

Nan Robertson, author of the forthcoming A.A.: Inside Alcoholics Anonymous, is a journalist and reformed Alcoholic. A New York Times reporter for more than 30 years, she won the Pulitzer Prize in 1983 for a personal account of her nearly fatal struggle with toxic-shock syndrome.

'I'M ONE DRINK AWAY FROM A DRUNK'

Where would I be without Alcoholics Anonymous? I would be dead. I entered A.A. in 1975. I haven't had a drink in 12 years. But it took me years to get well, and I had a turbulent recovery, including hospitalization for a nervous breakdown. The most courageous act of my life was not to recover from toxic shock; it was to admit that I was a drunk and to do something about it.

The world is full of functioning alcoholics, and I was one of them. I didn't drink on the job for the longest time. I never lost my job through drinking. I didn't ruin my career. I would have done all of these things had I gone on long enough.

For me, it was a conversation with one person who told me I had to stop, who was not himself an alcoholic but whose father had died an active alcoholic. It was the combination of this man's gentleness and the fact that he was a doctor - but that really wasn't the important thing. It was that he had suffered through alcoholism. And somehow, what he had to say to me started me on the road back.

I began drinking alcoholically when I was 33, which was about the time I married my second husband, Stanley Levey. I was controlled for the 10 years of our marriage before his death by the fact that he was a moderate drinker, the fact that he loved me. I was careful about my drinking. After he died, very

traumatically, all controls were off, and I began drinking suicidally and did so from 1971, when Stan died, almost through 1975, when I went to Smithers (an intensive alcoholism-treatment center in New York City) and then immediately thereafter joined A.A.

The worst-kept secret

I drank very heavily at night. My friends at work didn't know this. I thought I'd kept the secret. But when I called up from Smithers joyfully telling everybody I'm an alcoholic, it was the worst-kept secret in the world. My mother had known, all my close friends had known and my stepson had known.

You know, alcoholics drink for every reason they can possibly find. Your life is structured around alcohol. I used to look forward to lunch all the time because there I could have a couple of martinis and a beer. That's pretty pathetic, isn't it? I always wanted to go to restaurants where drinks were served. I didn't want to go to coffee shops. It's very, very typical.

There's a dramatic difference between the way women alcoholics drink and the way men alcoholics drink, which has a lot to do with the way society views women who drink heavily. Women alcoholics generally are hidden alcoholics. It is much less socially acceptable for women to go to bars, to be drunk and disorderly publicly, so

very often women drink at home. They often drink alone. Betty Ford is a classic case.

A debt of gratitude

People don't judge people in A.A. People don't check up on you. They do not care what you did out there when you were drunk. All they care about is helping you now that you're trying to get sober. That's something that's very hard for outsiders to understand, how extremely flexible A.A. is. If I feel in a crisis now, I'll go to meetings. I still go fairly regularly, but not as much as I did when I was in a terrible state. At most, I would go to A.A. meetings perhaps five times a week. Now, I go to about one a week, sometimes one every two weeks.

It's very hard, if your life has been saved by an organization - with your help, of course - not to feel deeply grateful to it.

If you are a member of a family that includes an alcoholic, don't protect him or her. Don't call the boss to say, "Fred is sick today and can't come to the office." Don't pour the liquor down the sink. Don't rant and rave. Don't threaten, unless you mean it, that "I'm leaving you."

You have to detach yourself from the person who is an alcoholic and find your own life, because the

alcoholic wraps his arms around the bottle - and the family wraps its arms around the alcoholic, and all of their lives become distorted. Their lives are dedicated to the principle that they have to keep this secret and they have to protect their drunk and nobody must know.

What you can do is save your own life. One of the best ways to find help is in Al-Anon, for the families of alcoholics, to know that you're not alone. They teach you to have a life of your own.

The best question to ask yourself or ask about someone you love: Is drinking distorting any part of my life - my working life, my social life, my family life? If it is, then you've got problems. Also, if you are secretly worried about your drinking, chances are you have reason to be worried. All alcoholics are, in their own souls, worried about their drinking. They may deny it; it is a disease of denial. Some people would rather be crazy than be called a drunk. It's something that people are ashamed of. There's a terrible stigma involved in saying: "I am a drunk. That's what I am. I'm a successful, charming, effective drunk that's sober, and I'm one drink away from a drunk."

Conversation with Beth Brophy