

Don't Sell the Newcomer Short!

Jack is an alcoholic who lives in a comfortable Chicago suburb. Years ago, he recognized his drinking problem and joined AA. He went to meetings regularly and frequently. His drinking got worse. He continued to go to meetings and every few weeks or months, he got drunk. His life became more unmanageable, and he went to more meetings. This continued for twelve years of meetings and drunkenness. In all these years, Jack never worked the Twelve Steps. Why not? "I didn't understand how and was ashamed to ask," he said. Nobody explained to him that he got drunk because he hadn't worked the program.

Finally, he got drunk again and this time something happened. He ran into some AA's who told him that "how it works" means that this is how the program works. They guided him each Step of the way in working the Twelve Steps. In a period of twenty-four hours, he declared, "I took Step Three aloud with another AA as it suggests on page 63 of the Big Book." I wrote a "searching and fearless" Fourth Step and then took my first Fifth Step with another AA member, who took his with me at the same time. Then we discussed Steps Six and Seven and prayed to have our character defects removed. Then, with his help, I listed the people I had harmed, and we talked about making direct amends starting right then. I began with my wife that same evening. I did more work with the Steps in twenty-four hours than I had done in twelve years around AA before that day.

That happened in November 1971, and Jack has been sober ever since. He's made all his amends. He's continued to work every one of the Steps, including a number of Fourth and Fifth Steps. Changes within him are reflected in a dramatically better life for him and his family. With a rueful smile, Jack says, "I'd have done those things much sooner, but no one ever showed me how."

Jack is talking about sponsorship he didn't receive for twelve miserable years. For a dozen years, he heard about an "Individual" program where members take what they want and leave what they find distasteful. He went to meetings where people got in touch with their feelings instead of with the Twelve Steps. He stayed drunk. Immediately upon working the Steps, he began to experience continuous sobriety. He found the AA message. That message is far more than just not drinking. It's the witness by men and women who have found a life so good, so joyous, and so useful that they don't have to drink any more. It describes a way of living that offers hope, meaning, and direction and it provides specific tools in the Twelve Steps that enable each of us to become what we should be. It works as effectively for a new AA member as it did for Jack. It's axiomatic that I can't give away what I haven't got. Unless I work the Twelve Steps on a continuing, lifetime commitment, there are three things I won't understand: (1) what the AA message is, (2) how to experience it, and (3) how to help another alcoholic find it.

The kind of change that Jack describes will be experienced by any alcoholic who wants to stay sober and will follow the directions in the program. This will work, too, for the AA member who has been sober a number of years and finds himself suffering depression, anxiety, fear, hostility, and boredom. Invariably, in my experience, these symptoms are the result of inadequate work with the Steps. Work the Steps and the symptoms disappear. Sponsorship is carrying the message, and the Big Book outlines precisely how to do it. Just staying sober does not bring manageability to our lives. That results from working the Steps that follow Step One, and each of us will be really healthy to the degree that we apply this program.

AA on Toast

February 1956 AA Grapevine

This is what I told Joe: "There are no musts in AA. Take it cafeteria style--take it your own way. Don't worry about the spiritual part of the program. Take the First Step, but never mind the rest of them right now. Just stay away from the first drink for twenty-four hours. It's that simple. We're all here to help you. Call us any hour of the day or night. . . ."

I pitched this woo at Joe, a reluctant newcomer, and he said "I do." He admitted he was an alcoholic. I was proud of my easy conquest. But the honeymoon ended abruptly a few weeks later. Joe phoned me at 3:30 A.M.--drunk as a skunk.

When I refused to come to his aid at that hour he threw my loving words back in my teeth:

"You shed you'd come anytime, dayernight."

I told him he knew his way around by now. "Why did you wait until after taking the first drink?"

"I'm a nalcoholic, remember?" Joe said. "You shed I got a disease." I hung up in disgust.

Months passed and Joe was still kicking it around. Finally, when he landed in the alcoholic ward of a hospital, I visited him to "straighten out his thinking." Instead, here is what happened:

"Look," Joe said, "I really am an alcoholic and I need this program. I'm willing to do anything necessary to stay sober--but, if you'll forgive me for saying so, I think you were too anxious to have me join quickly. I'm sure you thought it was for my own good, but it would have been better if you had laid all the hard facts on the line. I was ready for the 'blood, sweat and tears' kind of talk--after the beating I'd taken--but you made it sound like pie in the sky. You sold me AA on toast, with truffles, under glass."

I was incensed. Here was an ungrateful pigeon with a resentment against me, his sponsor.

"What do you mean, Joe?" I said. "Didn't I tell you it was the first drink that did it?"

"Yes, but you also said there were no musts. Well, from now on I choose to make that first drink a must not twenty-four hours at a time. I've attended a lot of meetings, in spite of my relapses, and I've kept my ears sharpened when serene-looking oldtimers spoke.

"I heard many of them say they tried to take the Twelve Steps in just the order they were numbered. They said the founders must have had some reason for this succession. I've even heard several former agnostics say that they at least tried to pray to a Higher Power as soon as they found AA--if only to say, 'Please' in the morning and 'Thank you' at night for the gift of their sobriety."

"Well," I interrupted, "I now do that, too, of course, but I backed away from it when I was a newcomer and I thought--"

"I know. You hoped this would 'rub off' on me later, and you were afraid of scaring me away with the 'God stuff.' Well, I've since observed that alcohol is only mentioned in two of the Twelve Steps and that practically all of them are spiritual steps. I wondered why you glossed over this fact and told me not to worry about the spiritual 'angle'--when the program itself is largely a spiritual one."

"Most newcomers are so fogged up with alcohol they're not ready to accept Step Two and the ones that follow," I said.

"But Step Two says 'Came to believe'," said Joe. "It doesn't say you've gotta believe right this minute! I heard one old-timer say it took him over a year before he came to believe--but he kept working at it, and trying. I don't mean to be critical, pal, but you didn't even tell me to try. You just said to relax. . .not to worry about the Steps or God or anything. You said Easy Does It, but you made it too damn easy for me. I'm really grateful for all you did, but if I ever have a Twelfth Step case, I'm going to tell him: 'Easy does it--but do it. Get the lead out of your pants, bub. This is a program or action!'"

"Move over, Joe," I said, "you've got a Twelfth Step case right now--and that's me. How about switching seats, and you be my sponsor from now on?"

Joe grinned from ear to ear. I was really proud of him.

"Okay, pal, you asked for it," he said. "But I want you to remember one thing: Unless you want a swift kick in the rear, just don't call me up in the middle of the night after you've had that first drink!"

It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

P.S. Ever since, I've been dishing out AA plain and simple--no toast, no truffles! Yes--it works.

H. L.
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A TRAIN STATION CALLED ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS from Archie M.

May I tell you what I was like for about 2 years as I hung around a train station called "The Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous"?

I was like a lot of people sitting around a railroad station (talking the talk) thinking I was on a train. Everybody was talking about travel (sober living by working the Steps), and I heard the names of stations like Serenity, Peace of Mind, Usefulness, a Sense of Direction, Release from Worry, Happiness, Freedom, etc. and I thought I had a ticket (attendance at plenty of meetings, learning how to talk the talk), and there was the smell of baggage around me (sober people, walking the walk, not just dry like me) and a great deal of happiness (by those working the Steps and working with others), and as I sat there I thought I was on a train (emotionally sober).

But I wasn't. I was just physically sober and very, very dry. I only started to get emotionally sober when I first bought a ticket for my new life (making a decision to turn my will and my live over to the care of God, Step 3) and then by getting on the train (by doing Steps 4 & 5).

Then I got pulled out of the station (Steps 6,7,8 & 9), enroute to my destination, a spiritual awakening, Step 12. I didn't walk out of the station; I got pulled out by God's power. I couldn't get out of the station on my own power.

CAN YOU GET OUT OF THE STATION ON YOUR OWN POWER?