

The important part,
this father writes, is how
it all begins

An Alcoholic's Letter to His Son

Condensed from DENVER POST
ANONYMOUS

Dear R----;

When I opened your last letter and found the picture of you in a college freshman uniform, I realized it was time for me to be writing this letter. It's one I've been thinking about for a long time.

Three and a half years have slipped by since - let's be honest - my last drunk. This much you know. What I want to tell you about now is a part of my experience you know nothing about - the beginning of it. My idea is that this may help you to understand some things about yourself, and might even save you from making some of the mistakes I made.

Don't get me wrong. Just because I'm an alcoholic doesn't mean you're going to be one. A special sensitivity to alcohol isn't passed on from a parent to a child. No, I haven't any particular fears for you - only those that trouble any father whose son or daughter reaches the age when it is hard to stay out of the way of a potential chemical called alcohol.

Okay, you're probably thinking: "Here it comes - the old man's got religion, and now he's going to start preaching." I promise: no sermons. I had plenty of them before I found the answer to my problem in Alcoholics Anonymous.

Holidays - what a wreck I used to make of them! Remember

Thanksgiving, 1959? I'm sure you do, even though your mother shooed you out of the house before the shouting started. Now I can finally let you know that I "got the message" when you slouched through the kitchen to the back door. You knew exactly what was going on, and you stopped for just a second and turned toward me. I was standing by the refrigerator - or, more accurately, propping myself up with it. You didn't say anything. You didn't have to. Your disappointment, resentment, disgust, just plain hatred - it all burned in your eyes.

So what can I possibly tell you that you don't already know about what alcohol can do when it takes control of someone? You lived through too much of it - the nightmarish months before the divorce, then a household without a father, the times when you didn't hear from me and wondered why, the times when you did hear from me and wished you hadn't.

What I want to point out, what is so necessary for you to understand, is that what you saw happen in our home, and what happened to me after I left - the fleabag hotel rooms, the psycho wards - was only the last act of my love affair with the bottle. It all began before you were born; in fact, it began about the time I was your age, which is why you need to be thinking about alcohol and

alcoholism right now.

We in Alcoholics Anonymous spend a lot of time sitting over coffee talking about our experiences, and one thing we've learned is that it isn't easy to predict what boy or girl is going to turn up with a drinking problem. As children, some of us went to bed every night in the security of well-knit families. Others were pulling the covers over their heads to shut out the hell of their homes. Some have Phi Beta Kappa keys; others didn't get past the ninth grade. None of us fit any alcoholic "type" as far as background is concerned.

Then how did we get to be drunks? Some people think we became alcoholics from drinking too much. I think we drank too much because we had something else wrong with us in the first place and used alcohol as a crutch. We had the equivalent of a broken leg in our inner selves - a weakness, a fear, a sense of guilt or anxiety, a shadow of uncertain outline that dogged our steps. This is not unusual in itself, especially among young people as they are becoming adults. What was unusual for us was how we reacted when we discovered alcohol and the way it could help us. Its effect was sheer magic. It rid us of that shadow.

The trouble is, our crutch began to play tricks on us. At times it would slip and we'd fall down. By the time we decided that it was bringing us more trouble than help, we made a startling discovery: we couldn't let go of it.

Quite a few of us began drinking regularly because alcohol gave us a deceptive sort of courage to meet situations that scared us. The more we relied on this artificial courage, the less genuine courage we could muster. If we drank to feel more comfortable around people, for instance, the

result was that we felt all the more awkward and self-conscious and tongue-tied when we weren't drinking. If we drank to fight off boredom or loneliness, the more bored and lonely we became when we had no glass at our side.

I picked up my crutch in the most innocent way, not really knowing that I was slipping it under my arm. There were half a dozen of us kids who knew the secret of acquiring a chilled keg of beer on a Saturday afternoon. There was a little glen on a farm about five miles outside of town that was made to order for our midsummer nonsense. With the right amount of beer under our belts - and not necessarily a dangerous amount - we could laugh ourselves silly at jokes that weren't really funny, and there was a warmth and conviviality that certainly couldn't be condemned.

Human beings have been amusing themselves this way for thousands of years, and I suppose that they always will, whether they gather around a beer keg at a picnic or the cocktail bar in a hotel. This is what is called "social drinking," and it is hard to make a case against it. As far as I know, I am the only one of that group I used to drink beer with who went the route of an alcoholic. It was the only kind of drinking I did for a long time. I had no idea that my fondness for alcohol was out of the ordinary. But in the most subtle and gradual way the occasions which called for my drinking began to multiply.

In the office where I had my first job after getting out of school there was a girl named Judy. She was bright, she had a sense of humor and, as you would put it, she "turned me on." I asked her for a date, and took her to a place I couldn't afford for dinner and dancing. I wanted to impress her.

That evening I discovered that Judy didn't like to drink. She didn't disapprove of drinking - it just didn't appeal to her. But we enjoyed each other, and when I took her home she said good-night in a way that made me think she would like to go out with me again.

The significant thing is that I never asked Judy for that second date. I dropped her, flat, and scouted around for another girl. As much as I liked and admired Judy, as much as I wanted to get something going between us, I couldn't face the prospect of spending a lot of time with a girl who didn't like to drink. Some kind of subconscious "radar" told me that I could not have Judy and also drink as much as I wanted to. I made my choice.

I was to make the same kind of choice time and again. I picked companions who liked to spend their spare time - as I did - on a bar stool or nursing a fifth through an evening of cards. I doubt that I would have found their company very stimulating if it hadn't been for the liquid refreshment that was always in the picture. And all this while I was developing two skills that you find in most alcoholics: the ability to conceal from others how much I was drinking, and the ability to conceal from myself how indispensable my alcoholic crutch was becoming.

Your mother didn't recognize this side of my character until after we were married. Our courtship was a whirl of bar-hopping and parties. Unlike Judy, she enjoyed drinking, or at least I always thought she did. She made a game attempt to keep up with me at first, and then she found herself on that bobsled ride so familiar to wives of alcoholics. From enjoying our life together she shifted to tolerating it and then to rebelling against it. She tried to understand me, to help me, and

her only reward was a kick in the teeth. The divorce itself was an anticlimax. Our marriage had ended long before. I was just an overgrown adolescent.

As much as I recoiled at what I saw happening, I couldn't do anything about it. I made promises, sincere ones, time and again, and broke them. Once I left a hospital after a week of treatment for acute intoxication - intravenous feeding, sedatives, vitamins, a sweating-out and shaking-out that brought me back from the brink of delirium tremens - and within 48 hours I was drunk again. It was the same suicidal process, and it took me back to the same hospital in worse shape than before.

From what I've written, you might guess that I'm going to tell you to steer clear completely of demon rum. No, I'll be practical and assume that you have the same curiosity about alcohol that I did when I was your age, and that many occasions may arise when you'll either want to drink or be expected to.

First, test yourself with alcohol in a sensible way. There are wrong times and right times to fool around with beer or liquor. With a bunch of kids in a car is a wrong time; at a party where there are responsible adults is a right time. The best time is in your own home, if you can persuade your mother to cut you in on the action when she's having some friends in.

If you're like the majority of people, you'll find that the first drink an interesting experience. You may dislike the taste, but like the effect, or vice versa. You may barely be able to "feel" one drink, or one drink may knock you for a loop. Just remember that no matter how mature and responsible you may consider yourself to be when you lift that glass, you're dealing with what is, for all practical purposes, a drug.

Alcohol is a depressant, and the first thing it depresses or slows down is the function of the higher center of your brain, your faculty of self-criticism, judgment and restraint. Remember, too, that in spite of what you see in the movies, in spite of the beer and whiskey ads, it is *not* necessary to drink to be sociable, to be a success in a business or profession, to sweep a girl off her feet.

Next, if the crowd you are running around with is drinking when you don't want to, or is drinking more than you care to, don't hesitate to say no when the next round is offered, to cut out, or to go home. It's stupid enough to get drunk; it's twice as silly to drink too much simply because that's what "everybody else" is doing.

Finally, and perhaps most important, there is always a chance that you have within you the characteristics of an alcoholic, a seed that is hidden now but waiting for circumstances that will let it grow and flower. If you should come to recognize in yourself a fondness for alcohol that seems to be greater than you observe in others - especially in people who impress you as competent, well-adjusted human beings - then the red flag of danger is up.

If you do any amount of drinking in the next few years,

there is a simple test I wish you would take from time to time: Try doing without alcohol for a while and see what happens. This way you can get an idea of how much alcohol *means* to you, how much you value what it *does* for you. You'll probably find that being "on the wagon" means no more than a moment of awkwardness when one of your buddies suggests having a drink. But if you find that removing alcohol from the picture makes a serious difference in the way you feel, if you are drawn back to it against your own resolve not to drink, this may tell you that alcohol does, indeed, hold a special danger for you, as it did for me. Then there is only one safe course: avoid the use of alcohol altogether.

You will have problems in life. You will have disappointments, doubts, fears. Try never to make the mistake of seeking an artificial, temporary solution to these problems through alcohol, pills or narcotics. A way of life cannot be built on such flights from reality. My prayer for you is not so much that you will find every happiness you seek, but that you will accept with clear-headed fortitude the times of trial that are sure to come your way, and receive with gratitude the love and good fortune that are always close behind.