

Tom W. is one of our AA pioneers. His sobriety date is July 17, 1971, he just celebrated 46 years. He taped his story in 2016 and the following has been excerpted from his tape with his permission. (Interviewed by Charles H. transcribed by Rhonda B. and edited by Charlie M.)

Interviewer: Tell me a little about your life before you found AA.

Tom: I was born in Brooklyn, New York. My entry into the world was a traumatic event. My mother died an hour after I was born. I was put in a foster home and I was there until I was 4 when my father came back from the Second World War and I was introduced to him and to the woman that would become my step-mother. That time in the foster home defined how I fit into the world: "I would make the decisions on what would go on in my life, what I would tolerate, and what I would do." So, if you told me to do something I normally rebelled against it if I chose not to do it. That was the groundwork for my personality, someone who was set up to drink.

I: What kind of a childhood did you have?

T: I was treated pretty well in the foster home but when it came to the authority idea I rebelled. Following directions and playing nice in the sandbox didn't seem to work for me. The woman, Mrs. B, who ran the foster home, must have been a pretty kind person because I have good thoughts about that time in my life.

I: As a child what did you want to be when you grew up?

Tom: Unfortunately, I had no dream(s) of the future. I always existed in a lot of fear as a young child. My fear was expressed as a bad temper. I just wanted to get through that day. I had no dream of being anything special you know, like an airplane pilot. If I was going to be anything I wanted to be a soldier. If I could fight, if I could be a combat soldier, I'd be all right. Not a bright out look on life.

I: How did you start drinking?

T: My introduction to alcohol came from my European background. My mother's step-father and that whole family was German-Hungarian and when they got together they drank a lot of whiskey. They also drank some beer and they gave the children these small jelly jars filled with half wine and half water. That was how they did it and it wasn't anything special. It was a normal way to have dinner with the family. At 13 I was introduced to my first Manhattan. It was given to me. I didn't have to take it. I took a lot after that. The first drink was very, very warm, almost hot going down through my esophagus and it filled my chest. Within a minute or two it affected my brain and there was a euphoric feeling that set me aside from everything physical and emotional. I really had found something that made me feel good as a person, not connected but calm. Again, not thinking deeply about it, it made me feel good. Like many other people who someday become alcoholics, I chased the feeling of that first drink for the rest of my life until I came into the program.

I: When and how did your drinking get out of control?

T: My drinking was out of control by the time I was 16 and I was drinking anytime I could. In the summer of my 16th year I was working at a YMCA camp in the kitchen. I wound up drinking with the two chefs. One night I drank a lot of shots and some beer and was dead drunk. I leaned against the wall and slid down to the floor. That was my first blackout, many more were to follow. At some point I walked down to where the kids were and I started to throw people around, clothes around, lockers around and I got in a bunch of trouble for that. That incident didn't stop my drinking and for the rest of that summer I went out drinking with those two men. At that age, drinking was important to me, not for social reasons but to feel OK.

They say alcoholism is a family disease. It certainly was in my family. My grandfather died at 42. My father had 2 brothers and a sister and a single German mother who raised them. They said that my grandfather died of consumption but they never talked about their father, ever, no stories. I asked them when I was a kid about grandpa and I asked again when they were in their 80s and still of sound mind, "What about your father?" The answer from the two brothers was, "We knew nothing about our father." My mother never said a word about him. Many years later I did a genealogy search and I found the New York City death certificate of my grandfather, George Valentine W. He died in 1914. The death certificate said the cause of death was acute alcoholism. My wife had always said alcoholism is genetic. Helen was in the fellowship and died with 31 years of sobriety.

Back to my story. At 16 my drinking was very important to me. It wasn't just a passing thing. It definitely helped me through my adolescence, "I didn't feel like I fit in." So, the more I could drink the more "I don't fit in" feeling was pushed aside. When I was 18 years old I was in a bar in New York City and I was by myself coming from my job back to New Jersey. I was drinking shots and beers in Washington Heights, New York. I said to myself, "If I could sit here the rest of my life, I would be happy." Looking back now many years later I think that was alcoholism at its rawest, if there is a raw measure for alcohol. I was chemically addicted to it and psychologically I was also addicted to drinking because it was the only thing I wanted to do. It made me feel good and that is how I wanted to be – in a state of feeling good. It made no difference that it came with throwing up, hugging the toilet and lying on the bathroom floor with my head on a cast-iron bathtub so my head didn't explode. Those things made no difference.

I: When did you hit bottom?

T: I hit bottom when I was 30 years old. It was the christening day of my third child. The day of the christening I went into a blackout. It was an October day and I wound up starting a fire in my fireplace. It was my house and I wanted a fire. Unfortunately for my family it was a hot day and I guess it didn't occur to me. I made the fire. I was in a blackout the rest of the time. At about 9:30 at night I came out of that blackout and I was in my living room and I realized where I was. That was the first time I ever remember coming out of a blackout. At that moment there was a noise on our screen porch, like an acorn that fell from a tree and hit it gently. To me it was as if a boulder had hit the house, almost knocked it off the foundation, so I had to go out and find out what happened, and the truth was a young boy threw something at a light just to see if he could hit it, and whatever it was went past the light, hit the screen porch, and now I was off on a mission. I wound up catching this kid and began beating him. I'm here in AA today sober and a free man because a neighbor was walking his dog and jumped on me, pulled me off, sent me home, and I guess sent the young boy home. That night, maybe 12:30 or later, I received call and it was the

family of the boy. They said they were having a family meeting and deciding what they were going to do. I asked if I could come over there to see them. They only lived a couple of blocks away. I went there and I talked to them and the father offered me a drink and that was the first time in my life that I ever refused a drink. In that conversation I said to the father, "I'm going to AA tomorrow." I don't know where that came from. I had never thought I was an alcoholic in my whole life, never. I drank because I drank and because I liked to drink. Truthfully, I had to drink, I had no choice. The consequences didn't really bother me. I had a bunch but they didn't bother me. The father said, "We're going to make a decision to have you arrested or not, whether we're going to call the police." So, I went home, not knowing what the outcome was going to be the next morning. When I got home and I got into bed I looked out of the window and I said out loud, "God if I wasn't drinking I wouldn't have done this." That was it. That was my moment of clarity, my moment of alcoholic desperation. It was the first time ever that I thought I had a problem with drinking.

I: When did you first hear of AA and from what source?

T: The first time I heard of AA was in college. In one of the sociology classes a professor brought in somebody as an AA speaker. He talked about his drinking and he talked about missing two days of work and that he realized that he had a problem and he went to AA. I heard that and I was quite unimpressed. I had lost so much time because of my drinking, worked so poorly at the jobs I had, and I thought how can you lose two days of work and go into this AA program. That was the extent of my knowledge of AA and I would have none of it. Thank you very much. It may be good for some people whoever they are.

I: How and when did you get started in AA?

T: That October night when I committed physical violence towards that boy. Sadly he was my paperboy. The next morning I tore out an ad for AA from our local newspaper and about 1:30 in the afternoon I went into a public telephone booth called this number that was on this piece of paper that had been in my pocket since probably 8am that morning and when they answered the phone the greatest thing happened in my life. A man answered it and I said my name and then he said, "I've been waiting for your call "boy" in a Texan accent. Well, up North you don't call people "boy." It just didn't happen. It didn't offend me but it was kind of different. He talked to me but after a couple of minutes he said to me, "I know about you." I asked hesitantly, "How do you know about me?" He said, "Your wife called me and told me about you." She had gone into the newspaper and found the number that was missing. She had called and told this guy all about me, all about my alcohol problems and everything. So, when I called I was a sitting duck. So, this wonderful guy, Lou M. from Isabella, Texas, said, "Do you think you cannot drink between now and 7:30? We'll pick you up and take you to a meeting. Would you like to go?" I said, "Yes" immediately because I still had in my mind what had happened the night before and my revelation to myself that if I hadn't been drinking I wouldn't have committed that particular act of violence. I finally connected that alcohol was a problem. I don't think I drank between then and the time they came to pick me up. We went to a 9pm meeting in Rutherford, New Jersey. I think it was, an open speaker meeting, lots of people. I got a cup of coffee because they said, "Get a cup of coffee," and I carried it to the table and as I was putting it down I started to shake. I spilled the coffee all over the table. They didn't look at me like I was crazy or anything. They said, "Don't worry." They cleaned it up. They got me another cup of coffee but they filled it halfway. They sat me down in front and there were two speakers and a leader. I remember a lot of what they said and I understood emotionally and it blew

my mind. I could not believe that I was hearing people talk about exact the same experiences I had had. I heard every word they said and everything they said I identified with without knowing the jargon of AA. You know, "identify don't compare." I identified. I heard my story. I heard my feelings. I heard my fears. That was what happened to me at my first meeting. It was unbelievable. I went there wanting to be sober but not knowing a thing about AA. I say this with humility. "I'm lucky that I came into AA as a desperate alcoholic." I had no fight left. I was finished. I didn't know it. When I sat down in that chair and heard those people, the grace of God washed over me. The fight was gone. The intellectual stuff was gone. In its place was a sliver of hope and a strong desire that I would be able to do this program of AA. Without it I was hopeless.

That first night when they brought me home and Lou said, "We have a Tuesday meeting in the town of Ridgewood," which was only 2 miles away. He told me the name of the church and the location. The next thing he said was, "Do you think you can get there at 8:00?" It was an 8:30 meeting. Timidly I said, "Yes, I can." I got there the next night and there they were, Lou M. was 3 year sober and the other guy that was in the front seat of the car was George C. and George was also 3 years sober. They were to be my saviors, my AA guys. They did that every night. Lou would say, "Tomorrow we're going to Hope Street, the oldest group in Ridgewood, would you be able to get there tomorrow?" They kept inviting me and for me that approach was important. They did not mandate me. They didn't demand anything. They saw that I was still pretty shaky. I should have gone to a detox but it was \$165 cash and at that point I couldn't pay my bills and I didn't have \$165 cash to pay for it. I shook and sweated at night because of the withdrawal and maybe a lot of you can identify with that.

I: What about step work?

T: Step work came as a natural part of being introduced to AA. The key thing George and Lou did for me was to say, "Go to lots of meetings, go to different types of meetings." There is a dual speaker meeting, go to at least one of those a week. Also, go to a step meeting where they read about a step and then talk about it. Then you go to a discussion meeting where a topic is thrown out and you keep mixing your meetings. Don't be one of those I only go to step meetings or I only go to something else. This was their experience so it became mine because I followed their way of getting sober. I believe it helped me because I was exposed then to the Big Book, to the 12 and 12, to step studying, to open speaker, and I love open speaker meetings because number one it's a time I go to a meeting where I keep my mouth shut and I listen to other alcoholics share their experience, strength and hope, which is so important for me. It keeps the program fresh. One of the things that they said to me early on and I think about it constantly is, "Keep your memory green," and the same thing they say in another form, "Remember your last drunk." I keep my memory green by remembering that last violent episode that I had that October night. It's important for me to remember that forever. When I go to AA, this is for real. This is not a passing fancy or something I just do because I have nothing better to do. This is something I have to do, but more importantly something I want to do.

I: Tell me about some of your experiences in AA

T: Early on I started to go to a beginner's meeting led by Phyllis B. and Pete A. both with about ten years sobriety. The beginners meeting was for people who had less than three months. The reason they had it that way is that new people could ask new people questions and not be embarrassed.

Sometimes there were only six of us there. It met for an hour and first thing they would ask you, "How was your week? Were you able to stay sober for the whole week?" If you had a problem or were fighting a drink what was that like? If you didn't drink, what did you do not to drink? I think it was the most basic wonderful way to introduce people to AA. This is before all the rehabs. We didn't call it treatment, we called it AA. I got a tremendous amount out of that beginners group because it was in a very intimate group. I didn't understand the importance of that word then.

Another part of my early sobriety involved the third person who was in that car the first night. His name was Howard D. and he was three days sober. We became inseparable friends for the next five years. If you saw Howard, you saw Tom. We did everything together. We went apple picking with our children. He had three children. I had three children. I was divorced. He was with his wife. We sort of like adopted each other as best buddies. I had dinner there a lot and together we painted the inside of his house. We went to meetings together all the time. I had never had a best friend. I was a bar drinker. I drank alone. I was there to drink not to talk.

The Big Book was an important part of my sobriety. When I first started to read it I couldn't understand it. I had done so much damage to myself that I would read a paragraph and then I would look at it and look at the words and have no comprehension of what I had read. It took me quite a while to start comprehending what it said but the good part is I kept going back to it little by little. Then, as I read the Big Book, the first 164 pages, every single thing I read was an answer to my recovery, to my alcoholism, to how I felt, how I thought, the way I drank, my rationalizations, my defiance of my life, my minimizing the consequences. All of these things were in the Big Book and obviously the solution. So, you laid out the solution in the Big Book and I never felt it was in a scornful, demeaning way. It was in a way that seemed like you invited me. I felt that I was invited into AA. Now maybe that was what I needed because of my personality and my weaknesses. I needed to be invited, not shoved in or yelled at. Maybe they knew this guy couldn't handle authority well, so, man, stay away from it if you want him to be a member. They did that and that's what worked for me. No authority in my coming into AA, nobody saying, "Get down on your knees and do the third step prayer because you've been in AA three days." Nobody said that to me. They said, "Can you come back tomorrow?" Using that approach kept me here.

I: Did you have a sponsor when you first came in?

Tom: Well, now that you know me a little bit you know about my authority problem. So no I didn't have a sponsor for the first couple of years. I had George and I had Lou. I talked to them a lot. I had "Russian John," they called him. I also talked to him a lot. One night I went to the Paramus Evergreen Group and there was a fellow talking, Jim M. from Morristown, and I liked what he said. I went up to him and asked him to be my sponsor. He said, "Yes." He laid down a couple of non-rules; call me whenever you want and go to meetings. I will meet you at a meeting anytime and anyplace you want me to. That was the end of it. So, I did. I went to a lot of meetings. I called him once in a while in the beginning, but not much. That phone weighed about 5,000 pounds. So that was part of it. Jim was my sponsor for 28 years. I loved him as a human being, as a person, as part of my life, as an intimate thread in my life. Jim set me on the path of my spiritual life. He was at my second wedding to my wife, Helen. We got married in 1980. We were both nine years sober and he was there for us and we were thrilled about that, so that's my sponsorship relationship. I was responsible to call my sponsor. My sponsor did not spoon feed me the program or indoctrinate me into "His Way." I think why AA worked for me specifically is it gave me a choice. It gave me

dignity. I was one of those people that did not need to be browbeaten. Some people say, "Well, some people need to get their ass kicked in AA. You got to tell them what to do." Well, I don't know. The program, the way it seems to be written and how I interpret it when I read it is an invitation, "Do you want to get sober? Good." It says in the Big Book if you want to go back out and drink some more that's your choice.

I would call Jim at 6:00 in the morning. We could talk before he was too busy. He would not let me go on and on about some terrible problem of the day. The first thing he would say to me was, "What step are you working on?" We would never discuss the problem. He would repeat it in a kind way, "What step are you working on?" What is Tom doing to change? Am I being part of my own solution? We stayed in touch and I was at his bedside the night before he died. He was in Intensive Care. I walked up to him, put my hand on his arm and I told him I loved him for the first time. That is what sponsorship can be. In our case it was 28 years of a relationship that meant everything. Sometimes a father figure, because I never had a relationship with my father and so sometimes Jim was that person. He was a person who I wanted to emulate, his spirituality, his way of living, his daily living the program "in all his affairs." That's how our relationship worked.

I: What were your feelings about AA initially and has it changed.

T: The thing that happened to me that first night in AA was that I found hope. I began to feel that maybe this would work and I could stop drinking. That was what I desperately wanted, to stop drinking. I was so enthusiastic about being in AA when I first got here that I could almost jump out of my skin. I had found an answer. I had found out how not to drink. I had many many problems and issues psychologically and emotionally to work through. I had to learn about myself, do an inventory, and work on my anger, which was not easy. I continued having tremendous feelings of joy that I was In AA sober. Now, I have just celebrated 45 years sober on July 17, 2016. I am, and I say this with deepest humility, as enthusiastic about my sobriety and about AA as I was in 1970. AA is the greatest thing that ever happened to me.

I'd like to share one last thing. As a daily part of my continuing spiritual life I say a sort of a prayer each morning. Its simple yet keeps me both grounded and grateful. Its very meaningful to my program. I say out loud. "Thank you God I'm sober."

Thank you for letting me share my experience, strength and hope.

I: Thank you Tom.