

Tom H. is one of Jacksonville's AA old-timers. Tom had his last drink in 1972 (50 years ago) and has been an active member of Alcoholics Anonymous since. Tom was interviewed last year, and the following has been excerpted from that interview with his permission. (interviewed by Dave S. and edited by Charlie M.)

David: Tom, tell us where you were born and how did it all start?

Tom: I was born in 1954 and I grew up in Rumson, New Jersey. I hit bottom and joined Alcoholics Anonymous at age 17. Many circumstances contributed to me joining AA as a teenager. I had a genetic predisposition to alcoholism, a strong family history, and a local culture that condoned alcohol excess. Also, I had childhood traumas and emotional sensitivity that probably contributed to my "early start" on the road to alcoholism.

When I was three years old, my two-year-old sister died from cancer. My mother drank alcoholically for the next eight years. My father distanced himself from the family and lived mostly with his girlfriend in New York City. These and other traumatic events influenced my character, and how I experience relationships today.

My father was a man of contradictions. He was a successful businessman with a strong, intimidating personality. And he was a narcissistic philanderer, given to fits of overpowering fears, depression, and explosive rage. He also could be compassionate and sensitive to the difficulties of people less fortunate than himself. He was the first one to recognize my alcoholism and direct me to Alcoholics Anonymous.

My mother died 5 years ago with over 50 years of continuous sobriety. Following a terrifying night of driving drunk with her 4 children, she had her last drink on October 30th, 1961. She was an active member of Alcoholics Anonymous and she was my role model in early recovery.

Age 14 at an all-boys boarding school, I began to drink and immediately fell in love with the effects of alcohol. Very soon I recognized that my reaction to drinking was different from my peers. I clearly remember wondering, "life is so much better with a few drinks, why don't people just drink all the time?"

Dave: How is your drinking different from nonalcoholics?

Tom: I am convinced that the reaction I have to alcohol is different than the reaction of a nonalcoholic. The essential fact of my alcoholism is that when I am drunk, I don't think I'm drunk. It feels the alcohol is not working and I want more. When I drank, I usually drank until I passed out. I stay sober today in part because I think drinking has the potential to be immediately fatal.

Alcohol made me feel so great that if I could drink all the time, I would. At age 16 that opportunity presented itself. I went to San Francisco with a friend and we lived unsupervised for 3 months. I had a fake driver's license and I drank every day. At the end of that summer, I was briefly suicidal for reasons I didn't understand. I didn't know I was depressed and it didn't occur to me that my feelings were related to my daily alcohol consumption.

I came back to boarding school for a year, rebelled, left, and enrolled in the public high school for my senior year. My drinking progressed and there were consequences. For a year, I drank two to three times a week until I blacked out. I had no control over how much I was going to drink when I started. And I couldn't stop drinking.

Dave: What got you to your first AA meeting?

Tom: One night I got picked up by the local police for breaking into a neighbor's house in a blackout. My father picked me up and told me what I needed to hear. He said, "Your mother is an alcoholic. She goes to AA. You're an alcoholic. You should go to AA". That seemed like a reasonable compromise because I thought I was going to get sent to an inpatient mental hospital.

Dave: You came in at 17 and you were still in high school. What that was that like?

Tom: It was awkward and very lonely. I never felt like I "fit in" with my high school classmates. Being a sober member of AA certainly didn't help that situation. Also, I felt like an imposter in AA. I was too young to belong in AA; my bottom wasn't low enough. I had hair down to my shoulders, rode a motorcycle, and worried about being drafted and sent to Viet Nam. AA in Rumson, NJ was suburban, middle-aged and upper middle class. I struggled to "identify, not compare". But I was terrified of drinking. I was afraid I would die. That is what I learned in my first 90 days in AA. I learned I was definitely an alcoholic and alcoholism was worse than I thought it was.

Dave: Tell me about your last drink.

Tom: It was March 19, 1972. I drove my girlfriend to the airport. She knew I was an alcoholic and she told me so. That night my mother asked me to take a young lady to the Young People's Meeting in Keyport, NJ. My plan was to stay sober until my girlfriend got back from her trip and win her heart with my new found sobriety. When she got back 2 months later, I was still going to AA, I was sober 60 days but I had another girlfriend!

Early on the thing that kept me sober was the fear of dying, fear of going to jail and fear of being confined to an insane asylum. At every AA meeting, I heard stories of people who had drunk like me, but they had continued until they lost their families, lost their jobs, had DTs, or went to jail. I heard stories of people who woke up from blackouts in jail or in a hospital. I knew that could happen to me. I knew that was in my future. I stayed sober largely because of fear.

Dave: You first had a plan to stay there for a couple of months. Was there a time that when you decided this was the life for you?

Tom: Yes and no. Right away there was something about Alcoholics Anonymous that appealed to me. It was okay to be different there. Everybody was different there. It was like the Island of Misfit Toys. I was beginning to appreciate the simple wisdom of the AA way of life. I wanted temporary relief from emotional pain and the consequences of my drinking, but I insisted on reserving my right to drink in the future. So, I did it one day at a time. I didn't want to become an AA member. I didn't want that identity or lifestyle. That wasn't me. I was seventeen. I didn't want to go to Denny's Diner on Friday night and drink coffee with a bunch of old alcoholics. I wanted to go to fraternity parties and look for college girls.

Dave: Then what happened?

Tom: After being sober about two years, as I walked into a Tuesday night men's meeting, the thought occurred to me, "why don't I just stop fighting and work the program". I felt a great relief. To this day I internally reserve the right to drink in the future; I still stay sober one day at a time. But on that Tuesday night with 2 years of sobriety I abandoned the idea that I was in a battle with the higher power over who would control my life.



Dave: Kind of a Step 3 moment?

Tom: Yes. You could say that. That was Step 3.

Dave: When you decided that this might be a longer-term thing for you, did you get a sponsor and start working the steps?

Tom: Again, I would answer, yes and no. I went to college and I got a sponsor named Harry, who pushed me to complete Steps 4 and 5. My 4th step was 80 pages long and there were parts I couldn't talk about because I thought they were too shameful. Slowly, Harry and I got through all 12 steps.

After freshman year of college, I was accepted to study in southern France for a year. Harry had a lot of concerns about me going over there and staying sober. His concerns were justifiable. I was NOT the AA poster boy. My commitment to my recovery was lukewarm at best. But I said, "Harry, if AA means I can't live the life I want to live then I might as well get drunk". In the end he gave me his blessing. I went to France and I stayed sober. It was amazing.

Dave: Did you go to meetings in France?

Tom: In France in 1975, there were no cell phones, no internet and very few AA meetings. To make a phone call I had to go to the post office and wait an hour. The General Service Office in New York published a catalogue of "AA Loners". Through that I began a weekly written correspondence with an American expat writer living in Paris. He was a wise man with great sobriety, and he was a professional writer. His letters were prompt and thoughtful. We exchanged letters every week for a year.

Dave: So, you came back from France, went back to college. What happened then?

Tom: I was still going to meetings. I worked in a hospital when my sister was admitted to a mental hospital. I decided to be a psychiatrist. I had been an underachiever most of my life. I was that student that scored high on standardized tests and had a low GPA. Everyone thought I was lazy and unmotivated. I realize today that I was depressed and had terrible low self-esteem. With two to three years of sobriety, the tools of the program had begun to do their work. Simple practices like doing my best and trusting God with the results took hold. I slowly abandoned my victim mentality. I was less depressed, and my academic performance soared. I went from being a C student to an A student and on March 19, 1977, five years after my last drink, I was accepted to Georgetown School of Medicine.

Dave: Did you go to AA meetings during medical school?

Tom: At Georgetown I had a rigid routine. There were classes in the AM, study early afternoon, attend the 4 PM meeting on P street in Georgetown, early light dinner, study some more, and early to bed. I did that roughly seven days a week for four years. When people tell me that they are too busy to go to meetings, they are talking to the wrong guy.

Dave: Tell us a little about your life after medical school.

Tom: I married my first wife, Carolyn, the mother of my 3 children when I was sober 10 years, and for 10 to 15 years she was my best friend. With more than a little spiritual pride, I thought that our marriage was bulletproof. I saw myself as a sober mature guy that would never get divorced. I self-righteously thought people who got divorced were quitters. Today, obviously, I see that differently. Divorce was the hardest thing I have experienced in recovery. And it was the most liberating. "...the process of gaining a new perspective was unbelievably painful!"

Dave: What was it like being a doctor, a husband, a father and an active member of AA?

Tom: Busy. It was really busy. Having a balanced life with career, family and recovery was a constant juggling act. I think I did an OK job. But it wasn't always pretty.

Dave: What was it like trying to live the principles with your kids?

Tom: I think it was good. The program taught me to put a high value on personal honesty and personal accountability, and patience. I think my three kids admired these characteristics in me, and today I see these characteristics in all three of my children. My 3 children are honest, disciplined and have a well-developed sense of personal accountability. They are willing to own their own part of things.

Dave: What do you do for service work?

Tom: Mainly I show up at meetings and I am available when called. I am more available now because my career has slowed down. I have always had a sponsor and I sponsor 2 - 3 guys. I speak at meetings, and I start new meetings. Over the years, meetings seem to have become bigger and more impersonal. It's important to start new meetings that are small, local, and more intimate. Actually, I'm starting a new meeting this week.

Dave: Is AA part of your social life?

Tom: One thing I've done consistently is celebrate significant life events for my AA friends. I regularly host birthday parties, wedding anniversaries, AA anniversaries and the like. I see social entertainment as part of my responsibility to my AA tribe.

Dave: How do you practice the program at work?

Tom: I practice the program at work the same way I do at home: honesty and accountability. And I try to keep the mood light. The most important thing I can bring to any relationship at work, at home, or in the fellowship is be happy. Negativity has an enormous cost. Keeping a daily written gratitude list helps me to stay positive.

Dave: Do you have concerns with respect to the health of Alcoholics Anonymous as a whole moving into the future?

Tom: Yes. I see parallels between the health and wellbeing of the fellowship and my own personal sobriety. Complacency is our biggest threat. "We are not cured of alcoholism. What we have is a daily reprieve contingent upon the maintenance of our spiritual program". To remain viable, my sobriety depends on willingness to let go of old ideas and on continued spiritual development. Similarly, I think that for the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous to remain vibrant and relevant, it must continue to evolve.

Dave: That's interesting. Can you give an example?

Tom: Many AA members see the fellowship as an established, stable and mature organization. That is an incomplete truth. AA is a young organization (85 years) compared to other service organizations. I would like more members to see AA as fragile and susceptible to extinction. I would like to see more individual alcoholics in AA start to think that unless we all do our part AA could become slowly irrelevant. We need to keep it alive for the next generation. AA needs leadership.

Dave: How could AA become irrelevant?

Tom: The social and cultural landscape of alcoholism has changed. In the early days of AA, the typical member was a middle-class Caucasian American male in his 50s whose drug of choice was alcohol. That is no longer true. That alcoholic subtype may actually be a minority. Most newcomers are under age 50, and drugs are part of their story. Many groups have tacitly adopted a "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy regarding discussion of drugs other than alcohol. People who have problems with drugs in addition to problems with alcohol, are allowed to attend AA meetings but they are subtly discouraged from talking about their drug related experience. They have kind of a second-class citizen status. When the number of people for whom alcohol was not the drug of choice exceeds the number of "pure" alcoholics, that is when AA could become less relevant. Old school culture dictates that our obligation is to the *alcoholic* who still suffers. I get that. But rigid adherence to that commitment could compromise AA's future.

I think dogmatism could kill AA. Exclusive adherence to a limited reading list of "AA approved literature" could limit our growth. I think there may come a time to rewrite the big book. If the Bible can be rewritten, can't the big book of Alcoholics Anonymous? To survive, AA has to be flexible like it was when the traditions were being hammered out. It is understandable that with success people can be afraid of change. A "let's not mess this up" mentality prevails. But the survival of the fellowship is like the success of the individual. It's grow or go.

Some parting thoughts:

1. Start more AA meetings. Members who commit to small intimate meetings stay sober.
2. Have a sponsor to improve the quality of your decisions and the quality of your life.
3. Sponsor others to survive the disease of alcoholism.
4. In spiritual growth, don't expect overnight miracles. Change takes time.
5. Meantime, remember, God uses us as we are, not as we think we should be.
6. Never stop going to meetings. Physical attendance is key to surviving the disease.

Dave: Thanks very much for sharing your thoughts today.