

12 STEPS FOR ALCOHOLICS

By Richard Lake

Brushing aside labels, mottoes and crutches, let's search for meaning in behavior instead of the bottle.

You who call yourself "alcoholics" or "problem drinkers" are among the least understood people in the world. In spite of extensive publicity and ardent organizations in your behalf, you aren't getting the breaks from science or modern methods of treatment. You are the victims of a label, "alcoholism," which you and your well-wishers have hung around your necks.

I'm being brutally frank, at the risk of offending you. In my estimation there's no hope for alcoholics. I mean that when you think of yourself as an "alcoholic" and not as a person among others, you shut yourself off from the rest of the people. You and I can't to one another on common grounds. And I think it is as much your fault as it is the fault of me and the rest of us who have hung the label on you. You have used the label to keep away from people.

But I don't believe there is any such thing as an alcoholic, or any such thing as alcoholism. I think we can get together as people, and there is as much hope for you as the rest of us. I'm saying to you, and to your friends and families: "You deserve better, and you can do better. You need not live in that lonely realm called alcoholism. You can come back into the world and live with people.

I'm trying to teach you through Twelve Steps, an approach that should ring a bell with many

of you.

1. *Your problem is the way you feel about other people, and the way they feel about you.* In years past I've put it this way: "You don't know how to get along with people." And you come right back: "Why I get along fine - except when I'm drinking." That still doesn't account for how you feel. I've learned over a period of ten years with thousands of you that how you feel is the last thing you are going to struggle with. When a feeling starts hurting in you, or even before it starts hurting, you grab a drink. Drinking doesn't do away with the feeling - may even make it worse. Drinking fixes things so you can't do anything about facing up to that feeling, study or master it.

You get along fine with people as long as you can have things the way you want them. You always want to talk to me alone. You are marvellously clever at impressing me with just what you want me to know - and hiding all the rest. After I learned this, I quit seeing you in private. I put you drinking people together. I want you to learn from one another. You need each other as desperately as do any other disturbed and sick people.

Here's the catch, though. When you're all together and all alcoholics, you still do not learn anything from one another. You talk about alcohol. With all sincerity and with the most genuine feeling, you tell about your harrowing

experiences, your personal ruin, your fight to conquer the habit of drinking, your slips and so on. Granting your sincerity and bitter reality of your experiences, this sort of trading stories does not teach any of you anything new about your feelings toward one another.

Somewhere in all these amazing and impressive stories should lie the answer to the "drinking problem." I have heard you express this wish many thousands of times: "Some one of you guys has got the answer to my problem."

Certainly the answer would be there, and just as certainly you would discover it - if drinking were your problem. The fact that you cannot find the answer to your problem by listening to the experience of other drinkers should show you that drinking is not your problem.

But a grim logic continues to prove that a person cannot learn anything *unless he is personally involved* in his own learning. Listening to other people's experiences and talking *about* a common problem does not get you sufficiently involved on a personal basis.

When I bring you into groups with other sick and disturbed people, I tell you. "Leave your bottle outside." When you try to bring your bottle (the discussion of alcoholism) in with you, the group soon tells you to throw it out. With this sort of atmosphere, you have a chance to leave your label to one side, to get out of that lonely world of alcoholism, and to have firsthand face-to-face experiences with others who are just as sick as you are, but who have no fancy label to help them feel more alone than they are already.

2. *People are more important to you than alcohol.* If people were not so extremely important, you would not have to put alcohol between

yourself and them. Thousands of you have told me, "Well, I guess I got started drinking when I was first going to dances - sort of to get over being bashful." Or, "I didn't have any friends except those I could find in a bar." Or, "I never thought I had anything to talk about until I had a few drinks in me."

There's no such thing as the "alcoholic" personality. There are as many different kinds of alcoholics as there are different kinds of people. But all of you "different" people have one thing in common - you don't know what to do with the feelings you have about others.

Again I'm remembering how many of you have told me, "I get along just fine." I believe you. You get along just fine until one of your tender spots is threatened. You can't stand your wife's critical attitude. Your mother is interfering with your life. A promotion is coming along which means you will have to take more responsibility. Before any of these tender spots is hurt, you have a drink in you to protect it. After a few drinks - or a hundred - matters are different. The alcohol has become an insulation between you and the people whose attitudes and feelings make you uneasy. You don't have to feel their feelings.

That's why I won't let you tell me that your problem is drinking. Your problem is and always has been people.

3. *Your habit of drinking is your way of dealing with people.* Many of you tell me, with an air of triumph, "I was born an alcoholic!" You'd like to believe that. You haven't reasoned it out because once you grad hold of this excuse, you don't have to. If you were born an alcoholic, there's nothing you can do about it, so no one can blame you for being what you cannot help.

Sorry. You weren't born an alcoholic. Alcoholism may run in families, but it isn't inherited. You learn from your parents and relatives and their friends. They don't know how to live with people either. They get sore, blow up, fight, scream, get hurt feelings. They drink so they won't have to feel what people feel. They set the example of dodging each other's feelings. You learn from their example. You see no one who knows how to express feelings, explore them and understand them, so you never get a chance to learn that.

When you talk with me, you tell me the truth, frequently without realizing it. I wish you could hear yourselves telling me these truths. "I had a quarrel with my wife." "My husband left me alone too much with the children - wouldn't take me out." "My husband wanted me to drink along with him." "She wouldn't talk with me." "I was stumped whenever I tried to talk with her." "My mother wouldn't let me make any decisions for myself." "My dad told me if I drank, he'd beat me." And so you drank.

4. *Your way of living is a method you have learned.* You've told me, "I sure do want to stay with this till I have it licked. Do you think it should take longer than three weeks?"

"Well, let's see - how long have you been an alcoholic?"

"Oh, five - ten - 20 years."

"Then why do you think you can lick it in a few weeks?"

"Well, those shots they give. It's just a matter of me developing some will power anyway, isn't it?"

Sometimes you take a dig at yourself. "I've got plenty of will power. I've stayed drunk when it took real smart planning and some doing to get that next fifth. If I'd spent a tenth of the will power on being a good human being that I've put on being a drunk, I'd be sitting pretty today. Maybe what I

ought to develop is some won't power."

Fair enough and beautifully stated. This sort of self-examination is what psychiatrists call good insight into your problem. But knowing all this didn't help you, did it? You went right downtown and got yourself another fifth. You didn't stay sober.

You told me how you were cured by taking pills that would make sick if you drank liquor. You took the pills for a while, and you enjoyed being sober. But somehow, after enough weeks went by, you couldn't resist testing out whether a drink or two of whisky would really make you sick or kill you. The first shot made you dreadfully sick. But you'd been sick before. Many a morning after a big drunk you had to hold the glass with both hands to get the stuff down your throat. And then you'd vomit up several drinks before one would stay down. When one whisky stayed down, you were off again. Same way with these pills. You kept tossing the whisky down, and after a while some of it stayed, and then you didn't care anymore.

Drinking is a way of living that you learned very, very well!

5. *If you learned drinking that well you can learn another method.* I think that you have been selling yourself short. You don't like me for including you in the "mentally sick" people. And you don't like me for taking away your ready-made excuses. But I don't think you need your crutches - that you were born an alcoholic, that you are allergic to alcohol, that you are always "just one drink from a drink," and that you must depend on fear to keep you straight.

You have other crutches too, just as I have, but I think the one that weakens you most is the simple label "alcoholic" that you have

allowed to be hung around your neck and which you wear proudly. An alcoholic isn't people. He can't be expected to deal with people. He must deal with alcohol.

If you stay in this blind alley, there's no hope for you.

But I feel there's a great deal of hope. You have learned drinking as a way of life in the face of the most heart-rendering difficulties. Loss of job, family, self-respect, love, health - none of these losses has deterred you from being a successful alcoholic hermit. Let's see how we can put some of this great learning ability to work for you.

6. *Every day you have a choice.* This is just the opposite of what you tell me. You tell me that every day you have to remember that you are still an alcoholic. You have no choice. You have to go on as you have in the past, resisting alcohol, living in fear of the consequences, believing that you were born this way and can't change believing that alcohol is your only concern.

But every day you have a choice between continuing to practice your present method of living and beginning to learn another method. You've told me yourself that when you go on day after day tensely resisting the desire to drink, you're actually on a "dry" drunk. And you tell me that a dry drunk ends up as a wet drunk.

What I mean is that living every day in holy fear of alcohol, organizing your whole life around resistance to alcohol, continues for you that same life of the hermit you achieved through drinking.

Your life as a dry alcoholic is the same as your life as a wet alcoholic. You are practicing the same methods of living with people.

I know that you tell me you are doing differently. You are making more friends, meeting a

"better" class of people, taking up hobbies and recreations, staying out of bars, spending more time with your family and so on. If you are, that's good. Those of you who do this, and in doing it practice being "just folks" among other folks, are learning something new. You are beginning to learn to be people, and to quit being "alcoholics."

But you and I and the statistics know that most of you are not doing much differently. In mingling with people you still insist on being treated as an alcoholic. Most of you are not learning another method.

7. *"What do you mean by another method?"* I mean a different method of dealing with people. You say that you are going to do things differently. You are going to hunt up another class of friends, people who don't hang out in bars. You are going to stay home more with your family.

But with these new friends, are you going to feel any different? What has happened to this in you that can't take criticism? Or this way of feeling bashful when there are a lot of people around? Or this getting sore when you have to take orders? How about standing adversity, when the bills pile up and the kids are sick? On the other hand, how about standing prosperity, say, when you get a raise or a promotion, or somebody thinks you're wonderful?

At such points as those you had to have a drink. With different people and different hobbies, you will still run into criticism and praise and embarrassment and all the matters that used to throw you. People will still be pretty much the same, and they will still be face to face with you. You haven't changed - yet.

8. *To deal with people differently you have to learn more about them.*

You won't do this by reading a book or taking a course. You won't do it by reading this article unless you get good and sore at me. If you do that, you may realize that I care about you. I think you are people, not alcoholics. Of course, I could be wrong. After all, what do I know about you?

You have told me that only another alcoholic can understand you or understand your alcoholism. I agree. But then I don't think of you as an alcoholic anyway, and I don't believe there is any such thing as alcoholism. We're right back where we started. With you as a "person," it takes another "person" to understand you. It doesn't matter whether there are only the two of us involved or a dozen, or four million. We pull up a chair, or we meet in a hall, or we take a walk. But this time let's do something different.

9. *In order to learn more about people, you have to give them a chance to learn more about you.* It's no accident that you who call yourselves alcoholics are poorly understood. If anyone tries to get close to you, to understand you, to get inside your hurts and your excuses - that scares you. Like as not you have several drinks in you before you have a chance to think much about whether it would really hurt you to have someone know your sore spots.

You should by now know where you stand with me. I think you're people, not something special called "alcoholics." I think you're sick people, mentally sick and emotionally crippled. I think that in general you are superior people who don't know how to do anything with your superiority except hide out from the give-and-take of human living. I think you kid yourself a mile a minute with your talk about living one day at a time, one drunk from a drunk, born an alcoholic and allergic to alcohol.

Last but not least, I think that you insult that God who is the Father of all of us when you lay the burden of your alcoholism on His shoulders. God helps those who help themselves - remember? He didn't get you into drinking, and He doesn't have to get you out. When you're about to decide there's nothing you can do about your drinking, think that over.

Now if you can take this kind of straight talk from me, we're off to a good start. Maybe you can see now that you make me angry and hurt - you who are a big slice of our best people, who won't help the rest of us in our common job of living with and understanding one another, but who crawl off into a bottle. Maybe you can see that I'm a lot like you. I'm uneasy about people and easily hurt by them. I'm easily misunderstood by people and find people hard to understand. It just so happens that drinking alcohol is no problem with me. Can you see by now that that doesn't make any important difference?

It will take some suffering, this business of exposing yourself to the feelings of others and letting them see yours straight across the board. It will take a lot of patience before it begins to pay off. But then, learning how to be as good a drunk as you have been took a lot of practice, too.

10. *You and I can learn together what neither can learn separately.* There are good factual reasons why I don't believe there's any such thing as "alcoholism." For one thing, the physiologists still haven't discovered a specific physical reason for your craving for alcohol. For another thing, there has never been discovered a specific physiological cure. Many remedies help, but always in conjunction with some emotional or social condition. Finally, no one has ever cut you open and found in

you anxiety or fear or bashfulness.

Hate, jealousy, feeling of inferiority - you name the feeling - none of them exist in you. Neither do they exist in me. You can sit and think about me all day without learning anything about me. Same with me about you. But when we get together, some relationship comes into being between us. We have an equal chance to learn what it is.

This is merely common-sense talk. It's another way of expressing the ancient wisdom that actions speak louder than words, that what a man does is more important than what he says he is going to do.

I may say to myself, "I like Joe. I shouldn't get upset when he speaks out so frankly." Meanwhile you may be saying to yourself, "Dick's just a shy fellow. I shouldn't keep telling him he's afraid of me."

When we get together and have it out, you know that I'm afraid of you because you keep hitting my sore spots, and I know that you know that I don't really like you no matter how I try to convince myself. But we have a chance now to be friends on a realistic basis.

11. The important things we have to learn about one another are matters of "emotional truth." I don't care how you look, how many times you've been married, how much time you spent in jail, how much you drank or what your childhood was like. What counts is how you and I can get along together. *This is what you don't try out.* When we don't get along too well, you grab a drink before you even have time to figure out why. The truth about what can be important between you and me never can be put in factual terms. It may change from day to day, week to week, year to year. It should change, because you and I change. That's why our job of learning about one another

is a continual job. We'll never find out all there is to know.

12. Emotional truths come up between us whenever we take a good look at one another.

All I'm asking of you is that we start taking those close looks, and keep on taking them. First thing you tell me is that you don't know how. Sure you don't. But if you even start asking yourself the question, "How am I going to get closer to people?" you're on your way to finding out. No one can answer that question for you. But if you want the answer badly enough, you'll find it. Anywhere but in a bottle.

You always ask me indignantly, "Well, do you think I can be a social drinker?" And I answer, "I don't give a hang whether you drink or not, so long as your working on this job of understanding people through first-hand dealing with them." Then you say, "But one drink will ruin me."

Now don't give me that guff. You've ruined yourself before you ever take that first drink, and you know it. You've decided you can't face up to the job of trying to live more honestly with people. Some where deep inside you, you've decided that. Then you take the drink, dive off the deep end, and blame it on the drink.

With real tears in your eyes, you say, "I just can't do it. I'm too far gone. I can't do any different. Isn't there any hope for me?"

I wish that you could believe that these are real tears in my eyes, too. But they are tears of anger. And I'm telling you, "You can do differently. There sure is hope for you. Right up to the day they nail the lid down, it's not too late. But you've used that excuse for so long to get sympathy - and you've always gotten it. People like me are to blame because we've always given you sympathy -

and pills and crutches - and let you blaspheme your God by claiming it was up to Him. Well, I know enough at last to refuse to fall for your tears. Get to work and try to learn something. It won't be any harder for you than it will be to continue to live the way you've been living!"

And still I know that you have questions and more questions. "Shall I continue with A.A.? What about these pills I've been taking?" "Do I need psychiatry?" "You sound interesting - will you see me an hour a day?"

No, I'll turn you to the company of other people who need

the same things you need. How people feel about you, and how you feel about them. Remember? This is where you came in. We live in a great nation, and there are a lot of us. We need A.A., pills, psychiatry, God and one another. Whatever you do, try to do something for yourself. Try to live as deeply and meaningfully with your fellow humans beings as it is possible for you to live. Once we get deep into that kind of living, we get all we need from one another, and that is where God is with us.

Source: Today's Health, November 1957