

I cannot say I was born an alcoholic, but without a doubt, I was born with an exquisite sensitivity to alcohol. Christmas was all about the Drambuie tippie for each of the kids. Among my earliest memories is the first time I had NyQuil — in the 70s that stuff packed quite a punch. I was probably five and told my mother the next night that I should have NyQuil *every* night. Soon enough sonny, soon enough. That being said, for the better part of fifteen years, my “less than” firmware kept me socially isolated enough to prevent a solid teen qualification. The first time I really got drunk was the last night of high school – as I puked in a gravel parking lot on my hands and knees, my sister’s boyfriend memorably remarked that he “didn’t care what everyone said – he liked me.” Message received. Looking back, I still had not really put it together that alcohol was the answer. In college, I was a serious beer drinker, but it sure seemed like everyone was. A fancy law school saw me wracked with social and academic anxiety, but drinking was still a solution and I found a crowd that drank my way.

My parents were not alcoholic and did the best job they could. Still, there are some tell-tales that all was not normal — whatever that means. There was a corner table where the ends of the two sofas met and that came to be referred to as my dog house. Cringe, I know, but it was the seventies, and they were doing their best. I was the youngest of four and I just could not tolerate the chaos that came with a special needs brother and two other siblings in near-constant combat with my parents. Under the table, I went. As long as we are on my mental health . . . I got the two-for-one pack of alcoholism and clinical depression. The “less than” thinking has been a companion my whole life, but in law school, I developed into a pattern of annual three to nine-month major depressive swoons. Heaping sides of self-sabotage and impostor syndrome rounded things out. Let’s just say that by the time I got sober there was never an instance in which I got on a plane where I was not earnestly hoping it would crash.

I was drawn to litigation because there were clear rules of the road, and you won or you lost. And my life in the law has been extraordinarily fulfilling. Things went well in my early years of being an associate, but as I came into the partnership process, the drinking accelerated and the wheels came off — as they say, we alcoholics have a knack for getting tight at exactly the wrong time. The next two years were a subconscious process of destroying everything I had built up through a festival of self-sabotage that blew up my marriage, my career at what I was convinced was the only law firm in the world, and otherwise confirmed my less-than impostor-dom. On the night before a major argument in federal court, reviewing partner in attendance, I was at the hotel bar until 4 a.m. Good times. I limped off to another firm and became a daily drinker. Not that I wasn’t trying to address my drinking — I would attend the lawyer’s AA meeting, soulfully share, and with a plan for my new life rolled up under my arm, I would, without the slightest sense of irony, head over to a bar to work out the finer points. Now I was a 24/7 drinker.

I am ashamed of when I hit my bottom, but glad that I did. I wish I could say it was when I was driving my kids around drunk or when I made tatters of my marriage vows. It was on a Monday when I came in and saw a memo I had sent to a client the Friday before. It was stupid, that’s the only way I can say it, and it was clearly composed by a stupid person. The wreckage of the future gets a bad name, but at that moment, I accurately saw (as confirmed by my partners after the fact) that my career was on the verge of a free fall. There was no safety net for my now fractured family — it was on my back as breadwinner, and this was a terrifying prospect. A very dear and trusted friend was in town and as he was headed out the door to catch the train back to

New York, I found saying these words a huge relief: “Charlie, there are six liquor stores on my walk from this apartment to the firm, I know the opening time of each one, and when I found the sixth, which was grandfathered to an opening time of 9 am, I literally jumped for joy.” Providence intervened with a trial *sua sponte* delayed for four months and Charlie drove me off to rehab.

Looking back, I now see that I was living my life in accordance with a popular but rubbish plan. When I was a child, I remembered reading breathless stories about the year 2000 and having the conviction that whatever it was that happened in the intervening years, surely I would not feel like I did then. Well, 2000 came, and I did. I took it as an article of faith that the right marriage, institutional affiliations, and neighborhood would fix me. I can’t improve on Bill Wilson’s 1953 Letter to Al: “Suddenly I realized what the matter was. My basic flaw had always been dependence -- almost absolute dependence – on people or circumstances to supply me with prestige, security, and the like. Failing to get these things according to my perfectionist dreams and specifications, I had fought for them. And when defeat came, so did my depression.”

Early sobriety sucks, and if all sobriety was like early sobriety, I do not think many people would be sober. I found fighting the chemical addiction and a mind that was screaming I KNOW WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT THAT was a brutal experience. I also had a practical problem which was that I literally had no idea what people did when they got home from work. I watched the entirety of Netflix. My life was saved by stupid slogans – spotting a Xeroxed piece of paper that said “Don’t Leave before the Miracle Happens” kept me from drinking once. The less-than thinking and the depression stayed with me and led me to isolate within AA. But one day, I saw a guy I knew from one of the meetings at a coffee shop and I mustered up the courage to get a sponsor, which has made all the difference. I found my inner alcoholic was both Dr. Banner (white lab coat, comes in a sits on the edge of the desk: “Well, I think this was a valuable experience, certainly no harm done, but we can all agree this was an overreaction . . .) and also The Hulk (oversized, green skin, goes through a lot of clothes: “CAN YOU BELIEVE WHAT \_\_\_\_\_ JUST DID TO YOU – YOU DESERVE A DRINK OR NINE!”). I cannot tell you how completely shocked I was to come to learn that I was a drama queen — ever on the hunt for a slight that would justify a whole range of self-destructive behaviors.

I was relieved of the chemical addiction (the constant, minute to minute, drinking being the number one thing on my mind) after about nine months — to be clear, it stayed on the top ten list of things always on my mind many years hence. I wound out my first year repeating a mantra (“sobriety does not cure depression, sobriety does not cure depression, sobriety does not cure depression . . .) and then on my one-year anniversary was appalled to learn that, in fact, sobriety DOES NOT cure depression. Like a flip of a switch, I descended into the deepest nine-month trough I had ever experienced, and only with the help of a fellow who devoted an extraordinary amount of time and care to me did I get through it.

If there is one thing you take from reading this, I would encourage you to be an active consumer of mental health services. What do I mean? It ends up the clinically depressed are pretty crappy shoppers because they tend to think that if it is not working it is their fault. I can now see that where I did not have respect for my shrink, it was a complete waste of time. Through a convoluted set of events, I found the doctor that worked for me — at the end of our first session,

he said “Your mental state is not acceptable and we are going to tweak psychopharmacological dials every week until that changes.” I had never encountered such an activist approach and it inspired me. I take two anti-depressants every day and plan to for the balance of my life. This doctor, who is an incredibly wise and insightful talk therapist as well, saved my life.

One of the things I love about AA meetings is that they are among the very most effective forms of time travel. When I see the anguish of the early days member and even more the heartbreak of relapse — I get a profound reminder that I NEVER want to get sober again. *Getting sober is infinitely harder than staying sober.* When I see people thriving in sobriety, their families working, their professional lives thriving, the fulfillment they get in giving back — I get a profound reminder that they have what I want, and it can be achieved.

For the first few years of sobriety, I pretty openly scoffed at the promises of AA. After all, if I was not sane to begin with, the promise of a *return* to sanity was pretty empty. It really shocks me to be able to say they have come true in my life. The AA literature teaches that the alcoholic is incapable of forming a true partnership. Similarly, John Updike wrote that falling in love with *the idea* of a person is a very dangerous path. In sobriety, I have consciously formed an extraordinary partnership with my extraordinary partner, I have reconstituted my relationships with my children, and I have formed truly profound friendships with my fellows. I thought I was doing well in AA pre-COVID as a one-to-two (so that means one) meeting-a-week guy. COVID radically improved my program, as I went to a schedule of one to two meetings per *day*. The effectiveness of AA over Zoom has been shocking to me – for new and old fellows alike. I now sponsor a number of guys and have a broad and active text and phone AA life. Out from under the table indeed. The very first meeting I attended post-rehab I heard an old-timer say, “I am just so glad I drank enough to get here.” He is now a friend and I am genuinely astonished to share that worldview. Life continues to happen and I make mistakes all the time — I have found that a rigorous commitment to both honesty and the prompt making of amends makes it all flow a lot easier.

The AA Big Book famously talks about following the program and “rocketing into the fourth dimension.” It shows me the enduring imprint of alcoholic thinking that most alcoholics read that phrase to mean there will be cash, prizes, and a Las Vegas dance show, or maybe Martians. To my mind, the fourth dimension references a release from self-obsession — the fourth dimension is the honest encounter with life and the human beings that populate it.