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MY RETURN FROM THE HALF-WORLD OF ALCOHOLISM

A letter to Alcoholics Anonymous saved the author's life.

Condensed from the December 1945 AA Grapevine

by Anonymous

A year ago I was a hopeless alcoholic. I tried to stop drinking, but the harder I tried the more I drank. I drank to get drunk. I drank to stay sober.

Alcoholics Anonymous jerked me back to reality.

I had only a vague knowledge of Alcoholics Anonymous but I did manage to part the haze in my head long enough to remember that the headquarters were in New York City. I wrote them, pleading on the envelope: "New York Postmaster: Please find these people for me. I am a veteran of World Wars I and II. I need help!"

That started AA's letters. I was remotely located beyond personal contact with the organization or any of its branches. The letters came in an unbroken flow, often daily, most of them by air mail. They were written in terms I could understand, and pulled no punches.

I did not believe in excuses and make none, but there were certain reasons for my drinking. I had been honorably discharged from the Marine Corps and was working at night. My daughter worked during the day. My son, who was with the Army Air Force in China, dropped out of contract for months. My wife was gravely ill and we had no one to help. Caught in a grind that kept me exhausted, I drank for energy. Liquor became a crutch upon which I leaned more and more heavily.

After my wife died I set about drinking continually for escape. One rainy night a car ran over me and I was left lying on the highway.

After weeks in the hospital I could finally walk by using a cane. I set out to hunt a drink. Drinking with head injuries made walking difficult - at hundred-yard intervals the world dissolved. There was no sensation of falling; the deck simply rushed up and hit me. There must have been a dozen such falls before a minister found me spattered with blood and head laid open.

There wasn't much I missed in the misadventures of advanced alcoholics. I tried to re-enlist but could not make the grade because of alcoholism. Frustrated, I became involved in street fights and frequently woke up in a jail cell, writhing in the excruciating pain of alcoholic neuritis. Under the usual treatment accorded drunks -- such as 30 hours' solitary confinement - alcoholism thrives. All I thought about was getting a drink to blot out the humiliation of the experience.

One night I went to the kitchen to seek a hidden bottle. Mistaking the cellar door for the cupboard, I fell down the stairway. Hours later I returned to consciousness and saw our three cats silhouetted against the open door of the furnace, watching me. I felt ashamed. Their silent, questioning gaze was more effective than the rebuke of any person.

Crisis impending now. The doctor did not have to say, "it's killing you." I knew it. I cut down on liquor one day, only to drink harder the next. I existed in a gray half-world. Somewhere in the depths of my mind there stirred a remote recollection of Alcoholic Anonymous. Grasping at this straw, I wrote that first letter.

When the reply came from AA, it was brief but reassuring: "AA will work if you want it to work." That threw a lot of responsibility right back in my lap. The letter continued: "The requirement for membership in Alcoholics Anonymous is simply the sincere desire to stop drinking, and you

certainly seem to have that. We will do all possible to help you, and of course there is absolutely no charge." Wishing me luck, they asked me to write again. I did.

One point from the booklets the organization sent me proved to be the key to the whole plan: "Get up in the morning determined that you will not have a drink throughout the day. Don't say you will never drink. Just concern yourself with this day." It made sense.

Days went by and I was standing fast. But there was more here than a state of mind, and that is where my doctor came in. He used sedatives and thiamin hydrochloride (B1) to steady my nerves and help my appetite.

Still, a tiger stalked me -- bitter memories of the past, that only liquor would remove. AA with its usual discernment, asked me to think this over: "God grant me the serenity to accept things I cannot change, courage to change things I can, and wisdom to know the difference." That impressed me profoundly.

From there on a message would arrive each day, with something like this: "When 'the feeling' torments you, eat sweets. It's good medicine. Alcoholics are used to great quantities of sugar in their systems, and when you stop drinking you cut off that supply."

The battle was not won immediately. I had two slips. But AA and the doctor agreed that a slip is not uncommon at the start, and that gave me heart. They pointed out that it may be precipitated by any emotional cries; so I learned to avoid both controversy and excitement. Overconfidence too, I discovered, is dangerous, and AA wrote that I might never be nearer my first drink than when I felt absolutely certain that I had won the fight.

Recently I stumbled upon one of the bottles I had hidden around the house. I put it away hastily. Fascination drew me back to it. I swished the liquor around, held it up to the light, smelled it. I wondered if it would be possible to take one drink, and imagined myself pouring a tumbler half full of the liquor, filling it up with water and sipping it slowly to savor the fragrance and satisfying sharpness. I grew taut as a violin string.

But then the mailman came with a long AA letter. At the end was this amazing paragraph:

"Some AA's after the pressure has been lifted, think: 'Well, maybe now I could take just a drink or two and stop there.' If you ever come to this stage, before you take that first drink just sit down and **remember!** That's all! Remember! One drink is too much, a thousand not enough."

I shuddered to think how close I had been to disaster, and was mystified by the chance guidance which had brought that particular message at the crucial moment.

Letters always were expertly timed, always bright and frequently sprightly. Not long ago after several bad days, I was frightened and I wrote AA. The answer was, "In the first place, will you please calm down! By the time I finish reading one of the letters you write when you're excited, I'm fit material myself for a padded cell."

Another time I was wavering on the edge, and AA sensed it. A special delivery air mail arrived: "Don't talk too negatively about this thing taking more than you've got. I thought the Marines never stopped fighting." That one snapped me back, for I'm proud to have been a Marine.

The letters brought results where all else had failed, because AA talked my language: they too were alkies. Kindly argument by my son and daughter formerly had made me ashamed and angry with myself, but then, unable to find a way out, I would drink harder in a desperate attempt to forget it all. Acquaintances and friends had urged me to swear off, to "be a man." They seemed unable to grasp the fact that alcoholism is a disease, that there is no more reason to censure an alcoholic than there is to berate a person for breaking a leg or having cardiac trouble.

The technique of AA, I discovered, was not to push, or even to lead, but to walk with you and offer you something you need -- if you want to accept it. There was no argument, no controversy. There was no concern, either, about temperance interests; they are not reformers. Neither are they concerned with race or creed. They do, however, feel it highly important that you have some belief in a power greater than yourself, because this fact of belief, or something to lean on, makes the fight easier.

"What the hell is the use of all this?" I asked in one of my letters.

"You'll eventually get the answer to that," AA replied. You have got a lot of years left. Why not make them worth while? There are other people like yourself you can help, and there is nothing like helping others in order to forget yourself."

One day I began thinking about a trip to New York. My AA correspondent encouraged me. People in the AA office were as curious to see me as I was to see them.

In our conversations the office people told me that I will always be an alcoholic. Most persons eventually lose the desire to drink and are not tempted in the presence of liquor. But I am one of those unfortunate few who are constantly in danger. I cannot look at liquor, smell it, even think about it. It sets that inner, involuntary compulsion astir. If I were to slip now, I feel certain I could not fight this battle over again. Drink to me means death.

AA national headquarters have records to prove that 50 percent of those who come to AA with a sincere desire to stop drinking do so immediately; another 25 percent stop after one or two slips, and of the remaining 25 percent some fail entirely, some fail to keep in touch with the organization, and others eventually resume contact and stay dry. Two types cannot be helped by AA: halfhearted persons who merely toy with the idea of becoming dehydrated and those with brain lesions or psychoses.

The New York companionship strengthened my shield and I was given a keener insight into the importance of the spiritual approach. I am not a religious man, but in the course of my return from the half-world of alcoholism I had begun to perceive the intervention of some outside force working in my behalf. This came to me slowly, during long solitary walks in the country. I began to feel that life must have some design, so I tried to pray to whatever may be back of all this.

The change which AA helps a man accomplish is close to the religious experience of conversion. Indeed, it is the same if it is genuine and lasts. I see now that most failures result from lack of acceptance of some power greater than oneself. I have found added encouragement not only from everyone in AA but my friends. Once one recovers a constructive approach toward life, self-confidence and a belief in the future, the devil of alcoholism can be conquered. I believe -- and my friends assure me -- that I have done it.