" Which about sums up my attitude and explains why, for the next few months, I continued to get drunk in spite of dragging my body to meetings every few days. I would stare at the large vodka bottle in my kitchen cupboard and say, "You won't get me!" but it did; I always lost the battle and ended up drunk.

My last hangover was on a Friday before a long summer weekend. I had struggled through the day feeling small and hopeless, hiding the trembling of my

hands when I had to sign documents, and desperately working to wrap my tongue around words during meetings. Later that Friday night, after an agonizingly long workday, I was dragging myself up the deserted street thinking that the whole world, except for me, had someplace to go on that long weekend, and what's more, they all had someone to go with.

The first difference between that night and all the others was that I did not immediately go directly to a bar to get lubricated or home with my regular giant weekend supply of booze. Instead I went to my club to swim, where strangely enough I also did not drink. I was so hungover that I had to give up trying to swim and instead wrapped myself in a bathrobe and sat in a dark corner of the locker room lounge for two hours, feeling desperately sorry for myself.

I don't know what happened during those two hours, but close to eight o'clock, I leaped up, jumped into my clothes, and raced off to a meeting I'd had no intention of attending. It was a bit like getting a rap on the head with an invisible hammer and having my brain flip over, because the meeting seemed to be radically different from the last time I had been there. The people looked animatedly alive, the weirdos who had been attending before were absent that night, and the books on display actually looked interesting. I bought the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, listened intently, and then, for the first time, I went for coffee with those people and listened some more.

Late that night at home, there was a presence in the room with me, even though I lived alone. The next morning I knew I didn't have to drink. That night I went to a Step meeting where they discussed Step

Two, “Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity,” and I actually talked about God, the one who had abandoned me when I was very little, very frightened, and very hurt. In the weeks and months that followed, I did everything that was suggested to me. I went to a meeting every day, read the books and literature, and got a sponsor who told me to have a quiet time every morning and try to pray and meditate or at least sit still for a few minutes, before racing off for the day. Since I prided myself on adhering to the intellectual principle of not having contempt for anything prior to investigation, I tried to keep an open mind no matter what anyone said and how stupid I thought it was. That probably saved my life.

I joined a downtown group that met near my office right after work at 5:15. (I would not have made it to 8:00 p.m.) Soon, I got into service. I was given bank books, notes of business meetings, and various other instructions and told to do whatever was necessary to keep the meeting going. I did that job for quite some time. I also instituted regular business meetings and found an eager newcomer to whom I eventually turned over the bank book and papers.

I had a lot of problems in those early days, but no matter what the problem, I was repeatedly told to seek more spiritual development, something that did not interest me. I was also told that my purpose here on earth was to be of maximum service to God and the people around me, and that didn't interest me too much either. However, I said nothing, listened, and kept going to meetings, mostly Step discussions, where I heard people talk about how they practiced the Steps

and about the Big Book, our selfishness, and helping others. Sometimes, I thought they were nuts, those meetings; often I thought they were boring, but I kept listening and tried to relate.

Soon after a friend of mine was killed by a drunk going the wrong way on the freeway, a truck driver talked about driving long hauls drunk. I was horrified and repelled, until I paused to recall that I used to drive when I couldn't walk straight. When my friend was killed, my A.A. friends said, "Don't drink! Don't think! Go to meetings!" I went to a meeting where I sobbed and gnashed my teeth, but I didn't drink.

I became as compulsive about A.A. as I had been about drinking, which was necessary because I had been told to spend as much time at meetings as I had spent drinking. I went to every A.A. get-together possible and was saturated with A.A. I listened to tapes of A.A. talks. I read and reread the literature and books, laughing into the night over *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers*. I signed up for the *Loners-Internationalist Meeting* in print (*LIM*) and shared the meetings I attended in letters to people who could not get to meetings. This helped me to remember what I had heard, and my sharing helped someone else. I once wrote to a man who received my letter the same day he had killed someone in a car accident, which would no doubt make one very, very thirsty.

Many years later, although alcohol is not part of my life and I no longer have the compulsion to drink, it can still occur to me what a good drink tastes like and what it can do for me, from my stand-at-attention alcoholic taste buds right down to my stretched out tingling toes. As my sponsor used to point out, such

thoughts are like red flags, telling me that something is not right, that I am stretched beyond my sober limit. It's time to get back to basic A.A. and see what needs changing. That special relationship with alcohol will always be there, waiting to seduce me again. I can stay protected by continuing to be an active member of A.A.

The hardest thing I had to deal with in sobriety was my own anger and the violence I lived through in my childhood. I had forgiven those involved as best I could, but the mind seems never to forget. I had gratefully received years of outside help because I was told that my drinking was only the symptom of deeper troubles. Yet despite the help of many professionals, I know I would never have recovered from violence and alcoholism without A.A.'s Twelve Steps, which are uniquely tailored for people like me.

Just as importantly, I believe that I recovered through the grace of a Higher Power, despite the fact that I was very angry and wanted nothing to do with God when I arrived at Alcoholics Anonymous. In fact, I did not need to find God. I only needed an open mind, and the spirit found me.

When I was five years sober, I met a man in A.A. who was also five years sober. He said that the rocks in my head fit the holes in his. Today we have a daughter who has never seen her parents drink and who sees them try to help others in Alcoholics Anonymous. We have a nice home and sober family life in a community with lots of A.A. friends and meetings. It's a long, long way from that first A.A. meeting, and it couldn't get much better.

A DRUNK, LIKE YOU

The more he listened at meetings, the more he came to know about his own drinking history.

USUALLY OUR stories start out by telling what we were like, what happened, and what we are like now. For me, what it was like was nothing in particular—no problems, nothing special happened. Nothing that I realized, anyhow. Only much later, when I started listening to other people and what happened to them and when and how, did I realize that those things were in my past also.

My story starts in the middle. What happened? My family and I were attending a relative's bris, a Jewish ritual circumcision and baby-naming ceremony. After the ceremonies and brunch I fell asleep. When it was time to leave, they woke me up. The car ride home was very quiet. The wife and my two kids said nothing. Later that day I found out what the problem was.

When they came to wake me, I was very belligerent and threatening. I scared them. They were afraid I would hit them. That was it. I could see that something had to be done. My wife's sister-in-law, who is a social worker, suggested we see a counselor. I thought that might be a good idea. I was having anxiety attacks for no reason. I used to be able to demonstrate products to high-level executives of the corporation I

worked for with no problem; now even minor product showcases were becoming difficult.

Also, I was having trouble getting technicians to work for me. In the past I had had my pick because I was good to work for and the projects were fun, with interesting new ideas. I always had a quick temper, but now things were getting out of hand. I would do things like beat up my desk with my desk chair.

And the most serious thing to me was that I was contemplating suicide. I had an actual plan—a plan for an accident that would raise no question in the minds of the insurance company. So in a moment of sanity, I decided it would be a good idea to seek help. If I hadn't lost my marbles, they were at the least very loose.

So my wife and I found a psychiatric social worker at the local Jewish Family Services agency. She saw us as a couple, then individually, then together, and so it went. When we were together, we worked on our interpersonal problems. When I saw her by myself, she would talk about drinking. I don't know why she kept bringing it up. I drank, but not that much. I never even mentioned my drinking except maybe to say, "Yes, I do drink," when she asked. It wasn't the problem—the other things were. One day she read me some questions from a pamphlet, which I answered honestly. She concluded that maybe I drank too much, and we talked about that for several sessions.

One day she asked if I could limit myself to five drinks in a day. I said, "Sure." Was I surprised when I found that I couldn't. That should have been my first clue that she might be right, but it didn't occur to me.

Then I hit on a clever solution. I have several academic degrees, and someone as smart as I was could solve this problem. The idea was to put off the first drink as long as possible and go to bed after the last drink. That worked out okay, and I told the counselor I was able to keep it to five a day with little or no problem. But she said if you had to control something, it was out of control.

During one session she suggested that I try not drinking at all one weekend. “Okay,” I said. She also suggested that I send the kids off somewhere for the weekend because I might be irritable.

I used to watch a lot of late-night movies—it was my time to relax by having a few drinks, a habit that started in night school when I had a full-time job and was studying chemistry at night. I had seen movie versions of what happened to people who had drinking problems: *The Lost Weekend*, *Days of Wine and Roses*, and others. And so I was nervous about raging, losing control, and maybe being violent as my wife had said I was. So we packed up the kids and the booze (all of it) and took all to my wife’s parents.

Much to my surprise the weekend went well—no problems—and in the next session I told my counselor so. She said, “What about the meeting?” I said, “What meeting?” She said, “The A.A. meeting.” I said, “What A.A. meeting? We never talked about that.” She said I had agreed to go to an A.A. meeting. So out came a meeting list. She explained about open and closed meetings. I decided on one I thought would be okay for me—a men’s discussion group. They would be my kind of people, and the time fit into my schedule. The

meeting list started on Sunday. I never started a project or anything else on a Sunday. Monday was my *M.A.S.H.* night. Tuesday was *Tuesday Night at the Movies*, and I am a big old-movie fan. So Wednesday is when I decided to try this A.A. meeting.

The meeting went okay. We talked about somebody's problem with an anonymity break at his doctor's office. The people at the meeting were telling him stuff that made no sense to me, like "Live and Let Live," "Easy Does It," "One Day at a Time," "use the Serenity Prayer," "talk to your sponsor," and as we went around the table it came my turn. Since they were all saying they were alcoholics, it wasn't too hard for me to say my name and, "Hi, I'm an alcoholic," and suggest that the man should just go to another doctor. He thanked me very much, and after the meeting he said to be sure and come back next week.

During the meeting, somebody mentioned spending too much time at discussion tables when we should have been spending more time at First Step tables for newcomers. So I went to the First Step table the following week. The discussion was very interesting. I didn't think I was "powerless over alcohol," but I knew "my life was unmanageable."

One night we were talking about when we started drinking, and I was saying that I drank all my life. Actually I was given my first drink at my bris. That is usually done when a boy is eight days old. So I said all Jewish boys start drinking early. I had to admit that after that it was just the usual milk and juice until I could sit up at the table with the family, and then there would be kiddush wine every Friday night. Not great stuff—what we got was sweet wine and seltzer,

so I didn't drink very much of it. I didn't like it. Later I learned the definition of a social drinker: someone who could take it or leave it.

When I was about ten years old, we all came back from my cousin's bar mitzvah services to celebrate at my grandmother's house. There I had my first real drink. All the adults went over to the table for a schnapps. There were all these little tiny glasses in front of various liquor bottles and everybody was having one, so I had one too. It was good. It was smooth and warm and wonderful. I liked it and went back for another. This one wasn't smooth—it was hot going down, not as wonderful.

After that I drank what I could, when I could, where I could. Not much, not often, not as a ten-year-old. At that First Step table we figured out, or they did anyhow, that that was alcoholic drinking—having one and going back for a second right away. I know now I never had just one drink, ever.

One night they were talking about how much they drank, and one guy said he had so many beers, the next guy talked about shots, one about mixed drinks I never heard of, another about so many pints, and on it went around the table. When my turn came, I said I didn't know. "Wow, that much," they said. "No," I said. I meant I didn't know the amount. I drank mostly at home and poured some in a tall glass and drank that and did it several times. "Well, how many times did you refill?" "I don't know."

Somebody asked it another way. He wanted to know, how many did I buy? "Well," I said, "I stopped in the package store every day and bought one." "Oh," he said. "How many did you have left at the end of the

week?” Well, he had me there. “None,” I said. He said, “a bottle-a-day man.” I never got to say another word—it was settled over my objections.

I saw the counselor once a week, and I went to this men’s meeting once a week, and everything was getting better. Once I saw somebody get a ninety-day pin. I decided not to get one. Even though I couldn’t see it from where I was sitting, I wasn’t going to wear an A.A. sign. One day somebody got a ninety-day pocket piece that he could rub for luck, and I decided to get one of those. After my three months were up, I went to the literature guy and bought one. He said it would be nice if it was presented to me in front of everybody. I wasn’t too keen on getting up in front of everyone. He said it would be good for the newcomers; it would show them that the program worked. So I told him okay and asked the leader of the First Step table to give it to me. They were paying him to run the meeting, or so I thought at the time. (Later I found out that they were reimbursing him for the snacks.) So the following week I got my pocket piece and thanked everybody for giving me the power over alcohol. Now I was more powerful than alcohol because for the first time in a long time I could choose not to use it.

A couple of weeks later the large company I was with, which had relocated me and my family at their expense, had a large staff cutback, and I was cut back—fired. I thought I was fire-proof. I was in a very important position, doing important work. I was the chief researcher in developing a new product; I was sitting in on strategic planning meetings. I was very upset. After all, I was better now and back to being a good employee and team player again, but to no avail.

We were able to stay on site in special offices set aside for us to conduct our job search. As part of this job search, I was allowed to go to a professional convention being held in the Southwest.

Now somehow, between the time I lost my job and my flight to the convention, I decided maybe I was not an alcoholic and I needed to test that theory. After all, I was a researcher, and things had to be tested. I decided that on the plane (it seemed like a safe place) I would put the question to the test. If I could have one drink and no more, I was not an alcoholic—alcoholics can't do that. So when the stewardess came by to ask me if I wanted a drink, I said, "Yes." She put two little bottles' worth in a glass ("No ice, thank you very much") and went up the aisle. On her way back she asked if I wanted another, and I said, "Yes." I drank for the whole flight—before dinner, during dinner, and after dinner. As we approached our destination, I searched in my pocket for a pen to fill out the in-flight magazine response card. I found this large coin. I took it out to see what it was. It was my ninety-day pocket piece, and I was reminded of what I was doing. And the thought came to me: Wow, those guys at the meeting were right—I am powerless over alcohol. I put that coin back in my pocket and from that day to this, some 15½ years later, I have had no urge to drink.

When I got back to my meeting, I told them what had happened. I don't know why—it was not like the old me to 'fess up to anything. They were concerned only whether I was still drinking. And I said, "No, I'm not." I was worried that they were going to take my coin back. All they wanted to know was what I was going to

do now. I had no idea. They did, however. They said I needed a sponsor—so I found a sponsor. They said I needed more meetings. “How many?” I wanted to know. They said I only had to go to meetings on days I would have had a drink. They said I needed to identify, not compare. I didn’t know what they meant. What was the difference? Identifying, they said, was trying to see how I was like the people I was with. Comparing, they told me, was looking for differences, usually seeing how I was better than others.

One day we were talking about spiritual awakenings. Everyone talked a little about what happened to them and when and how and all that. Then it came my turn. I said I hadn’t had one yet, but I was open to it.

Well, two people were trying to talk at the same time. “What have you been telling us about the airplane flight all this time?” “Well,” I said, “I was drinking and the coin reminded me of what I did. And I decided I was powerless and couldn’t drink anymore and stopped.” One man said, “Well, that’s it. What more do you want?” I said, “What about the blinding white flash?” “What about it?” he said. “Read the Big Book. The Appendix explains the concept of a sudden change and a gradual change, and that not everybody has a blinding flash.” “Oh,” I said, “That was it—that was mine?” “Yes,” I was told. “What more do you want?” Actually I wanted something more dramatic, and my sponsor said what he so often did: “So?” And I found myself saying, “Well, if that’s it, it will have to do.” “Have to do?” he replied. “It was bigger and better than most, and more importantly, it worked. You stopped and didn’t start again.”

Well, that worked for me. I have stayed in the

Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous long enough to find the program in the Big Book and to practice all its principles in all my affairs on a daily basis.

The last big hurdle was closing the meeting with the Lord's Prayer. As a Jew, I was uncomfortable with it and decided to talk to my sponsor about it. So I said, "The Lord's Prayer bothers me. I don't like closing with it." "Oh," he said, "what's the problem?" "Well, I'm Jewish and it's not a Jewish prayer." "Well then," he said "say it in Jewish." I said, "It would still be the Lord's Prayer." "Right," he said. "Then say something else that you like. Your Higher Power, whatever you call it, is helping you, and you need to say thank you."

That was a big step for me; I finally began to separate the religious aspects of my life from A.A.'s spiritual program. Now the big difference to me is that religion is the ritual, and we all differ there, and spirituality is the way we feel about what we do. It's about my personal contact with my personal Higher Power, as I understand Him.

Everything has turned around. I found a new job, which I then decided to leave. I opened my own business. I was able to put my two sons through college at large universities. My oldest son's great passion was to go on road trips to get away from home when it was time to come home on school breaks; now he comes home regularly and brings friends. The younger son comes home often and calls regularly.

My marriage is no longer on the brink and is better than ever. And the best is yet to come. All this and more I owe to the Fellowship in the rooms and the program in the book.

ACCEPTANCE WAS THE ANSWER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

On two occasions, over weekends, I had decided I

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For years I was sure the worst thing that could

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I went back to the dean who had guided me into

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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