

## THE DARKNESS OF HELL. REFLECTIONS FROM AN ALCOHOLIC IN RECOVERY

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If you saw me, you would not know that I am an alcoholic. I abused alcohol for 20 years, from my early teens to my early thirties.

All during those years, I led a double life. On the one hand, I projected the image of the “nice girl” who was well behaved, all the while being rebellious, acting insensibly and drinking myself to oblivion every time I took a drink. After a first university degree, a boyfriend “dared” me to go back for another degree. So, I ended up working full time, studying full time and drinking full time. In hindsight, I do not know how I managed. Probably by sleeping less.

I had blackouts almost from the beginning of my drinking until the last evening I got drunk. I could not not get drunk. Alcohol overpowered me. No amount of willpower on my part could make me stop or not have that drink. In my case, “going out for a drink” has always been a figure of speech. I do not know what the end of an evening looks like! To this day, I do not know what exactly happened on the last evening I drank.

Of course, my alcohol consumption increased over time and I could control it less and less. By age 18, I was drinking far too much and should have stopped at 22. But it would take another 12 years before I had my last drink.

Looking back, I realize I also suffered depression episodes approximately every five years, starting at puberty. Alcohol became my medication of choice. And I started my descent into hell.

I come from a long line of alcoholics on both sides of my family. Is it important? It does explain a few things. I was raised in such context and it leaves scars and unhealthy and distorted ways of thinking and behaviors.

Denial was also a big part of family life. For instance, when I would ask what was “wrong” with my grandmother as she was on the floor writhing and speaking unintelligibly because she had had too much to drink, I would be told, “Nothing is wrong. Everything is fine. It’s all in your imagination.” Yeah, right!

In my family, appearances were very important. Oh, how I kept them up! To a point where when I quit drinking several people were quite surprised to learn that I had a problem. But those people had never seen me at the end of an evening. I would leave—leaving them with a good impression—and then go and join my drinking buddies until the wee hours.

Over the years, people had told me that they thought I was drinking too much. I just kicked them out of my life. What did they know? Physicians would ask me if I drank. “Like everybody else” was my reply. No further probing. Of course, I drank like everybody else I hung around with. I would not be around people who did not drink, they were boring. For instance, I went to a dinner party once: only one drink before dinner was served and one—yes, one bottle of wine for eight people! How could they? It was torture. Needless to say, I had a few drinks when I returned home. I was so thirsty.

Self-sabotage was also a great trait of mine. I would get drunk at the least opportune times: the night before a presentation, an interview, an exam. Once I started university, there was not an exam I did not write hung over. Not one. All through my two degrees and the year I studied to obtain my professional title and right to practice. I drank to reward myself for studying well and also because I was very nervous. Little did I know that that first drink would be the end of me. I just wanted to “relax” a bit and “calm my nerves”.

I tried all kinds of courses and workshops and activities to get to know myself better and hence solve this great distress and unhappiness that haunted me, never realizing that alcohol—the first drink—was the main problem. I even tried psychotherapy and the therapist fell asleep when I was talking. It seemed that he did not think much of me! So much for self-esteem!

It is said that one has to hit bottom before taking any action to cease drinking. Mine was shame. I had attended a wedding reception with a man who happened to be an AA member. Of course, he did not drink. Having decided that he had not been nice to me, I punished him by getting drunk—like drinking the poison and waiting for the other person to die. Great thinking! That is what alcohol did to me every time: alter my judgment. The next morning, he just said, “I think you have a problem.” I had been caught in the act. I had appeared less than perfect. I have not taken a drink since and that is 32 years ago.

What happened next? I joined Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) telling myself this better work because the only other solution was suicide. In AA I found people like me who could laugh at themselves. To me that was

unheard of. How could one tell the most horrible stories about him or herself and laugh? How could one live without feeling ashamed, guilty, full of remorse? I finally can with this program.

At the same time I quit drinking in my early thirties, I explored “adult children of alcoholics” (ACOA). I was so happy to discover that I was not crazy, but that it was the family life I was born into which was. What a relief! So, I would not end up in a psychiatric ward by the end of my thirties, smoke like an engine, have a disheveled look and rock myself until the day I died. Because this is exactly how I envisaged my life when I was 22 years old. At a time when one is supposed to have her whole life ahead of her, with infinite possibilities. I had the great fortune to find a psychologist whose expertise was the dynamics of alcoholic families and ACOA. I started to learn what normal was, what overreacting to the smallest thing was, as well as what limits and boundaries were. With her I learned to come out of a life of survival and profound distrust and crises and embrace a life of peace and calm and finally serenity. Was it easy? No. I had to face my demons, walk through my shame, to finally come into the light of the living.

My life today? Quiet, peaceful, joyful, full of laughter. I have learned to be of service to others and feel useful. Since that statement about me having a problem, I have never craved a drink. Life has gone on sometimes happily, sometimes not so much. But that is life unfolding. I went through a difficult but rapid divorce. I quit smoking. I am enjoying the small pleasures of life. I no longer need excitement or crises to feel alive. I am surrounded by wonderful friends. I know I am loved. I resumed my relationship with my family. I am reliable, I keep my promises, my mouth is no longer a weapon of mass destruction, I am capable of introspection and recognize when I am in the wrong and make amends.

I have been told by a physician friend of mine that it was very frustrating to treat alcoholics because time after time they always come back with the same problems and they do not stop drinking. I told her that unfortunately for her, she could not solve that riddle: the person who is drinking holds the key to the solution. And until that person wants to stop abusing alcohol or drugs not much can be done except providing information about the consequences of alcoholism and addiction, being patient and compassionate. ■