

Alcoholism Is a Lonely Business

**Not just the loneliness of the flesh, but of a soul cut off from
God**

THE MIRACLE came with a burst of sunlight. It was the morning after the spiritual experience which had set me free. In the quiet of the night, the spiritual light had come to me, illuminating every crack and cranny of my soul.

I had been going to AA meetings for three weeks. About all I could grasp was: "Become willing. Willingness is the key!" I tried, God knows how I tried. At first, it was just a tiny ray of light. Then it suddenly burst forth in a flood of illumination! The weight of centuries seemed lifted. I felt free of guilt and nameless fears; I saw the way to be free from the terrible bondage of myself.

Alcoholism is a lonely business, says the Big Book. How well I know! I see those lonely, rainswept docks, deserted except for the figure that was me, staggering and struggling to get back to a ship that had left two hours before. I see the surreptitious trips I made to a village cemetery, hoping to share the peace and silence (and do some undisturbed drinking), only to flee in horror at the distant howl of a coyote. I see that secret visit back to the old home, the standing in the snow on Christmas Eve, outside, afraid to go in. I see the empty rooms with the bare light bulb, the battered suitcase, and the wine bottles.

I was always a loner. A high IQ is not an unmixed blessing, believe me. Getting ahead too fast in school meant being the youngest in the class and earning the undying resentment of the older kids for knowing answers when they did not. So, early, I began to withdraw into my own world. I took up radio, and this soon became an obsession. I substituted mental for physical activity, and I didn't make friends easily.

Our family was bitterly poor in a material sense, but we were spiritually rich, and my training at home was to come back to me years later. I was the only boy in an all-girl family, and had an overprotective mother; but I loved both of my parents and had no conflicts that I remember. Nonetheless, I left home at the age of sixteen. I managed to get my radio license, but it was the depression period, and there were no jobs. I finally joined the Army Signal Corps and was shipped off to Alaska, where I spent the happiest two years of my life (until recently).

When my hitch was up, I landed a good job with the airlines. It solved my driving urge to be on the move, and it solved my economic problem. With a job like that, I should have been popular. But I wasn't. When I went out with a girl, I would spend the evening talking about myself; when people would invite me to their homes, I would drink before I went or else grab two drinks to their one. I had taken my drinking lessons in the Army, and I had learned almost too well. Although I became very money-hungry and saved in strange ways, like not eating, I still spent plenty on booze. During the war, I did most of my drinking alone, not wishing to be caught.

As an alcoholic, I had to work twice as hard as the nonalcoholics; while they were getting promoted, I was lucky to stand still. I built up myriads of resentments: toward my bosses, who didn't recognize genius; toward my girlfriends, who kept going off with normal slob; toward just about everyone and everything. At least, I did like my job.

They say a neurotic wants what the normal person wants, but always manages to turn his dreams into nightmares. This I believe. My dream was of a nice rose-covered cottage, a nice girl, and all the things that make up a home. Finally, one day after the war, I withdrew my entire life's savings and bought a beautiful little house. It was right out of a picture book! But I hadn't been in it very long when I realized something was missing. The girl! I had forgotten about that part of it.

It wasn't hard to correct the oversight. I quickly found a girl and vaguely recall going through a ceremony somewhere. I remember she drove me home; but when I realized my life's savings had been spent, I flipped. I woke up in the little room with no doorknobs on the inside.

When I got out, I was minus a job, and very shortly the girl went home to her mother. She got the house, which was all right with me, as I wanted to hit the trail. But my traveling now was different. Before, I had traveled to get somewhere, or because my job required it. Now I was running. Job after job. Looking back, I can see that I was searching for a spot where I could drink and work at the same time. I missed many opportunities in the search; a lot of those jobs could have led to fine careers. My drinking was bad now; I was more or less drunk all the time. I headed for the ships, somehow got through the Korean War and in and out of hospitals, jails, and the usual scrapes. My mind was in an uproar; it never let me rest, night or day. When I was asleep, nightmares persisted.

I was tired all the time. Anything that required original thought or sustained effort was beyond me. I would often do extra work for free, trying to make myself indispensable on a job. But it was a losing battle; I would goof off and get myself fired.

Yet all of this was only a prelude to the bone-chilling terminal phase which crept up on me during my last trip. The ship was going around the world, and I was on probation. The tension was terrific; I desperately wanted to make good. But I went

to pieces completely. One night I came to, and I was out on the fantail. The captain and the chief engineer were slapping me to consciousness. After I had dashed through the ship, awakening everyone, the two officers had found me standing there in my underwear, cold and shivering, about to jump over the side. I remembered nothing.

My blackouts became more and more frequent and lasted longer. My brain was badly affected, and the medicos assured me the damage would be permanent, unless the deterioration was interrupted by death. I remember thinking that would be a welcome relief.

A humanitarian skipper, a good company, and a series of miracles brought me across the continent and to an AA meeting. (In my memory, the details are vague.) I was fortunate to have a sponsor who seemed to have infinite patience. He guided me through those first weeks, until there came the tiny ray marked "willingness," and then the golden flood of illumination. Those were the miracle days. Amend-making turned out to be fun. Most of my "enemies" were quite glad to see I was straightening out. In all walks of life, I was being accepted again. No one else can really know such happiness as the unacceptable one who suddenly finds himself accepted.

I wanted to tell the whole world. I imagine the New York staff at the AA General Service Office must have been driven dizzy with my correspondence, and I take this opportunity to ask their forgiveness. I wrote them constantly, and they were very good-natured about it. Frankly, I don't think I would have made it through that first year without their kind counsel, for I had to go back to sea again.

Perhaps the honeymoon phase of my sobriety is over now. I hope I never lose it entirely, but perhaps I can be more effective with a little quieter approach. While beating the tom-toms, I found that I sometimes did more harm than good.

During those first years, I was given tremendous spiritual strength. One night, alone on deck in the Indian Ocean, I asked God about my tobacco habit. I had just put out a cigarette and was trying to find another and had to open the fourth pack that day! My lungs were a wasteland, and my heart felt as if it were in a clamp. "What do *you* want?" was the answer. So I took my cigarette supply down below and gave it to my shipmates. From that moment on, for six years now, I haven't had the slightest desire for a smoke of any kind. A miracle? No. Just the application of faith. For I have found a faith that works. It works on countless other problems and has guided me surely and consistently over many a hump. Out of weakness has come strength!

I know that a priceless gift has been given me. God doesn't play games or pull magic tricks on us. I must treasure it and take care of it as I would any gift, but I know that it is mine as long as I want it. I have been physically healed, and I was badly damaged; anyone who drank as much as I did is bound to be. Yet a recent examination showed everything shipshape.

A Tibetan Buddhist lama gave me some insights into the art of meditation. We Americans, with our jet airplanes screaming overhead, our moon rockets, high-speed automobiles, noise, and news every hour on the hour, find it hard to concentrate, let alone meditate. But we can learn if we but listen. "Be still and know that I am God!"

Have you ever had a dream where you were both the subject and the object? Where you were two people at the same time? When that happens, who is the Other Mind? Just who or what is speaking when one mind is interrogating the other? Surely, we have an inner man, "a still, small voice."

They say the difference between a drunk and an alcoholic is that the latter has a conscience. I believe he has a more active one, that's for sure. I feel that this conscience is God-given. It bears much the same relationship to the human being as the radio receiver to the ship. The receiver is part of the ship, but its intelligence comes from sources *outside* the ship. It can be dulled and even rendered mute, but it is still there and with patience can be brought to life and tuned to outside intelligence.

Here is where our wonderful program comes in: Through meditation and prayer (praying only for knowledge of His will for me and the power to carry that out), I can choose the right path. I have found that conscience is *invariably* right; hence, I feel it can be only the voice of God.

I know beyond any doubt that somewhere I am written into the book of life. The incredible loneliness I once felt was not of the flesh at all; it was the loneliness of the soul cut off from God. Eternal life isn't some dim, distant concept, but a very real thing. For me, it began the day I walked into that AA meeting. Whether you are in a crowded city or on the windswept deck of a ship, you are never alone from the moment you come into AA.

Anonymous
Tolovana Park, Oregon

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