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Big Book Stories - Updated (2 of 5)

This is the second article in the Grapevine's new series by authors of the personal histories in the Big Book, Alcoholics Anonymous. First published in 1939, a revised, enlarged Big Book was published in 1955. Now, twelve years later, the author of "He Who Loses His Life," page 540 in the Revised (Second) Edition, looks back over twenty years-plus of sobriety.

COME ON! BE HAPPY TOO

Twenty years later? Dry, one day at a time, for twenty years? Once that would have seemed an unendurable sentence to be faced. In retrospect, the years have been so busy, so happy, so full of fulfillment that no one of those seven thousand three hundred days has been long enough. And I have been happy - not frivolously and determinedly cheerful - but deep down happy. A happiness so basic that it can withstand the occasional shocks of anger, frustration, impatience and bone fatigue that once would have sent me to the nearest and quickest alcoholic escape.

Fifteen years ago I wrote my story for the Big Book. In it I said that I belong to the school of AA thought which teaches that successful membership in AA frees us, so that we may range the world - in a manner of speaking - like any other human being. Practically expressed, this viewpoint means that I do not feel the necessity of going to meetings constantly. I go whenever I have a Twelfth Step case to work with (I never turn down a Twelfth Step case) and on my anniversary. I do not go out looking for Twelfth Step cases as a means of insuring my continuing sobriety. Yet I always tell my new friends and even casual strangers, when I am in their company and they are having a drink, why I do not drink: I am in AA. A friend has remarked that she considers me the alcoholic the least anonymous she ever heard of. This procedure has brought me more than a few Twelfth Step cases. Always it elicits inquiries and usually intense interest about the unorganized organization called AA. If there is this interest, I explain briefly my own experience before and after joining AA, smile, accept congratulations, secretly giving thanks inside myself for the philosophy I have hooked onto. For I am hooked on AA; that is the most certain thing I know. And it makes me happy to shoot arrows into the air.

I also believe that as soon as they are a bit competent in AA, the newcomers should carry the Twelfth Step work. That's how I got well - doing constant and intense Twelfth Step work, privately, in groups, and in hospitals. I did it for a number of years, joyously. Now when I acquire a new customer, as soon as it's sensible to do so, I transfer him to an AA member younger in AA than I am, and so (I am convinced) provide him with some of the help and opportunity he needs to better himself as well as the new candidate.

I keep liquor in my home and serve it to friends. I literally do not want any. It's no deprivation for me to act as bartender for everyone except myself. I go to cocktail parties early and leave early, before my friends and the other guests get silly and argumentative and boring. I have served my time paying back for the boredom I inflicted on others when I got drunk. Sometimes I pick up a Twelfth Step case at one of these parties.

Anyone tailing me as I move around the big city where I live might think me a liar and a hypocrite, for on occasion I go - alone - into a bar. The answer is simple: from the old, bad days I know where the washrooms are and, of course, when you gotta go, you gotta go. American cities are notoriously short of this kind of convenience; the most likely place always is in a bar.

My intent in writing such details is, hopefully, to reassure the candidate for AA who hesitates about coming to that first meeting or keeping on coming. Joining AA does not mean to me the taking of perpetual vows of abstinence through years that loom ahead bleakly. Of course this is why we have the twenty-four-hour plan. But even so, two years before I achieved sobriety in AA, a friend told me not to come near her again until I had been sober for ten years. I yelled, "I'd rather be dead than face such a terrible future!" Her reply did not comfort me: "Keep on as you are and you *will* be dead." I knew that; but I did not know that in achieving sobriety in AA I'd also achieve the free-est kind of freedom, if freedom can be qualified. I would achieve the freedom of *choice*. I'd like all hesitant candidates to know that and to accept it: that they are not necessarily committing themselves to a life of bondage, however healing that bondage might be.

No one would be in despair because his body cannot handle strawberries. Well, my body just can't handle alcohol, that's all. It so happens I've had my gall bladder out and can't eat grapes, but that circumstance does not make me contemplate suicide. (The doctors assure me that my past drinking had nothing to do with the gall bladder trouble, for any possibly curious readers of this essay.)

Now, while I go to meetings only occasionally, I use AA daily, hourly, I might say every waking hour of my life. I have to deal with a lot of people. Frequently, I am in the position of being able to help them in many ways. Thanks to AA, I am more tolerant and, I hope, more understanding of others. A certain former impatience is minimized; I'm working on it. The sarcasm is replaced by - at least in intention - wit, or maybe just good humor, good nature. I hope I am easier to live with. And behind the anonymity of this essay, I will confess to a joy that approaches smugness in performing good deeds, also kept anonymous, if possible. You wouldn't think that at my age anyone could be so naïve? Ah, truly, it is more blessed to give than to receive. Let not your right hand know what your left hand doeth. Retire to a private place for your prayers. Bread cast on the waters, and so on. Believe me, it's all true. At least, it's true for me.

Selfishly, for me, the best is that I'm in command. No compulsion by anything drives me to actions that I don't really want to do, don't approve of, and know are wrong. I hope I am no less human for being dry, twenty-years-plus dry, in AA.

The bad old years, the years of suffocating in the deep morass of alcoholism, are years I could have used to good advantage had I not been trapped by this hideous disease. There were seven or eight years before I found AA - oh, how I could have used those years! But they were not wasted; they stripped me of everything, including self-respect; but they made me ready for the happiness of the last twenty years in AA.

Come on, man, join us! Be happy, too. All you have to do to change your life is change your mind.

E.B.R., Manhattan, N.Y.

HE WHO LOSES HIS LIFE

An ambitious playwright, his brains got so far ahead of his emotions that he collapsed into suicidal drinking. To learn to live, he nearly died.

I REMEMBER the day when I decided to drink myself to death quietly, without bothering anyone, because I was tired of having been a dependable, trustworthy person for about thirty-nine years without having received what I thought was a proper reward for my virtue. That was the day, that was the decision, I know now, when I crossed over the line and became an active alcoholic. Perhaps a better way of saying it is that, on that day, with that decision, I no longer fought drinking as an escape. Rather, I embraced it-I must in honesty admit it-with a great sense of relief. I no longer had to pretend. I was giving up the struggle. Things weren't going as I thought they should, for my greater enjoyment, comfort and fame; therefore, if the universe wouldn't play my way, I wouldn't play at all. I, a man of steel, with very high ideals, well brought up, an honor student and the recipient of scholarships and prizes, a boy wonder in business-I, Bob, the author of this essay, looked and saw that the universe was beneath my contempt, and that to remove myself from it was the only thing of dignity a man could do. Since, perhaps, suicide was a bit too drastic (actually, I was afraid), dry martinis were chosen as the slow, pleasant, private, gradual instrument of self-destruction. And it was nobody's business, nobody's but mine. So I thought.

Within a month, the police, the hospital authorities, several kind strangers, most of my friends, all of my close relatives, and a few adepts at rolling a drunk and removing his wrist watch and wallet had been involved. (There was a time, for about three months, when I bought a ten-dollar wrist watch every pay day-that is, every two weeks. Since it was wartime, I explained to the somewhat startled shopkeeper that I had many friends in the service whom I was remembering with a watch. Perhaps, without realizing it, I was.)

On that day of decision, I didn't acknowledge that I was an *alcoholic*. My proud southern blood would have boiled if anyone had named me such a despicable thing. No, it can best be explained in a little phrase I coined and sang to myself: "What happened to Bob? Bob found alcohol!" And having sung that phrase, I'd chuckle with amusement, turning into irony turning into self-contempt turning into self-pity, at the sad fate of Bob, that wonderful, poor little motherless boy who was so smart in school and who grew up to accept responsibility so early and so fast and who staggered under his burdens without a whimper until the time came when he thought he was too good for this world and so he ought to be out of it. *Poor Bob!*

That was one aspect of it, and a true one. There were several others. There was loneliness. There was the necessity for sticking to a job I hated, a dull, repetitive job performed in association with other men I had nothing in common with . . . performed for years on end, because the money was needed at home. There was the physical aspect; to be the youngest and the runt of the brood of children, to have to wear glasses very early and so to be teased, to be bookish and bored in school because the captain of the football team *could not* translate Virgil and yet was the school god while you, *you*, you little shrimp, were the school egghead, junior size and an early model.

There was the father one lost respect for at the age of eleven, because the father broke his solemn word in a circumstance where you, eleven years old, had assumed guilt when you were innocent but the father would not believe you, no matter what; and to ease his suffering you "confessed" and were "forgiven," only-months later-to have your "guilt" brought up-only he and you knew what he was talking about-brought up in front of the stern grandmother. The sacred word was broken and you never trusted your father again, and avoided him. And when he died, you were unmoved. You were thirty-five before you understood your father's horrible anguish, and forgave him, and loved him again. For you learned that he had been guilty of the thing he had accused you of, and his guilt had brought suffering to his entire family; and he thought he saw his young son beginning his own tragic pattern.

These things were all pressures. For by thirty-five I had been drinking for a few years. The pressures had started long ago. Sometimes we are told in AA. not to try and learn the reasons for our drinking. But such is my nature that I must know the reason for things, and I didn't stop until I had satisfied myself about the reasons for my drinking. Only, having found them, I threw them away, and ordered another extra dry martini. For to have accepted the reasons and to have acted on them would have been too great a blow to my ego, which was as great, in reverse, as my body was small.

In my twenties, I found Edna St. Vincent Millay's verse:

"Pity me the heart that is slow to learn
What the quick mind sees at every turn."

That couplet contains most of my reasons for drinking. There was the love affair which was ridiculous-"imagine that midget being able to fall in love!"-and my head knew it while my heart pumped real, genuine anguish, for it hurt like hell, and since it was first love, things have never been quite the same. There was the over-weening ambition to be the world's greatest author, when-at thirty-nine-I had nothing of importance to say to the world. There was the economic fear which made me too timid to take any action which might improve my circumstances. There was the sense of being "misunderstood," when as a matter of fact by my middle twenties I was quite popular, although I hadn't grown much bigger physically. But the feeling was a crutch, an excuse. It was my "secret garden"-bluntly, it was my retreat from life, and I didn't want to give it up.

For a while, for a long time, we can endure the intellect's being ahead of the emotions, which is the import of Millay's couplet. But as the years go by, the stretch becomes unbearable; and the man with the grown-up brain and the childish emotions-vanity, self-interest, false pride, jealousy, longing for social approval, to name a few-becomes a prime candidate for alcohol. To my way of thinking, that is a definition of alcoholism; a state of being in which the emotions have failed to grow to the stature of the intellect. I know there are some alcoholics who seem terribly, terribly grown-up, but I think that

they are trying to make themselves *think* they are grown-up, and the strain of their effort is what is causing them to drink—a sense of inadequacy, a childish vanity to be the most popular, the most sought after, the most of the most. And all this, of course, is, in the popular modern jargon, "compensation" for immaturity.

I wish I knew a short cut to maturity. But I wanted a cosmos, a universe all my own which I had created and where I reigned as chief top reigner and ruler over everyone else. Which is only another way of saying, I had to be *right all the time*, and only God can be that. Okay, I wanted to be God.

I still do. I want to be one of His children, a member of the human race. And, as a child is a part of his father, so do I now want to be a part of God. For always, over and above everything else, was the awfulness of the lack of meaning in life. Now, for me, and to my satisfaction, I know the purpose of life: The purpose of life is to create and the by-product is happiness. *To create*: Everyone does it, some at the instinct level, others in the arts. My personal definition, which I submit as applying only to myself (although everyone is welcome to it who wants it), includes every waking activity of the human being; to have a creative attitude towards things is a more exact meaning, to live and to deal with other human beings creatively, which to me means seeing the God in them, and respecting and worshipping this God. If I write with the air of one who has discovered the obvious, which is to say, the eternal truths which have been offered to us since the beginning, forgive my callowness; I had to find these things out for myself. Alas for us men toward whom Shaw hurled his cry, "Must a Christ be crucified in every generation for the benefit of those who have no imagination?"

My serious drinking covered about seven years. In those years I was in jail nine times, in an alcoholic ward, overnight, twice; and I was fired from three jobs, two of them very good ones. As I write these words, it seems incredible that these things should have happened to me, for they are, truly, against all my instincts and training. (Well! I started to cross out that last sentence, but decided to let it stand. What a revelation of ego and arrogance still remaining in me—as if *anyone*, instinct and training apart, *likes* to be in jail or in an alcoholic ward or fired from his job. After nearly eight years of sobriety in A.A., I still can set down such thoughts, "against my instinct and training," showing that I still consider myself a "special" person, entitled to special privileges. I ask the forgiveness of the reader; and from now on I shall try to write with the humility I honestly pray for.)

A pattern established itself. I never was a "secret" drinker, and I never kept a bottle at home. I'd visit one bar after another, having one martini in each, and in each hoping to find some one interesting to talk to. Actually, of course, I wanted some one to *listen* to me, because when I had a few martinis inside, I became the great author I longed to be; and the right listener was in for some pretty highflown theories of literature and of genius. If the listener were drunk enough, the lecture might go on through several martinis, which I was glad to pay for. If he were still sober, chances are that very quickly I put him down as a Philistine with no appreciation of literary genius; and then I went on to another bar to find a new victim.

So it was that in alcohol I found fulfillment. For a little while, I was the great man I wanted to be, and thought myself entitled to be just by reason of being me. I wonder if ever there has been a sillier reason for getting drunk all the time. Sobering up, the mind that was ahead of the emotions would impel the question: What have you written or done to be the great man? This question so insulted the emotions that clearly there was only one thing to do, go and get drunk again, and put that enquiring mind in its proper place, which was oblivion.

Depending on the stage of drunkenness, eventually I either fought or went to sleep. Brandishing my "motto," which was "A little man with a stick is equal to a big man," sometimes I varied the literary lecture by a fight with a big man, selected solely because he was big and I was little. I bear a few scars on my face from these fights, which I always lost, because the "stick" existed only in my mind. So did the waterboy on the high school football team attempt to revenge himself on the big brother who was the star quarterback; for I was the waterboy and my brother was the star quarterback, innocent of everything except the fact that he was a star quarterback.

When sleep overtook me, my practice was to undress and go to bed, wherever. Once this was in front of the Paramount Theatre in Times Square. I was down to my shorts, unaware of wrong-doing, before the ambulance got there and hauled me off to a hospital from which anxious friends rescued me, later that night.

Still another friend and temporary host received me at four in the morning from the charge of a policeman who had found me "going to bed" in a garage far from the last place I could remember having been, a fashionable bar and restaurant in the theatrical district of New York, to which I had repaired after my date for that evening, a charming lady of the theatre who had refused my company for obvious reasons. This time, whoever had rolled me had taken my glasses as well (they were gold). When the policeman released me to my stupefied and exasperated friend at four in the morning, I went to my traveling bag and groped until I found-well, let the officer speak: "Ah," said the policeman, "he's got anuder pair, t'ank God!" Thank *you*, Mr. Policeman, wherever you are now.

I mentioned that this friend was my temporary host. Need I add that such was the case because I had no money to provide a roof over my head? Still, I had had funds sufficient to get plastered because that, of course, was more important than paying my own way.

Once, or even twice, such incidents might be amusing. Repeated year on end, they are horrible-frightening and degrading; a chronicle of tragedy which may be greater because the individual undergoing the tragedy, myself, knew what was happening, and yet refused to do anything to stop it. One by one, the understanding friends dropped away. The helpful family finally said, over long distance, that there would be no more money and that I could not come home.

I say, "refused to do anything to stop it." The truth is, I did not know how to stop it, nor did I want to, really. I had nothing to put in the place of alcohol, of the forgetfulness, of the oblivion, which alcohol provides. Without alcohol, I would be *really* alone. Was I the disloyal sort who would turn his back on this, my last and truest friend?

I fled, finally, after having been fired from my war job by a boss who wept a little (for I had worked hard) as he gave notice for me to clear out. I went back home, to a job of manual labor where for a little while I was able to keep away from alcohol. But not for long; now, for five Friday nights in a row, I went to jail, picked up sodden with beer (which I always disliked, but which was the only drink available); in jail five consecutive Friday nights in the town where I had grown up, where I had been an honor student in high school, where a kindly uncle, bailing me out, said, "Bob, our family just doesn't do this sort of thing." I had replied, "Uncle, give the judge ten dollars, or I'll have to work it out on the county road." I was in hell. I wandered, craving peace, from one spot to another of youthful happy memory, and loathed the man I had become. I promised on the grave of a beloved sister that I would stop drinking. I meant it. I wanted to stop. I did not know how. For by now I had been exposed once to A.A., but I had treated it as a vaudeville and had taken friends to meetings so that they too could enjoy the fascination of the naked revelation of suffering and recovery. I thought I had recovered. Instead, I had gotten sicker. I was fatally ill. A.A. had not worked for me. The reason, as I learned later, was that I had not worked for A.A. I left this home town, then, after I had made a public spectacle of myself in the presence of a revered teacher whose favorite pupil I had been. I could not face the boy and youth I was in the reality of the contemptible man I had become.

Back to the big city, for another year of precarious living, paid for largely by one or two friends I still had not milked dry or worn to exhaustion with demands on their bounty. I worked when I could-piddling jobs I thought them. I was not capable of anything better. I stumbled agonizedly past the theatre where in years gone by a great star had played my play. I had even borrowed money from her, over her protest: "Bob, please don't ask me to lend you money-you're the only one who hasn't." I took her money, though; I had to have it. It paid for a ten-day binge which was the end of my drinking days. Thank God that those days are gone.

On another small borrowed sum, I went up into the country to the home of a doctor I had known since boyhood. We worked in five below zero weather, fixing on an elm tree

a wrought iron device which modestly proclaimed that he was indeed a country doctor. I had no money-well, maybe a dime-and only the clothes I stood in. "Bob," he asked quietly, "do you want to live or die?"

He meant it. I knew he did. I did not remember much of the ten-day binge. But I remembered the years of agony preceding the binge, I remembered the years I had thrown away. I had just turned forty-six. Maybe it was time to die. Hope had died, or so I thought.

But I said humbly, "I suppose I want to live." I meant it. From that instant to this, nearly eight years later, I have not had the slightest urge to drink. I chose to believe that the Power greater than ourselves we ask for help, wrapped my shivering body in loving warmth and strength which has never left me. The doc and I went back into the house. He had a shot of brandy against the cold and passed me the bottle. I set it down and made myself a cup of coffee. I have not had a drink of anything alcoholic since January 12, 1947.

Please do not think it ended so simply and so easily. Simply, yes, it did end; for I had changed my mind about alcohol, and it stayed changed. But for the next years, I worked hard and exultantly in A.A. In the nearby little town there was a plumber who once had tried to get an A.A. group going. I went over and met him, and we two started the group up again. It is going strong still, these eight years later, and some of its members have been of great influence for good in state-wide A.A. work. I myself have been lucky enough to help out. I have had the joy of seeing many a human being, down and out, learn to stand straight again, and to proceed under his own power to happiness in life. I learned the true meaning of bread cast upon the waters.

There were debts totaling nearly ten thousand dollars to be paid off. They are almost paid; the end is in sight. I have been allowed to build an entirely new career in a field I had never worked in. I have published a book covering certain aspects of this field which has been well-reviewed and which is helping other people. I have been appointed to the faculty of my old school, to teach in my new field. All of my family and loved ones, all of my friends, are nearer and dearer to me than ever before; and I have literally dozens of new friends who say they cannot believe that a short eight years ago I was ready for the scrap heap. When I remark that I have been in jail nine times, and in an alcoholic ward twice, they think I'm kidding, or possibly dramatizing for the sake of a good yarn. But I know I'm not. I remember how horrible jails are, how dreadful a thing it is to be behind steel bars. I wish we did not have to have jails; I wish every one could be in A.A. and if every one were there would be no need for jails, in my opinion.

For I am happy. I thought I could never be happy. A happy man is not likely to do harm to another human being. Harm is done by sick people, as I was sick, and doing dreadful harm to myself and to my loved ones.

For me, A.A. is a synthesis of all the philosophy I've ever read, all of the positive, good philosophy, all of it based on love. I have seen that there is only one law, the law of love, and there are only two sins; the first is to interfere with the growth of another human being, and the second is to interfere with one's own growth.

I still want to write a fine play and to get it on. I'd gladly do it anonymously, as I have done this brief account of my struggle with alcohol-merely to present certain ideas for the consideration of the reader. I don't care too much about personal fame or glory, and I want only enough money to enable me to do the work I feel I can perhaps do best. I stood off and took a long look at life and the values I found in it: I saw a paradox, that he who loses his life does indeed find it. The more you give, the more you get. The less you think of yourself the more of a person you become.

In A.A. we can begin again no matter how late it may be. I have begun again. At fifty-four, I have had come true for me the old wish, "If only I could live my life over, knowing what I know." That's what I am doing, living again, knowing what I know. I hope I have been able to impart to you, the reader, at least a bit of what I know; the joy of living, the irresistible power of divine love and its healing strength, and the fact that we, as sentient beings, have the knowledge to choose between good and evil, and, choosing good, are made happy.