

Drink, Die, Or Find A Better Way

I staggered into the rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous on the evening of May 14, 1975 a broken man. I had been drinking on a daily basis. I shook, I stank and I weighed almost 300 pounds. The little blue and silver sign with the Circle and Triangle drew me into that church as if it were a magnet.

Thus began my journey into the world of recovery. At 28 years old it appeared that I was the youngest person in the room. I sat down and was immediately surrounded by a couple of older gentlemen who placed their arms around me and held me throughout the meeting. I am not sure about what was said at the podium that night, but I remember the conversations after the meeting had closed.

They told me all I needed to do was, "Don't Drink and Go To Meetings." Each and every time I said, "BUT," they told me the only but I had was the one I sat on. They told me to make 90 meetings in 90 days, get a sponsor and that it will get better.

My sobriety date became May 15, 1975, the first full day without a drink. I followed directions, didn't drink, and went to meetings, got a sponsor who listened to my tales of woe and went to more meetings. I was no longer drinking but nothing else in my life changed.

Life was still unmanageable for me; I still exhibited almost all the same behaviors as in the past, only this time without the benefit of beverage alcohol. I continued to lie, cheat, steal, lose my temper and worst of all, be unfaithful to my wife. The very same wife who had stood by me throughout my drinking the six years we had been married.

Most of that behavior continued until one evening in 1980. I was attending my then home group, a young people's meeting, when the walls came crashing in. The speaker that evening began his talk by stating: "I had a bad day at work, came home, slammed the door, yelled at the kids, kicked the dog and almost hit the wife." He continued with, "But I didn't take a drink!"

Everyone in the small room clapped and told him he was a winner. "Just don't drink, no matter what." Tears rolled down my cheeks, he was describing my life and everyone affirmed the insanity of it as long as I didn't drink. There HAD to be more to recovery than that. If all I had to do was not drink and it would get better, why then was my whole life falling apart? I then decided that there were only three choices left; drink, die or find a better way. I wanted to drink every day. I didn't want to die and I knew of no other way to get better. I picked up a copy of Alcoholics Anonymous, the Big Book and began to read it.

I discovered the better way within the pages of A.A.'s Basic Text. I read about a program of recovery, much different from the one I had and different from the one I was hearing at the meetings. I wanted what those hundred men and women in the Big Book who had recovered from a seemingly hopeless state of mind and body had discovered. I wanted to be happy, joyous and free!

I then set out upon a spiritual search, reading everything I could on spirituality and religion. I spoke with long-term members of A.A. and members of the clergy from various religions and denominations; no one had the answer I was seeking.

At that time I was a member of A.A.'s Loners Program, meetings by mail. I was corresponding with a long-term member in Elyria, Ohio who was helping me to understand the history of A.A. and what it was that worked so many wonders for the original members. He told me that there was only one surviving member of the original 100 men and women. Roger gave me his address and suggested if I wanted to "get it from the horse's mouth," that I should write to this man.

I went one step further, I called this man and immediately knew, from the timbre of his voice and the serenity I felt over the phone that I wanted what he had. That man was Clarence H. Snyder, the Home Brewmeister of the Big Book.

Clarence and I spoke on the phone and corresponded throughout that year. I had not asked him to be my sponsor as yet but knew I was going to. How could he be my sponsor? He was living in the State of Florida and I was in New York. I arranged for him and his wife to come to New York to lead a spiritual retreat.

Upon his arrival in New York I immediately knew that this was going to be a turning point in my life. I wanted what he had and during the retreat, asked him to be my sponsor. He did not immediately accept my request. In fact, it took several requests before he felt I was ready.

That weekend, Clarence took me through the Steps, just as he had taken hundreds, if not thousands of others before me. He instructed me and introduced me into the program of Alcoholics Anonymous just as his sponsor, Dr. Bob had done back in 1938. When I got up off of my knees in that hotel room on April 4, 1981, I was a new man. The old had been washed away and I had been reborn.

In 1983, Clarence asked me if I would write his biography and the history of A.A. in Cleveland, Ohio. The book, Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers had been out for three years but Clarence felt that there was more to the story that needed to be told. He instructed me as to how he wanted the book to be written. He wanted a book that could be read by the average A.A. member, not a tedious scholarly work. He wanted to impart the flavor of the Big Book. He told me that this was to be a book written about an A.A. member, for A.A. members. He told me never to apologize for God, the personal God we both had shared together - the God he had introduced me to that evening at the retreat. The God Dr. Bob had introduced him to that day in February 1938 in Akron City Hospital.

Clarence reminded me, and told me never to forget that I was saved not in a church, but in Alcoholics Anonymous and never to mix the two together. He told me that my ministry was to "fix rummies." I was told that if a rummy wanted what I had, I was to tell them about, and introduce them to that Power greater than myself. The same Power Dr. Bob had introduced him to. The same "Great Physician", Dr. Silkworth had told those alcoholics who were declared hopeless could "cure" them.

from the Preface of the book "How It Worked: The Story of Clarence H. Snyder and the Early Days of Alcoholics Anonymous in Cleveland, Ohio" by Mitchell K.