

Tom is a long-time member of AA. He is very active in AA and has 38 years of sobriety (DOS 6/3/86). He was interviewed earlier this year, and the following has been excerpted from that interview with his permission. (Interviewed by Kevin and edited by Charlie)

Tom: My name is Tom, and my sobriety date is June 3, 1986. I was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

I grew up in an alcoholic household, but I was surrounded by a lot of people who loved me. My alcoholic dad loved me even though he was not a happy man. The only time he was happy was when he was drinking. He teased me unmercifully when he was drinking and said that I would never amount to anything and that I was a jerk. It hurt my feelings to hear this in front of my mother and my younger brother. My brother was born with cerebral palsy. He never had any use of his hands, could not walk, and could barely speak. It was a tragedy for our family. My mother was a warrior, and she took care of him until he was 21 years old. She changed the diapers and fed him. She was terrific. My dad just wallowed in heartbreak over my brother's disability. My grandparents on both sides would take me in for the weekends to give my mother a break. These grandparents really, really loved me.

I believe I was born an alcoholic. I had an alcoholic personality for as long as I can remember. I was afraid. I was constantly crunched up inside. I didn't know what it was like to relax. The people around me loved me but just didn't get through. I never felt loved even though they loved me. I believe that was alcoholism. There seemed to be a shield between me and the rest of the world.

I used to think that the happiest day of my life was the day I left. My father drove me to downtown Pittsburgh and put me on the airport shuttle. I flew to Washington DC, where I went to college. The drinking age was 18 in Washington, and I had a great time. I like to tell people that I started drinking in Pittsburgh, but I really perfected my drinking in Washington. I went to the Zebra Room, and we got pizza and pitchers of beer. I went to Wit's End, and we got pizza and pitchers of beer. I would do somersaults on Massachusetts Avenue because I was so happy to be drunk. I loved everything about it. I loved drinking.

Out of college I found a job that I really loved, and I've been working for that company for over 50 years. In 1968 I married my college sweetheart. I thought that was going to fix me, but it didn't. I was unhappy. I was never very good at communicating with people and I couldn't tell this poor girl that I was not happy. I did a terrible thing to her. I would pick her up every day after work. I would drive into downtown DC and pick her up outside of her office. On this one particular day, I didn't pick her up. I just left her standing there on the corner of 17th and K because I was off drinking, and I didn't go home. I didn't call her. She called the cops reported me as a missing person. She called my boss. She called my mother. She called her mother. She called our friends. She was frantic. Something terrible must have happened to me. When I got home, she was waiting for me. She said, "Do you want a divorce?" I said, "Yes." It was one of the worst things I ever did to another human being. I just hit that girl with an emotional haymaker. She didn't deserve it. She was a good wife. I didn't want to be married anymore. Her father came up from Tennessee and changed the locks on my house. That ticked me off.

I tried being single. That was a disaster. I met another woman, we fell in love and got married in 1974. My wife and I had two children, one in 1979 and one in 1980. We built a house in the suburbs and had two cars in the garage.

We were transferred to Jacksonville in 1975. My alcoholism progressed to the point that after I got drunk, I became a jaywalker. I got a thrill out of skipping in front of fast-moving vehicles and I got away with it. Then I got caught and they found out. I was in legal trouble, financial trouble, marital trouble, and employment trouble. My wife had made the connection that there was some link between all this trouble that I was in and my drinking. I went to a psychiatrist because the boss sent me as it was clear to him that I was nuts because of this double life that I was living. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, pillars of the community by day, debauchery of the community by night.

I said I would stop drinking. And I tried. I mean, I really tried. I couldn't make it 24 hours on my own. For the last year of my drinking, I lived in that dark place where you're trying to get them to think you're not drinking but you actually are drinking more than ever and trying to hide it. It was excruciating. I started doing things like carrying paper bags filled with empty beer cans down to the end of my street and dumping them in the woods dressed only in my underpants.

One particular night I told my wife that I was going to help Steve with his computer. Later that night another friend called to get hold of me, and she called Steve to relay the message. Steve hadn't seen me, hadn't heard from me, and didn't have any idea that he would hear from me. I came through the kitchen door after my night of drinking. She asked me, "How is Steve?" I said, "Steve's great". She said, 'You don't know how Steve is because you weren't there.'" Caught, busted and big fight. She goes to bed, and I run away from home. I wind up at a motel on route 17, passed out and I think I vomited all over the bathroom. The next morning, I called her and as soon as she heard my voice she said, "I am divorcing you". She has no money, a mortgage, two kids and she's pregnant. We'd been married over 11 years, and I knew her well enough to know she was not one of those people who says stuff and doesn't do it. If she says it, she's doing it. I said, "I'm an alcoholic". And she said, "No kidding" and hung up. I didn't know what to do. I was flopping around. I called Alcoholics Anonymous. Elaine at intergroup answered and directed me to a meeting in Orange Park. I didn't go to that meeting. I called the care unit out at the beach and used the word insurance and the next thing I know I have two guys in the motel room with me. This was in effect my first AA meeting. I didn't go with them but called my friend Earl J. and asked him whether he could get me to Willing Way, which was the treatment center where he had gone. He said, "Yes I can but let me take you to a meeting first". Before meeting Earl I went to my doctor and after examining me he said, "Tom, you're a smart alcoholic." Now that was the nicest thing anyone had said to me in recent days. Then he gave me the punch line, "That's the worst kind". Later I met Earl at JABA, and he chewed me out for being late. We went into that meeting and sat down at a table. That was one month shy of my 40th birthday. I had a sensation in that room sitting in that chair next to Earl that I had never experienced in my entire life. I felt comfortable in a room full of people for the first time in my life. Everybody there except Earl was a stranger and I felt comfortable.

I saw a guy there I recognized but couldn't place. He was the overnight clerk at Starvin Marvin where I would pick up a 12 pack when I got off of work at 11:30pm. He had been the president of the Associated Press in New York City. He had drunk his way out of that job. What a message that carried to me about the progression of alcoholism. He is still sober today which carries the message of the power of Alcoholics Anonymous.

One night someone asked me, "Tom, are you willing to go to any length to stop drinking?" And I said, "yes, I'm willing to do that." He then suggested I go to 90 meetings in 90 days. I blurted out that I was a busy man. He said, "Tom, if you keep going the way you are, you'll be a lot less busy soon." That irritated me so I went to 120 meetings in 90 days. The most miraculous thing happened, I

didn't drink for 90 days. I was a man who drank every single day for 23 years. I never missed a day. This same fellow said to me, "Tom, when you get up in the morning, I suggest you get down on your knees and ask God to help you get through the day without taking a drink." He didn't ask me if I believed in God. He didn't ask me if I went to church. He said, "if you get through the day without taking a drink, I suggest you get back down on your knees before you get in bed and thank God for helping you get through the day without taking a drink." Here's the miracle. I'm not one who follows directions. I did what he said I did those three things.

At about three weeks without a drink, I Let the group know that I'm ready to start my fourth step. After the meeting, this man comes up to me and introduced himself. He asked me how long I've been in AA, and I said three weeks. And he asked how long have I'd been without a drink? I said three weeks. He asked me how often I went to meetings, and I said every day. Then he went over to the steps hanging on the wall. And he said, "Mr. Three weeks, I'm going to show you where you are in the program of Alcoholics Anonymous. The steps are numbered. You are not at step four. You are at the first word of the second step, which is came. You're coming to these meetings, and you're not drinking. If you keep coming to these meetings and don't drink, you'll slide all the way over to the second word of the second step, which is to, you'll come to and if you keep coming to these meetings, you'll get to the third word of the second step, which is you will come to believe that a power greater than yourself can restore you to sanity. The sanity they're talking about is the sanity of not picking up the first drink." That man was Dick M., and he was my sponsor for the first 20 years of my sobriety. That night he gave me a copy of the third step prayer.

Every single thing that he told me for the next 20 years was the truth. I said the prayer off the card until I had it memorized. The only part of the prayer that I understood was take away my difficulties because I was choking to death with difficulties. At about 30 days sober I told this man all my secrets. I told him I hated my father. He said, "Tom, you will come to love your father." I tell him everything. All the while I'm thinking, he's going to pull over, open the passenger door and kick me out. You're too sick for Alcoholics Anonymous." He just looked at me and said, "Sounds like a typical alcoholic." I told him my legal problem and he helped me fashion a prayer. "Dear God, I'm turning over into your care today my legal problem. It's too much for me. I can't handle it. And I need your help." I tried it and it worked. I stopped thinking about the problem for 15 minutes. Then I'd have to say the prayer again. I kept saying that prayer and doing what my lawyer told me to do. At about 10 months sober my lawyer informs me that my legal problems have been resolved.

I turned my paycheck over to the care and protection of my wife that did immensely good things for the marriage and for the financial situation because she's really good with the money. She no longer wanted a divorce.

Dick had me write my fourth step, I had to write it not type it. When I was finished, he made an appointment for me with Father Bob. Dick knew all my secrets, but Bob was 23 years sober at the time. He was Dick's sponsor and was a licensed clinical psychologist as well as a Jesuit priest. I'm not Catholic, but I think Dick thought I needed the licensed clinical psychologist part. Bob and I sat on his balcony overlooking the ocean and I read everything I had written. I read it all to him all the resentments, all the fears, all the things I was ashamed of, all the deep, dark secrets.

When I finished, He said, "I'm leaving. You're welcome to stay here as long as you like." I got a chair and took it down to the ocean and sat there for an hour. I reviewed the first five proposals. I had a spiritual experience. I

felt like an invisible hand had opened up my gut and lifted out this load that was so heavy. I didn't know how heavy it was until God lifted it out. And I felt the presence of God.

I worked my way through steps 6 and 7. At the amends steps, I already had my list. I sent my first wife a letter saying how much I regretted the way I treated her. I've never heard back from her and that's OK. The hardest amendment I had to make was to my father. In December of 1991 I was visiting Pittsburg. My Dad had cancer and was dying. His death certificate would say he died of cancer, but he died of acute alcoholism. Before I left, I called Dick and he said, "Tom, you go tell your father you love him". I said, "I can't do that." In my family no one ever says those words. But I always did what Dick told me to do. I went into dad's room and said, "I have to leave for the airport now. I love you." Nothing. "I'm going back to Jacksonville. I love you." Silence. I leave. Six months later my mother calls and tells me dad has died. I cried. He died without ever knowing what we have in Alcoholics Anonymous. He never got the gift. The date of my father's death was July 4th. My birthday is July 4th. Coincidence? I believe the message is my father died so I could live.

Ralph A. gave me one of the greatest gifts I 've ever been given, a copy of the 24 hours a day book. I devote 45 minutes to an hour every morning reading it. He pointed out the January 6 entry that says the most important decision I ever made is my decision to give up drinking. My whole life depends on not taking that first drink. I bought it then and I buy it even more today. The most frightening characteristic of alcoholism is losing the desire to stop drinking or the desire to stay stopped. I maintain this desire by going to lots of meetings. I love meetings. I just came from one and I'm going to another one tonight at 10 on Zoom. It's the greatest show on earth.

K.: What do you think about the state of AA today.

T.: I believe these are the good old days of Alcoholics Anonymous. The pandemic was a worldwide catastrophe, but there was one blessing in that we now have all these meetings online on Zoom. We have people who've never been to an in-person meeting. What's also changed is how we accept drug use. When I got here you were ostracized if you mentioned drugs. Fortunately, we have grown more tolerant. Drugs are so pervasive today that most young people coming in have drugs and alcohol in their stories. AA needs to help as many people as possible so I'm glad we have become more accepting. I try to do is to help as many people as I possibly can. I sponsored four guys that I have never met in person. Helping others is the joy of sober living. I must add, however, for AA to work each of us must arrive at the conclusion that whatever we are, we are alcoholic.

Another thing Dick taught me was that when meeting is over you get your butt home to that wife and kids. Take a day on the weekend and give it to your family. Don't go to a meeting. I'm practicing these principles in all my affairs.

K.: Thank you, Tom. That was a wonderful story.