

THAT FIRST STEP IS THE TOUGHEST

We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable.

The fellow who said that the first step off the Empire State Building was the toughest might well have been talking about the AA program. I had four problems which kept me from even trying the First Step and two more problems when I finally tried it. The whole process took three years. You see, I could do "controlled" drinking (meaning that I didn't get slobbering, falling-down drunk) sometimes for as long as several months. I would start with wine or beer on some "special occasion" and after one drink stop with no effort at all. So where's the problem? Since there was none, I would try something more or stronger a few days later. It might take months before I got so unmanageably drunk that I had to be lugged off to the hospital--a couple of times in a straitjacket.

Problem #1. They say that lower levels of intelligence are unable to identify the relationship between cause and effect if the two are separated in time. There's supposed to be a remote tribe somewhere that has never figured out what causes babies.

The fact that I failed repeatedly to relate the one innocent drink to the eventual drunk says something uncomplimentary about my intelligence. That innocent first drink lit the fuse of an immutable mechanism that kept on ticking until it exploded into another drunk. But it took all of three years for me to acknowledge the causal relationship. Some people get drunk right away. I just happened to have a long fuse.

Problem #2. This was the successor to each struggle with Problem #1. After each drunk, I dried out, I ate well, I exercised. Pretty soon I felt I could lick anything that came down the pike--including booze. My thinking went like this: "Don't tell me that anyone in as good shape as I am who feels as well as I do can't take a drink or two from time to time.

Furthermore, I know the danger signs. I'll just stop when I feel myself beginning to get tight. There's certainly no sense in my giving up drinking entirely. No one would want my company and no way I could have any fun." We all know the answer to this: Our physical and emotional well-being has no effect on our ability to handle alcohol.

Problem #3. I have never encountered anything in life I could not achieve, provided I gave it my total energy and concentration. It's a sign of weakness and an acceptance of defeat to admit that I can't do something myself and have to turn to others for help--and strangers at that. I'd rather die than submit myself to that kind of humiliation. A couple of times I darn near did die.

Problem #4. Where do they get this "life is unmanageable" stuff? I am holding down a good job. I am paying my bills. I have a wife and kids and a good roof over our heads. If I can do all these things, my life is certainly not "unmanageable." Q.E.D., why should I join AA, have to go to all those meetings and associate with all those stuffy people?

The four problems described above were what prevented me from even trying Step One. Then when I did try it, here is what I encountered.

Problem #5. What's this intellectually dishonest ploy about, not taking a drink for just one day? I know perfectly well that they intend that I should never take a drink as long as I live. I'm not going to participate in that kind of self-delusion. It may make the future awfully grim, but I've got to make up my mind never to take a drink from now till the day they bury me.

Problem #6. They tell me to ask for help from a Higher Power. If there is a "Higher Power" (which I doubt), then he must be a malicious one rather than a benevolent one. He's fixed it so I can never have any fun for the rest of my life. I can just see myself asking Him for help!

So much for the problems. How did AA guide me past these six roadblocks to my sobriety?

First of all, my sponsor and others reviewed my history with me, over and over again, and were able to demonstrate beyond contradiction that: The first drink--any drink--lit a fuse which led inexorably to a drunk. Neither good health, happy circumstances in my life, nor any other factor could stay the burning of that fuse.

Not all my so-called intelligence, not my ability, and not my will power had been able to control my drinking.

So where was the intelligence in trying the same thing over and over again with the same disastrous result?

Maybe intelligence would dictate that I try something else--like getting some help?

Finally, about my conviction that my life was "manageable," Webster cites one of the definitions of manage, "to achieve one's purpose."

Was I achieving any purpose--even the purpose of handling my drinking—to say nothing of the fact that my home life and my family were a shambles, my health was cracking at the seams, and I was barely holding on to my job? That doesn't sound as though I were managing. And if not, perhaps it's because I am powerless over alcohol.

So now I am grudgingly willing to admit that the First Step may possibly apply to me. How do I go about implementing this admission and making it a part of my basic thinking about myself?

They tell me that the sine qua non is that I must ask for help. It seems that the most important four-letter word in AA is "talk." I've got to start talking to other members of AA about my feelings and the struggle I'm having in trying to practice the program. And the one I should talk to most is a sponsor.

This makes Job One the finding of a sponsor--someone whose sobriety I respect and to whom I can talk with reasonable comfort.

So I listen to different people at meetings and chat with some of them. Afterward I finally pick one with whom I have a lot in common outside of AA and who seems to be very comfortable in AA. When he agrees to be my sponsor, I start talking. I am surprised to discover that talking about my problems, rather than proving embarrassing, turns out to be encouraging and helpful, very helpful.

Job Two is to ask for help from a Higher Power (which I am not at all sure exists). But I figure that as long as I have gone this far in trying AA, I might as well keep on going. So I gulp and start every morning asking this Higher Power for help and thanking him every night.

Job Three is to yield on the "intellectual dishonesty" problem and give a try to this one-day-at-a-time delusion. I find that, while the assumption of having only this one day to contend with may be a delusion, it sure works. I can do a better job today because I've got an accomplishment which gives me a lift to tackle the next day. Instead of moping over the past and fearing the future, I am free to concentrate on today. It's the most productive delusion I have ever encountered.

It has been almost half a lifetime since I finally succeeded in taking that First Step. The struggle was so intense that I remember the whole experience rather vividly. It has been many years since the thought of a drink has even crossed my mind. I want to keep it that way.

So every morning when I say my prayers and confirm to my Higher Power that I am an alcoholic, I picture a specific favorite drink (frequently a dry martini with a twist) and, at the same time on my mental projector, I run a few feet of film of a specific alcoholic episode.

Then I call to mind how, when I first forced open my eyes at the end of a drunken episode, I was overcome by a dread horror of facing anyone or anything. I was desperate to cringe into my skin. I wanted to be a turtle so I could pull back into my shell. That would lead me to a frantic search for some basis--any basis--for accusing someone else of being the cause of my behavior.

By recalling these events and emotions I lock together the first drink and the inevitable consequences thereof. If I should ever reach for one, I am sure that projector would start running.

At that point, I ask my Higher Power--oh, yes, I almost forgot to say that He has proven to me that he exists--I ask Him to help me stay away from a drink for that day. And he does.

This is my way of taking the First Step once again every single day.

January 1992 AA Grapevine