

# Staying in the right lane

**This common, ordinary, everyday drunk realised that if he followed certain suggestions, he didn't have to drink again.**

The only interesting thing about my drinking is that it went on for so long. It took forty years between my first blackout and my last. And throughout that whole period, I would have denied that I had a problem - that I was an alcoholic.

I started drinking as a 15-year-old. And right from the outset, I seemed to have a propensity for it, and problems started. The alcohol had the advantage, I now realise, of stopping me having any sort of feelings or emotions, particularly as I was starting to go through that very scary time of adolescence and meeting girls and so on.

I now know that throughout my drinking, I was one of those alcoholics who was fine if I had no alcohol in my system at all. Then I could function, behave reasonably normally, and get through life. Conversely, if I had one drink, I wanted two. If I had two, I wanted four. If I had four, I wanted eight, and any suggestion that I might stop at some stage was completely and utterly rejected. My brain simply said, don't tell me what to do; give me another drink. As my life went on, the times when that happened became more and more regular. And my drinking became a bit of a problem to everybody but me. I thought it was still quite normal. A lot of people I knew drank as I did, or certainly when they were with me, they drank as I did.

In my forties, I suffered what today I suppose is called a mid-life crisis. It set me on the track of going to counsellors, therapists, workshops, all that stuff that back in those days we called personal growth or self-transformation. And while I spent a lot of time, a lot of money on such things, they didn't help me with the underlying problem - which was the drinking.

And that was something I didn't want to confront, and I didn't confront until my mid-fifties. At that stage my daughter, who was then in her twenties, was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. My wife and I decided to take her and her then boyfriend, now her husband and father of three of my grandchildren, on a holiday. But my wife quietly mentioned to me that my daughter had made it abundantly clear that if I got drunk on this holiday, the chances that she would put up with it and talk to me again were pretty limited. She said she'd had a gutsful, and if my behaviour continued the way it was, she was going to cut me off. I've got to say that I was absolutely amazed. How could this be?

Now, in the past I'd had experience of giving up drinking. There were times I can remember that, as a family, we all stopped drinking for a month. It wasn't that hard, but I knew pretty well that at the end of that month I was going back drinking. So, knowing that this was coming up to something of a watershed, I decided that yes, the time had come.

I said I'd condition myself to stop or to control my drinking. So I did that for a couple of weeks before we went on holiday. But I had absolutely no controllability at all and got on the plane to go on the holiday with the worst hangover and worst blackout I've had probably since my first one 40 plus years earlier.

I got through the 10 days of the holiday without drinking. It wasn't so bad, but there was no way that I was ready to stop drinking altogether, nor – I thought - did I need to. At the same time, I knew I had to do something. I'd been told by any number of people that I had, or might have, a drinking problem and some suggested that I go to Alcoholics Anonymous.

But one of the reasons I didn't want to go to AA was that I knew nothing about it other than what I'd seen on the TV. And the impression I had was a bunch of moaning old guys sitting around, dying for a drink, spilling their guts and saying that life was a bitch while hanging out all the time for the next drink. And being firmly convinced that I was one of the smartest people I ever knew, it certainly wasn't for me. But I also thought that being the happy-to-learn liberal-type person, I'd go to AA and just see if they could give me a few pointers. Having done all the counselling and personal growth workshops I reasoned that, after getting a few pointers- after about six weeks -I'd be able to change my way of thinking and carry on living and drinking without getting drunk.

So I looked around for these AA meetings and I found one that was close enough that they'd still be a bit like me but not so close that they might recognise me. And I went along thinking that like every other such place I'd been, when you turn up somebody would meet and greet you, take you out the back, sign you up for the six week introductory course and after that period of time I'd be cured and I would never go back again.

## The Higher Power / God of Your Understanding

In the early days I heard somebody say in a meeting, when you're shaving in the morning, look at that person in the mirror. Is that person looking back at you the most powerful thing on earth? And if the answer to that is no, then it means you believe that there's something more powerful than you - a Higher Power. And that, academically or intellectually, made a lot of sense to me. I could buy into it because the thing that I learned in my early days was that I was alcoholic and that basically, there was probably nothing I could do about it. It wasn't a lack of willpower or self-control, and probably no human power could fix it. And then they said, but God could and would if he was sought. And I thought, ah, bloody hell, they're bringing in that God thing. I now know that I have a hang up on the word.

I heard people say, oh look, Andrew, get over the God thing. It doesn't matter. It's a God of your understanding. You can call it a Group Of Drunks, or Good Orderly Direction, or whatever. It didn't help me. So I started to read what people in AA call the Big Book (Alcoholics Anonymous) and I got it. What the book says is that I don't have to believe in anything. All I have to do is allow that there is something around that is more powerful than me.

I have no doubt at all in my mind, in my whole being, that there's a power greater than me out there. I'm still not as comfortable with the word God or even Higher Power as I would like to be. But it doesn't worry me. I've heard people who talk of their God as the AA meeting itself. That was one I liked very much, because every time I went to an AA meeting, I felt a hell of a lot better when I walked out than when I walked in. And if that wasn't something spiritual, it was certainly something more powerful than me.

Now, I don't remember a whole lot of that first meeting. What I do remember is that when I arrived, everybody was bright eyed and bushy tailed, laughing and talking - male, female, young, old, brown, white, pretty, ugly, all sorts of people. And then on the dot of the time, the meeting started and people were saying things that I thought only I had even thought about. They talked about their drinking, which in many cases was so similar to mine, and they said they were alcoholics. So the penny started to drop. I started to realize that there was a possibility that my brain wasn't telling me the truth all the time. It may in fact have been lying to me.

But I still thought they were probably trying to suck me in, get into my twisted brain and grab me as a member. And when I saw that God word on their banners, I knew they were coming for one tenth of my income. That God word, and the fact that so much of the 12 Step programme talks about the "God of your understanding," caused me a number of problems and, to some extent, still does.

I heard people who were proud of the fact that they've been going to these meetings for years and I thought, you poor suckers, how stupid could you be? You know, I'm here for six weeks. I'll pick this up in six weeks and then I'll be off on my way. But some of these people had spoken in a way I'd never heard people speak before. Not just about their drinking but about their ethical, mental, emotional and spiritual lives. And then at the end of it, some people said hello to me, come back again. I had a cup of coffee and a bickie and we all went home.

My wife said, so how was it? I said, well I've got no idea really, I'm totally confused, but I think I might go back again. So I started to go back regularly and I began to come to grips with the God thing.

In my early days in AA the biggest surprise was when I came to realize that I was a just common, ordinary, everyday drunk. That I had alcoholism; there was nothing I could do about it, but if I followed certain suggestions, I didn't have to drink again.

By listening to other AA members I came to the realisation that, in my drinking days, alcohol took care of all my emotions. When I was happy, I drank. If I was sad, I drank. If this happened, I drank. If I was angry, I drank. Didn't matter what the cause was - I drank. And that solved the problem until it didn't. I was drinking more and more, and stuffing up my life more and more until AA showed me that I had been doing the same thing time after time, and expecting a different result, which is one definition of insanity. And so I was ready to try this concept of a higher power in the hope that it might help me.

I also had to clean up my act. That's where the 12 step programme transformed me. I started to change my whole life around, as I worked through the principles of this program time and time again.

And as a result of working through the 12 Steps I have no doubt that I've had a spiritual awakening. It certainly wasn't the whistles and bells some people have. It was simply one time when I realised I was staying in my right lane on the road, instead of heading up the fast lane on the inside and cutting them off at the corner.

Somewhere along the line I started accepting things as they are, and all sorts of things in my life have changed for the better since then.

AA is the most important thing in my life today. It's the most significant thing I've ever done. I'm happy for the fact that throughout my whole time in AA, going to meetings after meetings I've never got bored. I've always heard, consistently and regularly, something I had never heard before. It's like a light bulb going on. And I'm happy that I continue to learn and grow in this programme year after year by following the 12 steps.