

EXPERIENCE, STRENGTH AND HOPE

Do you
think you're
different?

This is A.A. General Service
Conference-approved literature.

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS[®] is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism.

- The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions.

- A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy; neither endorses nor opposes any causes.

- Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.

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**Do You Think
You're Different?**

Many of us thought we were different	7
My name is Gloria, and I'm an alcoholic (African American)	9
My name is Louis, and I'm an alcoholic (79 years old)	11
My name is Padric, and I'm an alcoholic (gay)	13
My name is Ed, and I'm an alcoholic (atheist)	15
My name is Paul, and I'm an alcoholic (Native American)	16
My name is Diane, and I'm an alcoholic (15 years old)	19
My name is Michael, and I'm an alcoholic (clergy)	20
My name is Mary, and I'm an alcoholic (lesbian)	21
My name is George, and I'm an alcoholic (Jewish)	22
My name is famous, and I'm an alcoholic (movie star)	24
My name is Phil, and I'm an alcoholic ("low bottom")	27
My name is Jim, and I'm an alcoholic ("high bottom")	29
My name is Jan, and I'm an alcoholic (agnostic)	31
Now we are all different together	35

Many of us thought we were different

“A.A. won’t work for me. I’m too far gone.” “It’s nice for those people, but I’m president of the P.T.A.” I’m too old. Too young. Not religious enough. I’m gay. Or Jewish. A professional person. A member of the clergy. Too smart. Or too uneducated.

At this moment, people all over the world are thinking that A.A. probably won’t work in their case for one or several of these reasons. Perhaps you are one of these people.

We in A.A. believe alcoholism is a disease that is no respecter of age, sex, creed, race, wealth, occupation, or education. It strikes at random. Our experience seems to show that *anyone* can be an alcoholic. And, beyond question, *anyone* who wants to stop drinking is welcome in A.A.

Our co-founder Bill W., in telling about A.A.’s earliest days, wrote:

“In the beginning, it was four whole years before A.A. brought permanent sobriety to even one alcoholic woman. Like the ‘high bottoms,’ the women said they were different; A.A. couldn’t be for them. But as the communication was perfected, mostly by the women themselves, the picture changed.

“This process of identification and transmission has gone on and on,” said Bill. Low-bottom alcoholics said they were different. So did young people, artists and bankers; agnostics, veterans and prisoners.

“But nowadays all of these, and legions more, soberly talk about how very much *alike* all of us alcoholics are when we finally admit that the chips are down.”

In the stories that follow, you may encounter individuals whose race, age, sexual preference, or any number of other conditions are similar to yours. They came to A.A. and found that Alcoholics Anonymous worked just as well for them as it had for hundreds of thousands of others of us who thought we were “different.” We found help, and we found friends with whom we could identify and share our experiences.

We are no longer alone.

***My name is Gloria, and
I'm an alcoholic (African-American)***

A while ago, I was supposed to meet an A.A. friend at a big meeting. When she came in, she walked right through the crowd to where I was standing and talking. The room was full, and I was really surprised she saw me so quickly. When I asked her, she just said she spotted me right away, and let it go at that.

It wasn't until the middle of the meeting, about an hour later, that it suddenly hit me the reason she saw me right away was that I was one of the only three black people in that whole crowded room. Me with my black skin and my big Afro, wondering how she could spot me so fast!

That may not seem like much of a story to you, but to me it's absolutely fantastic. You see, when I first went into A.A., about 14 years ago, I was in a group of mostly white people, and I really felt different all the time. I was okay as long as we were talking about staying sober, but when they started in about where they had their hair done or something, I'd really feel lost. I remember one meeting where the first lady said she'd gone to Europe and sold some stocks in a blackout, and the second one said she'd had a terrible day because she misplaced her tickets to the symphony. I wondered if I was in the right place.

I had my first drink when I was 15 years old. A man said he'd give me two dollars to fix his breakfast for him, and I did. Then he gave me some bourbon. It really made me feel good. For the first time, I really felt *all right*. Until then, I'd always felt *all wrong* — out of whack with everybody around me. Well, I found out pretty soon that the man wanted more than breakfast. I got out of that okay, but with a brand new taste that was to stay with me for years.

I'd been pretty unhappy at home. It was a quiet home. Nobody drank much, and my parents were

very religious. I had a sister everybody said was prettier, and I remember I used to get sick on purpose just so my mother would pay attention to me. But now I had booze, and when I was drinking, I felt warm and pretty and loved — at least for a while.

I kept right at it, even though I got sick almost every time I drank. It wasn't long before I decided I really needed alcohol to function. In the office, I was sure booze helped me type faster. I'd sneak out for old-fashioneds on my coffee break, and soon switched to half-pints. Every weekend was a big drunk, and by Sunday night I'd always be lying in state, passed out cold.

Finally, one day I had had it. I called a white woman who worked in my office. She had once shown me an A.A. pamphlet after she found me throwing up in the john. I had hated her ever since, but finally this day came when I was ready to learn something about not drinking.

She told me where her group meeting was and said she'd meet me there if I wanted to go.

I said I would, but when I found out it was in a church basement, I almost backed out. I hadn't been in a church in a long time, and I thought anything that met in a church basement must be pretty grubby. But I was really sick. I had been on clear broth for three days and finally got up to chicken soup by the day of the meeting. So I went. Where else was I to go?

Like I said, I took to A.A. right away, but for a while I felt different. Most of that group was white, and yet I didn't feel all that great in another group I went to that was mostly black. I think it went back to feeling all wrong without booze, as I mentioned earlier. I just didn't feel comfortable with *myself*. I never had, and maybe that's why I took to booze so fast.

But finally I got a sponsor, and things have gotten better for me ever since. I think we A.A.s all carry umbrellas that we put up over each other when the rain seems to be falling a little harder on our neighbor, and it really doesn't matter what color we are.

My best friend today is a white woman in A.A. who came from a rich family. She had a governess, and her mother was always off playing cards

or something. Mine was always off working or at her church, but my friend and I both had exactly the same *feeling* of being unloved. Maybe she had a thousand toys and I had only one doll, but it all comes back to the same feeling. Today, she sees and feels things exactly as I do. She says what I'm thinking, and vice versa. And both of us are more comfortable with each other than with our families.

Today, I go to A.A. groups. I hardly notice whether the people there are mostly black, mostly white, or evenly divided. They're just A.A.s. For me, it's important to mingle. I think I'd always feel different if I didn't, no matter where I was. I think there's something about the A.A. program that goes right *through* all the differences I worried about.

***My name is Louis,
and I'm an alcoholic (79 years old)***

I guess I've always been an alcoholic. At least, I've always drunk alcohol. My mother used to put a few drops of whiskey in a bottle of warm water and give it to me when I was a baby. And that was a long, long time ago.

I quit school young and went to work on the horsecars as both conductor and driver. At that time, six tickets cost a quarter and so did a half-pint of rye. Every day, I had to make a hard decision. Should I pocket the first quarter I collected, or the second? On good days, I let the company have the first one, and I'd wait until I had sold 12 tickets before stopping the car at Dailey's saloon. On bad days, I took the first quarter.

In any case, service on my car stopped while I went into Dailey's. The horse didn't mind waiting, and I didn't give a damn about the passengers. The company did, though, and after a while they detailed spotters to catch me. They never caught me. I quit first.

Then I really hit the skids. I panhandled and I drank. I could roll my eyeballs so far up that when I opened the lids only the whites of the eyes showed. Everybody pities a blind person, especially one so young, so I made enough money to drink on. But one day I dropped a half-dollar a woman

had given me, and I ran straight to the gutter where it had fallen. She caught on and began to holler for the cops. I kept running and took the next train out. In the city where I ended up, I lived on skid row and I drank. I slept in flophouses, in doorways, in jails.

For some reason, when I got to be 21, I decided to go to work. So I got a job on the railroad and stayed with it until I was 73, when I was retired. I was a freight conductor. Once I locked myself in my caboose, nobody could see me or know what I was doing. What I was mostly doing was drinking. I drank everything: whiskey, gin, canned heat, smoke, sneaky pete, embalming fluid, and musky. The sores are gone now, but I still have the scars.

I don't know how many times in my life I have been arrested — 30 or 40, maybe. My first arrest was for panhandling. After I retired, I was arrested 17 times on charges of intoxication. I had a pension from the railroad and nothing to do but drink. My wife had died. My married daughter wouldn't even speak to me. I lived alone and friendless except for the company of a few other drunks like myself.

When I was 79, I was arrested again. Only this time it was different. A probation officer asked me if I wanted to quit drinking. I said yes, and he went on to tell me about Alcoholics Anonymous and about the local municipal court alcoholic rehabilitation program. He asked me if I wanted to try it, and I figured I had nothing to lose, so I started going to meetings at the court.

I went to one meeting with a half-pint of wine hidden in my shirt. A gray-haired man named Jim said he was an alcoholic and had been drunk for a long time, but in A.A. he'd learned how to stop drinking and start living. He asked if there were any questions. I asked if this organization expected a man 79 years old, who had drunk all his life, to stop drinking just like that. Jim said if he'd done it, I could do it, too. I figured maybe he was right, so I reached inside my shirt, took out the half-pint, and gave it to the man sitting next to me. I haven't had a drink since.

Right after I started going to A.A. meetings, things began to happen to me. Good things. The nicest people in the world became my friends.

They're my real brothers and sisters. Not long ago, at an A.A. meeting, I had a heart attack. They rushed me to the hospital and stayed close, and their friendship pulled me through, even when the doctors had given me up. I owe my life to these people. My daughter loves me now, and I get to see my grandchildren and my great-grandchildren.

The years are going by — one day at a time — and I guess I don't have too much longer to live. But I don't care. The main thing I want is to die sober. Meanwhile, I try to help the younger people find sobriety and happiness the way I have. I tell them, "If I can do it, so can you."

***My name is Padric,
and I'm an alcoholic (gay)***

Seventeen years ago, a bearded stranger sitting next to me in the TV lounge of one of our city's least elegant hotels suddenly turned to me and asked if I had a drinking problem. "Whatever gave you that idea?" I retorted, knowing I was physically sober at that moment, though slightly shaky and none too well coordinated.

He didn't answer me. He just reached into the depths of a jacket that had seen better days, took out a grimy and much thumbed booklet, and said something about a meeting I might want to go to that night. He said there would be "nice people who'll understand you" there. He also mentioned free coffee and cake. That decided me.

Today, I thank God, whom I choose to call H.P. (Higher Power), for that conversation. Cold and empty as I was, I managed to pull myself together and get to the address he gave me. Of course, it turned out to be an A.A. meeting. It was there I made the first real human contact I'd felt in many years, with the man who eventually became my A.A. sponsor.

A few weeks later, I went back out to drink and bleed for seven more years. But then I came back (H.P. again), and recently I celebrated my tenth anniversary of sobriety at our regular gay A.A. meeting here in my home city.

My alcoholism goes way back, just as my gay-

ness does. One of my earliest childhood memories is stealing sips from my foster father's can of beer and filling it with water so he wouldn't know. Then I started going to gay bars in my early teens. Right from the start, I loved the glow I got inside from a drink, even though I always hated the taste.

It wasn't very long, though, before I started getting into a lot of trouble with liquor. I began to use it as a crutch, as well as a glow-getter. I drank to get up the courage to do dangerous things. I had no idea what I was doing at the time, but now I see that I drank badly right from the start. I remember, for instance, how a good friend used to get disgusted with my drinking when I was barely out of my teens. I thought I was just being sophisticated and looking for bed companions, like others in those gay joints. But now I know the drinking soon took over and became an end in itself.

Before A.A., all I had was drinking and sex. I mechanically used people for both. Everybody was faceless. Nobody was real, least of all me! My sponsor was the first real person I'd met in years. And he made *me* feel real, too. He cut right through any concern I might have had about my gayness or anything else. Without sentimentality, he calmly held out his hand to me that first night as one human being to another, and what he put into my hand was life.

Today, I believe we in A.A. have a *family* relationship with one another. I think all the people in A.A. — gay and straight — are my brothers and sisters. After we sober up, we are given a chance to create healthy new relationships, compensating for the way we fouled up others previously. Our fellow members are people we really come to know, loving them, feeling with them, suffering when they suffer, even lovingly fighting with them once in a while. It's a real sharing, an honest one. It's certainly something I never had at home.

I'm also glad I feel this special A.A. closeness to many straight people, something I never would have thought possible. In fact, for years I stayed sober and so held onto jobs by going to meetings of A.A. groups that were mostly straight. In A.A. today, I know sober leather fans, transvestites, and members of every other sexual group there is. But the only important thing *here* is that we

are all human beings, all alcoholics, and all in A.A. together.

Personally, I have never hidden the fact that I am gay, in A.A. or outside it. For me, this has been the right decision. But I know it wouldn't have mattered if I had hidden it. What we do in private and how we choose to talk about it just are not what A.A. is about. Our Third Tradition says, "The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking." And this has meant my survival, right from the very first day. Believe me, if there were any other qualifications, I would have flunked out!

***My name is Ed,
and I'm an alcoholic (atheist)***

I am addressing this to alcoholics who have had trouble with the religious overtones in the A.A. program. To those who do not accept the idea of a supernatural being, let me assert that it is always *people* who have strengthened me when I needed help.

I admit that I need more strength than I alone possess to overcome the compulsion to drink. I receive this strength from the power for good generated in A.A. I have interpreted the frequent mention of "God" in the Twelve Steps and elsewhere as power that comes from other people.

After a year and a half of real sobriety (I had been trying to grasp the A.A. program for three years previously), I suffered a personal catastrophe. I do not ascribe my dilemma to punishment for past "sins," nor have I the vanity to think that a deity would choose me for martyrdom. Certainly, it is ironic that I should have become disabled after a period of genuine sobriety and not during a bout of drunkenness. But it is nothing more than that — simply ironic.

I have a deep belief in human morality. I believe that evil impulses can be subordinated by decent actions. A.A. brings out impulses for good, and this has tremendous force. In my opinion, this sum total of good actions is the "higher power."

In the words of a Unitarian minister: "In a world

that has lost, or is losing fast, any convincing concept of divine providence at work, of a personal God ordering the affairs of humanity, it is not necessary to assume that the only alternative to a human-cherishing universe is a hostile or satanic universe. There is the much more likely alternative of a neutral universe where people live, hammering out salvation without hope of heaven or dread of hell. People can find that life has value, not because a divine being so ordains, but because the achievements of good men and women, laboring together with love and self-respect, are self-validating and self-rewarding.”

For a period of over two years, I was practically a loner, being able to attend only a couple of meetings a year. Fortunately, my wife has a good understanding of alcoholism (because of past association with a family group), and I was able to have almost daily discussions with her. Now, however, we have formed an A.A. group in this area that meets in my home weekly.

I was not able to accept A.A. or the very real help it could give until I made a rationalistic interpretation of the program. I am still an atheist, but I am a grateful atheist.

I don't want to change A.A. It works for me. I just want it to be effective in attracting rationalists. Their membership will help A.A. tremendously.

My name is Paul, and I'm an alcoholic (Native American)

I was raised on a small reservation in one of our Western states, and my life was influenced by the good and the bad of both cultures. My first drunk was in the summer of my 12th year, when I ventured to town with some friend. We purchased a jug and found a place to drink it. I got drunk, blacked out, and got sick, and we went back to get some more. The accepted attitude was: When you take a drink, you're supposed to get drunk.

Later, I was bused away to a government boarding school where booze was difficult to obtain. I learned to use substitutes: inhaling glue, lighter fluid, gasoline, paint or hairspray, and drinking

after-shave lotion, mouthwash or hair tonic. I was expelled from that school and sent back to live with my grandparents on the reservation.

My grandfather, although uneducated, was a very wise man, and he told me of the difficulties I would encounter without an education. So I wrote the school a letter asking them to give me another chance and promising to change. From some people who were home for the holidays, I heard that when the head counselor received that letter, he called a student assembly and read it in front of the student body. The only people in that auditorium who laughed were my friends. When I was trying to do possibly the first right thing in my life, my friends laughed at me. This hurt me deeply, and I decided I would never trust or need anyone any more.

When I was 16, I left the reservation and joined the Navy. While home on boot leave, I had my first experience of being jailed as a result of drinking. My drinking increased. I had more money, and it seemed everyone drank. First, my drinking partners were the new recruits; later, the men in my section; and finally, I found myself going it alone, as it was meant to be.

For I was different. When I drank, there was no fun, none of the benefits of a relaxing, sociable evening with friends. When I drank, there was always trouble. I blamed my problems on the fact that I was Native American. My shipmates would tell me things I had said or done while in a blackout. I never fully believed them. There were many jokes about the Indian and his firewater, and I was dubbed Wahoo. I developed feelings of guilt and loss of self-respect. I became afraid of people, of being alone, of everything around me.

At 18, I was on the streets of San Francisco, with 50 cents and a train ticket to Los Angeles in my pocket, less than a proper education, and a less-than-honorable discharge from the Navy.

I decided I was in that situation because I was a Native American forced to live in a white world. I bummed awhile, staying dry most of the time. One night when I was on Canal Street in Chicago, the man in the cage next to mine died in D.T.s and convulsions. I remember thinking he should have had more sense than to drink that much. ("But

for the Grace of God.”) I settled in the city where I now live, and was arrested for being drunk on 40 different occasions.

Here, I also married. Of all the good influences in my life, my wife is among the main ones. We learned about A.A. from a newspaper article. The call was made and returned, and we went to that first meeting. I was much impressed by the people, and I quoted the Big Book for seven months. But deep down inside, I wasn't ready.

And then it happened — the worst drunk I ever had, and the most beautiful, because it was my last one. The fear and guilt were greater than I had ever known. I had let A.A. down, let my group down, and let my wife down; the image I had built was destroyed. But a thought, clear and concise, came to me: “The only person you have let down is yourself.” So I came back to you people, and we began anew.

Chief Joseph of the Nez Percé looked upon his people, and saw them cold, destitute, homeless, lonely and defeated. He said, “We cannot go on living the life we once knew. We must begin a new life. Take the best the white man has to offer and the best the red man has to offer, and begin this new life.”

I stood at the doors of Alcoholics Anonymous full of fear, guilt, remorse, confusion and defeat. Those doors were open to me, and I was welcomed in. As my mind clears and I recall the teachings of my ancestors, I believe I found the “best the red man has to offer.” Today, I have the fellowship and program of Alcoholics Anonymous and my wonderful wife. I feel that I have found the “best the white man has to offer.”

***My name is Diane,
and I'm an alcoholic (15 years old)***

When I first came to A.A., I couldn't have been an alcoholic. It was impossible at the age of 14!

I had my first drink at the age of six. Being the only girl out of three and being the youngest child, I could get my way. I now believe I was an alcoholic from the first drink, because from then

on I set up my life in the alcoholic pattern. I lived in fear of the day, in hatred, in resentments, in a dream world. I would dream I had six closets full of clothes and all the girls were jealous of me. In real life, I was fat, overbearing and jealous of others. I hated my mother because she would spank me and not let me go without a shirt, like the boys.

We moved away from that town just before I entered fourth grade. I was really lonely. I had no friends, and I couldn't make any. Then I met kids who smoked, drank and took drugs. My parents begged, beat me and argued with me. But what the hell! They were the ones who had me and never wanted me. They were the ones who put me through all the years of misery. Now was the time to pay them back, I decided.

I started taking drugs and drinking. My self-pity caught fire. Booze and drugs helped me relieve it all. Wow! It was really weird. Sex also became very important, because I wanted love. Lots of love!

I thought my homelife was the problem, so I started going to counselors, church, therapists, the whole bit. It didn't work. So here came the booze again.

I always wanted to belong. Anything the group said to do, I did. But I didn't like it, and I wanted out. My bottom came up and hit me. I didn't go down and hit it.

I got in contact with A.A. through a drug addict friend. She just needed something to do, so she didn't stick around. I stayed. I liked the love that I got. I needed that love. I stayed in, drunk, wanting to be "a part of, not apart from."

Finally, after 11 months, I started working the program. Things began changing, and it was really beautiful. My relationship with my parents and other people is great. The love I receive, I pass along to still-sick alcoholics. God — my God — is very patient, thank goodness for that. I am now losing weight and feel fine. (I weighed 200 pounds.)

I still get some questioning looks from oldtimers, but I know I am an alcoholic, and that's all that counts. I feel rejected at times because the young people in our group are married and get together quite often, without me. God willing, in about four years I'll be married, too, and then I'll remember to ask the single young person to join in.

My father is still drinking, but I have to “let go and let God.” Maybe someday God will find him also. I am an alcoholic, and in two months I’ll be 16.

***My name is Michael,
and I’m an alcoholic (clergy)***

I am a Roman Catholic priest, a pastor of souls with the title of monsignor. I am also an alcoholic. A few months ago, I celebrated an anniversary of ordination. A month before that, I celebrated a more important anniversary, my fourth as a member of A.A.

Why do I say that my anniversary in A.A. is a more important date than my ordination anniversary? The answer is that through A.A. my Higher Power, God, has not only saved my life and restored me to sanity, but has given me a new way of life and has immeasurably enriched my priesthood. Thus, thanks to God and A.A. I am today striving honestly and sincerely, despite many shortcomings, to fulfill my priestly vocation in the manner that God intended. My sobriety has to be the most important thing in my life. Without sobriety, I would immediately revert to the kind of life I led during the later years of my drinking — the life of one who found himself going in only one direction, down.

I believe that I engaged in work for work’s sake, hyperactively spreading out in many directions — anything to keep the searchlight off my inner self. Alcohol became a reward for my strenuous labors. By the easy excuse “I work hard, I play hard,” I tried to justify the drinking that had become more frequent and more prolonged and had resulted in absenteeism, lying, deception, neglect of duty.

Driven by recurring fits of remorse, guilt and depression, I sought help from doctors and from fellow priests, to no avail. I tried retreats, prayer, acts of self-denial, abstention from alcohol for periods of time, rest homes, geographic changes. Nothing worked.

Deep discouragement and despair set in. Thus, a life that had been motivated by grand ideals, great enthusiasms, burning incentives, had now

become almost completely enclosed within the circle of the bottle and myself. The priest, a man of God, was bowing down before a different master, alcohol.

Then, finally, down in my deep well, shrouded with blackness, feeling devoid of hope and helpless, I cried out for help. Now, at last, I was ready to go to any length to achieve sobriety. And God heard my cry and answered.

After a period of hospitalization, I went to my first A.A. meeting. I then involved myself with a group of alcoholic priests, and I attended these meetings regularly. I also went to laygroup meetings, open and closed. I listened with an open mind. I became active. In addition, I spent six months in psychiatric treatment.

Day by day, one day at a time, I have kept away from that first drink. A.A. has become my way of life. I realize that, paradoxically, I keep my sobriety by giving it away. I am responsible whenever and wherever a hand reaches out for help. What freely I received, freely I must give.

Of one thing I am certain: God's will for me today is that I be sober for this 24 hours. He will take care of the rest. If I remain faithful to this way, the A.A. way of life, one day at a time for the rest of my life, I pray — and I am confident, though wary of complacency — that God will, by His loving mercy, mold me into the priest He wishes me to be.

***My name is Mary,
and I'm an alcoholic (lesbian)***

I'm an alcoholic. I'm 27. I'm a woman. I'm a homosexual. I've been sober in the beautiful Fellowship of A.A. for 17 months and, for the first time in many years, find myself smiling, laughing and really caring for other people.

After ten years of alcoholic drinking, that life of horror, loneliness and despair brought me to the doors of my first A.A. meeting. In the first few months of my sobriety, I tried to follow suggestions, went to many meetings, joined a group, and found a sponsor whose sobriety I respected. But during this time, I lived in fear — fear of my homo-

sexuality being discovered, fear of being rejected by fellow A.A. members, fear of being left alone to cope with my disease of alcoholism. This fear drove me so close to the first drink that I believed I could never maintain the sobriety I so desperately needed and wanted. I became distrustful of my fellow A.A.s. My fears seemed to be a bigger problem than my alcoholism.

Finally, I heard a speaker ask, "Are you willing to go to any lengths to maintain your sobriety?" Was I willing? Who would understand my situation? Whom could I trust?

In desperation, I went to my sponsor. I cried, sweated and shook. But the words I hated to say came out, painfully and slowly. I sat back, waiting for a word or a look of rejection.

My sponsor simply smiled and told me that she was an alcoholic just like me and that this was how and why she could help me.

I thank my Higher Power every night for this program that saved my life, a program of "principles before personalities." "The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking," our Third Tradition says, and there is a place for every person who wants help. There is a place for me. I thought that I was unique, different, that I had nowhere to turn in this world for help. But thanks to A.A., I have found the way to a full and happy life.

***My name is George,
and I'm an alcoholic (Jewish)***

A startling, four-color advertising poster appeared some time ago in the New York subways. Staring at the viewer was a "typical Irish cop" about to eat a luscious delicatessen sandwich on Levy's rye bread, and the legend was, "You don't have to be Jewish to like Levy's."

As countless subway stations flew by, and as the rusty gears in my head meshed, the whole idea of that Irish cop (and by now in my mind's eye he had become a Catholic-Irish cop named O'Toole, with a thick brogue, 14 children and a grandmother in Kilkenny) had turned itself upside down.

One evening, while talking to my closest friend in A.A. (whose name is so Irish I can preserve his anonymity only by omitting his initials here) and after having attended an open A.A. meeting where the one female and two male speakers all sounded like characters from an Abbey Theater production of a play by Lady Gregory, I had a brainstorm.

“At my own expense,” I told my friend, “I shall have the same advertising agency responsible for that Irish cop make up a poster for distribution to all A.A. groups in this area. It will feature a photograph of me in full color, and I shall be clearly drunk, sucking on a bottle of Scotch. Underneath this photograph of my Levantine features (once described by a friend as ‘the face of Abraham’), I shall have inscribed: ‘You don’t have to be Irish to be an alcoholic.’”

The myth that there are few Jewish alcoholics is, as far as my experience is my guide, sheer bunk. With many more Jews residing in the city in which I live than in the entire state of Israel, Jewish attendance at A.A. meetings is what you might expect. A good number of groups in this part of the country have Jewish memberships of up to 50 percent. Jews abound in other groups as well, and you will even find handfuls of us at meetings in areas where few Jews live.

Another myth is that the tradition of social and heavy drinking has never existed among the Hebrews, and therefore Jews lack that special extra “something” that turns the social drinker into the alcoholic. Nonsense! The Yiddish language has a perfectly satisfactory word for drunk — *shicker* — and when it is used as a noun (as in “a *shicker*”), any Jew in town will know what you are talking about!

I think, seriously now, that we Jewish alcoholics often display a tendency to be oversensitive about our Jewishness. Therefore, we cover this raw spot with a patina of indifference. This attitude may keep many a miserable Jewish alcoholic out of our Fellowship, to his or her misery and our loss.

I am thinking now of a young woman I know, deep in the self-torture of progressive drinking. Both my wife (also in A.A.) and I have tried for nearly two years to bring her to the A.A. program. All her rationalizations against us boil down to one

sentence: “Nice Jewish girls aren’t alcoholics.”

Maybe, Ruth, many nice Jewish girls aren’t alcoholics. But neither are “nice Jewish boys,” “nice Lutheran girls,” “nice Methodist girls,” “nice Italian girls,” “nice Vassar girls,” or just “nice girls” or “nice boys.”

There is nothing “nice” about any alcoholic in the throes of this ailment. In A.A., we don’t care how “nice” you think you are, or whether you are Jewish, Christian, Moslem or agnostic. True, we end most of our meetings with the Lord’s Prayer, but even the atheists in the program do not often object to this formality. The speaker usually says, “Will all those *who care to* join me in the Lord’s Prayer?”

When I was on the sauce, I wasn’t a Jew, I wasn’t an American, and I wasn’t a man. I was just a drunk, loveless and unloving, respectful of no one and nothing, least of all myself.

No, Ruth, “You don’t have to be Jewish.” But maybe it helps. I think that it helped me accept the truth that I am a member of more than one minority group, and today a sober one, thanks to the God of my fathers, and thanks to the people of *all* kinds who are Alcoholics Anonymous.

***My name is famous,
and I’m an alcoholic (movie star)***

Early in the game, I used to work at any job, just so I could eat and pay the rent while learning to act. Drinking simply was not very important in those days. Then came one certain movie, and the whole scene changed. It was a kick to have all the famous people I had heard of suddenly calling me by my first name and insisting I come to their parties, have lunch, or meet them in “21” or Cannes or Venice. Almost the first thing said was always, “What are you drinking?”

Sometimes I had too much, but so did lots of people. Usually, I didn’t drink while making a film, only on junkets or on brief holidays between pictures. But gradually I found that when I got home late after a long day at the studio, some schnapps and a pill helped me to sleep. One ghastly morn-

ing, I yelled at the makeup man for being so slow. He looked at me long and hard before he said, "Maybe I'm getting older, my dear. It can't be that those circles under your eyes are getting bigger, can it?"

That was a jolt, but when I thought it over, I decided I must need a vacation. For each crisis after that, there was always some easy remedy — a new diet, a different kind of pill, a new man, more work or a short stay at a spa.

A worse jolt was a gossip-column item that began, "Which Hollywood lady is giving her director and producer the shakes with lateness and 'nerves' and forgetting fines?" It was a "blind" item — no name given — but the details that followed pointed right at me. I was so furious that I tied on a big one and landed in the hospital for the first time — all the columnist's fault, of course. I was admitted under an assumed name. Ten minutes later, I was shrieking at a nurse, "Do you know who I am?" And I told her.

In the hospital, I was still medicated to the eyeballs when two A.A. women came to talk to me. I suspect they were almost as impressed with my reputation as I was. I listened to them graciously, but once was enough. I wanted no more calls from sweet little do-gooders like that.

My manager and friends agreed. My case was different, they said. For years, they went on shielding me from the consequences of my own behavior. It prolonged my illness, I think now, but I don't blame them. They were doing what they thought best for me, and what I wanted them to do.

Then I was signed for the lead in a play. I stayed on the wagon OK — the pill wagon, that is. We had three press previews. When you look at the different notices, you can tell that one night I must have been on uppers, one on downers, and the third on my own private blend of hallucinogens. After that, the offers just stopped coming. I was bad news for employers, in the theater and in films.

At a friend's insistence, I went to a psychiatrist (a wonderful woman of great distinction in the field of alcoholism, I know now). Underneath all my pretense, I really was scared and wanted help. Long before, I'd had the standard Hollywood

analysis, because it was such an in thing to do and many of us felt it helped us as actors. But the New York psychiatrist took a different approach. I was beginning to like her and trust her when she dropped the bomb: She wanted me to take Antabuse, join A.A. and go to group therapy. I was kind of relieved to take the Antabuse, but couldn't imagine myself in A.A. or any other group. What would people say?

Yet I was terrified; my life seemed to be over. So I sat, miserable, in some A.A. meetings in a wig and dark glasses, and sneaked out before they ended. At a group therapy session, I explained that my work required me to lunch in good restaurants, with wine, and that I often did business with important people over the dinner table at my French chateau, noted for its cellar. In my special circumstances, I said, this kind of civilized drinking was really a business necessity.

Another patient fixed me with a stare and said, "You sound stupid." Long silence. I kept smiling, but it took an effort. "At least those poor slobs in A.A. aren't stupid," he went on. "They're smart enough to realize they have a drinking problem and start doing something about it. You sounded, just then, as if you haven't got that much good sense, or courage, left."

He let that sink in and then added kindly, "But I expect you do. Don't you want to feel better, to be happier?"

That shocked some sense into me. He was right. No matter what I thought of people in A.A., they obviously had answers about staying sober that I didn't have. I recalled some famous advice to actors: "Act as if." And I began right then to act *as if* I wanted to learn from each and every alcoholic in A.A. It would be a new part for me — being audience, not star.

Since then, I believe, my *as if* has become real. I don't have to act in A.A.; I know I *am* just one more woman recovering from alcoholism. Yes, there have been rough times. It takes a little while for some other members to see me as an alcoholic person like themselves. At first, some of them are dazzled by the movie star image they associate with my name (a prop I can live without now); some ask for my autograph. For my own sanity,

I have learned not to let this attention puff up my ego (it's too big already!) or annoy me. I try hard to be polite and turn the conversation to A.A. matters. It works marvelously, all over the world. When I volunteer at one of our central offices, it even works with new alcoholics seeking help. Occasionally, one of them asks, "Aren't you ____?"

I say, "Yes, I am, and I am also an alcoholic working on my recovery from this disease."

My career has flourished, with some very unexpected twists and even a new triumph or two. I am more comfortable than ever at Hollywood parties, or sipping my Perrier at a restaurant in Paris. By the way, I've noticed many other people don't drink alcoholic things, either — not the way I used to think all show people did.

The other night, I saw on TV a movie I made in Europe during some of my worst drinking days. I dubbed the English soundtrack in New York after I had been sober in A.A. about a year. I got the giggles watching it, because I was *seeing* a stumbling, drunken performance, but *hearing* a perfectly sober one. I'm a lot better at my job when I'm sober.

***My name is Phil,
and I'm an alcoholic ("low bottom")***

Frightened, arrogant, enraged and resentful of humanity, God and the universe (yet vaguely hopeful, because *maybe* these strange people who claimed they had found a way to stop drinking could help me) — that was how I felt almost seven years ago, at my first A.A. meeting.

I was frightened because my years of drinking and deluded dreams had reduced me to a terrified life of skid-row panhandling, complete with wine sores and doorway sleeping. I stank. I didn't have a change of clothing, nor did I really want one. All was lost, down the drain — my career as a teacher plus the hundred other jobs I had tried. There was nothing left to live for; but I was too frightened to die.

My arrogance rested on the firm conviction that I was better than those around me. After all, I was a talented writer, wasn't I? I hadn't written

a readable line in years, but I thought my work was unpublished only because I was misunderstood and discriminated against. It had never been understood by anybody. No one had come close to feeling the agonized awareness, the suffering and loneliness inside my soul. I was black and bright, and the world had consistently rejected me for it. I hated this punishing world and resented its life and its God. My rage was all-consuming; only because my pain and sickness were still greater was I able to sit through that first meeting with a group of clean, apparently happy, mostly white folks who called themselves alcoholics.

They handed me coffee and gathered around me. They were honest enough not to pretend they didn't notice my shaking hands. They laughed and said it would get better. With difficulty, I listened to them. They said that alcoholism is a disease, a physical, mental and spiritual illness, a treatable illness from which people can recover. All this I drank in with the frantic gratefulness of a person dying of thirst.

Yet there was a bitter tinge to this water, a lingering doubt: Would it work for me? After all, unlike these people, I had been condemned by society to the life of a black, beaten bum. Therapy in the mental wards of many hospitals had confirmed my early suspicions that my heavy drinking was caused by an inability to adjust to the hostile world I was forced to live in. Religion had strangled me since childhood; it offered more fears and restrictions, and therefore reasons to drink. The word "God" stood out on the walls of the meeting room, which was in a church, and I seriously wondered if these godly, white, middle-class alcoholics could in any way comprehend the grave problems that forced a uniquely brilliant black wino to drink.

Many meetings later, I came upon certain basic principles that not only saved my life, but have gradually changed it. I learned that all of us alcoholics, no matter who we are or where we come from, drink the way we do for one basic reason — our alcoholism. We have a disease that won't let us stop drinking, once we pick up the first one. Our disease is profound and dynamic, constantly invading the mental and spiritual tissues of our being. We must constantly keep it arrested through the

program of A.A. if we are to recover and remain sober.

The rewards of sobriety are bountiful and as progressive as the disease they counteract. Perhaps greatest among these rewards has been a release from the frightening prison of my uniqueness.

***My name is Jim,
and I'm an alcoholic ("high bottom")***

I was one of those drunks who never saw the inside of a jail, nor was I ever ticketed for any offense that I could attribute to alcohol. I have never been hospitalized for any reason. Drinking never cost me a job or my wife.

My favorite expression was "I can quit drinking any time I want to." It got to the point where I started to believe it. I was able to quit drinking each Lent except for the one just prior to my coming into the A.A. program. I believed God would punish me more in the hereafter if I didn't do some penance for my sins here on earth. Abstaining from alcohol was the toughest penance I knew of. Sheer determination, bullheadedness, willpower and egotism carried me through.

Bullheadedness was a part of my nature. When I had made up my mind to do something, hell or high water couldn't change it. Many times during Lent, my wife pleaded with me to drink, just because I was so miserable to her and the kids when I wasn't drinking.

All my friends knew I always quit during Lent. Their adulation of my willpower sustained me through those days and nights. The fear of what they might say or think if I happened to fall off the wagon kept me going till Easter. I lived on the comments of my drinking buddies' wives: "Oh, how I wish my Jack (or Tom, or Steve) could quit like you." My wife was probably thinking, "If they only knew what his sobriety is costing me!"

I was also the smartest man in the world, in the company I worked for, in the departments I worked in, and at home as the head of the family.

I had only one problem that was a little difficult to understand, let alone solve. After waking so

many mornings feeling so terribly lousy and sick, and telling and promising myself I would not be that stupid again, *why* would I go right out and be stupid again? Why couldn't I stop after only one or two, like some guys I knew? Why was I almost always thinking about booze one way or another? Why couldn't I fall asleep unless I was at least half in the bag?

What would I do with my time if I quit? What would people say or think if I quit? What would customers say? What about Christmas, New Year's and my birthday without booze? How come I couldn't quit when I wanted to, when I'd always said I could? How come I lied so much? I was tired of lying, I was tired of trying to be someone else. It hurt me to think I was hooked on booze like an addict on dope.

One beautiful Saturday afternoon in July, when I was 34 years old, I blurted out to a priest that alcohol might be the root of my troubles. I had never before admitted such a thing to anyone. The priest suggested I try A.A.

I think one of the extraordinary yet simple points of A.A. is that I didn't have to quit drinking — *in the sense that I understood quitting* — before entering the program. I think if the program had advocated quitting as I understood it, I would not be sober today.

A.A. teaches us how to live without alcohol, how unnecessary alcohol is, and how it increases our problems.

It is a perfectly natural thing for most of us to say thank you to other people for whatever we receive. That's why it is important that I say thanks for the most precious gift I can receive — 24 hours of sobriety.

***My name is Jan,
and I'm an alcoholic (agnostic)***

My parents gave me a faith that in later years I lost. No, it was not a religious faith, though I was exposed to the teachings of two sects.

Neither was forced upon me; I simply drifted away through boredom, and my fragile, superficial

belief in God vanished as soon as I tried thinking about it. It was a faith in people that my parents gave me — both by loving me and by respecting me as an individual, entitled to make my own choices.

Out in the world on my own, I still had a feeling of being under benevolent protection. My immediate bosses (of both sexes) seemed to regard me as kindly schoolteachers had. Oddly, my good fortune sometimes annoyed me. “What is this?” I asked myself. “Do I arouse the parental impulse?” For there was inside me an element at war with my faith in people. It was a furious, stiff-necked pride, an urge for total independence. With my contemporaries, I was always painfully shy, and even then I interpreted this handicap correctly as a symptom of egotism — a fear that others would not agree with my own high valuation of myself.

That valuation certainly did not include a picture of myself as a drunk. Often, I suspect that pride kills as many alcoholics as liquor does. Ask for help? What an idea! The day came when my pride was squashed flat (temporarily), and I did call for help. I called on people — strangers. But my pride, expanding as health returned, blocked my first two approaches to A.A. After one more failure to regain my skill as a social drinker, I was convinced, and I began my A.A. membership in earnest.

Fortunately, I joined a group that devotes its closed meetings to Step discussions. Most of the members had their own concepts of a personal God; the atmosphere of faith surrounding me was so marked that I thought at times I was on the point of joining in it. I never did. And yet I found each discussion revealing new depths of meaning in the Twelve Steps.

In Step Two, the “Power greater than ourselves” meant A.A., but not just the members I knew. It meant all of us, everywhere, sharing a concern for one another and thereby creating a spiritual resource stronger than any one of us could provide.

At first, Step Three was simply the way I felt on no-hangover mornings of early sobriety, sitting by my window on days that always seemed sunny, having no immediate prospect of employment,

and feeling perfectly happy and confident anyhow. Then the Step became a cheerful acceptance of my place in the world: "I have no idea Who or What is running the show, but I know *I'm* not!" And I could also see Step Three as a good attitude, an effective approach to life: "If I am swimming in salt water and I panic and start thrashing around and fighting it, it will drown me. But if I relax and have faith in it, it will hold me afloat."

Though Step Four does not mention a Higher Power, to me the word "moral" carried an implication of sin, which in my book translates as an offense against God. So I regarded the inventory instead as an attempt at an honest description of my character; on the red side went qualities that tended to hurt people.

I am not sure that I was consciously working the Steps, but they were surely working on me. In about the fourth year of sobriety, a trivial incident suddenly made me realize that my old bugaboo of shyness had disappeared. "I feel at home in the world!" I said to myself in astonishment. Now, some 18 years later, I still do. In the whole measure of life, the benefits of the A.A. experience have far outweighed the damages of active alcoholism.

What was it that overcame my pride (for the moment) and made me reachable? The best answer I can find is what my father used to call "the life force." (He was an old-fashioned family doctor, and he had seen that force springing up or failing many times.) It is in all of us, I believe; it animates all living things; it keeps the galaxies wheeling. The salt-water metaphor applied to Step Three was not chosen by accident, for to me the ocean is a symbol of this force; I come closest to Step Eleven when I can contemplate an unbroken horizon from the deck of a ship. I am cut down to size; I feel serenely that I am a small part of something vast and unknowable.

But isn't the ocean rather a cold symbol?

Yes. Do I think that its eye is on the minnow, that it is concerned about any individual's fate? Would I talk to it? No. Once, near the end of my drinking, I did address three words to Something non-human. In the darkness before morning, I got out of bed, knelt, folded my hands and said,

“Please help me.” Then I shrugged and said, “Who’m I talking to?” and got back into bed.

When I related that incident to one of my sponsors, she said, “But He *did* answer your prayer. “

That may be. But I do not feel it. I didn’t argue with her, nor do I attack the mystery with pure logic now. If you could prove to me logically that there is a personal God — and I don’t think you can — I still would not be inclined to talk to a presence I couldn’t feel. If I could prove to you logically that there is no God and I know I can’t — your true faith would not be shaken. In other words, matters of faith lie entirely outside the realm of reason. Is there anything beyond the realm of human reason? Yes, I believe there is. Something.

In the meantime, here we all are together — I mean all of us people, not just alcoholics. We need each other.

Now we are all different together

Unique as the stories in this pamphlet are, did you notice a common theme that runs through many of them? In the words of just four:

Louis: “They’re my real brothers and sisters.”

Padric: “We are all human beings, all alcoholics, and all in A.A. together.”

Mary: “There is a place for every person who wants help.”

George: “. . . the people of *all* kinds who are Alcoholics Anonymous.”

This is a theme you hear over and over again at our meetings and read over and over again in our literature: the theme of *community*, of *sharing*. Gloria says, “We A.A.s all carry umbrellas that we put up over each other.” Sooner or later, most of us come to express this truth about our Fellowship.

In some large cities, you’ll find some special A.A. meetings — for police officers, members of the clergy, young people, doctors, LGBTQ members, Spanish-speaking people, A.A. beginners, or women only. Going to some of these when we are new in A.A. may ease the recovery path at first, but the happiest, healthiest recoveries seem to come to people who go to *all kinds* of A.A. meetings, not only the special ones.

We have found it unwise to limit our A.A. circle to folks exactly like ourselves. Segregation gives our “uniqueness” an unhealthy emphasis. We find it more enjoyable, and more healing, to get into the mainstream of A.A. life and mingle with everybody else, not just “different” people.

Here we are. We are *all* different. We are *all* pretty special people. But we are also *all* alcoholics and all sober in A.A. *together*. In this, we are more like each other than different. Here in A.A., we find the shared humanity that enables us to live out our widely differing lives and pursue our separate and individual destinies. You are welcome to join us.

THE TWELVE STEPS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.

2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.

4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

THE TWELVE TRADITIONS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.

2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority — a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.

3. The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.

4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.

5. Each group has but one primary purpose — to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

6. An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.

7. Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.

8. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.

9. A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.

10. Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.

11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films.

12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

A DECLARATION OF UNITY

This we owe to A.A.'s future: To place our common welfare first; to keep our fellowship united. For on A.A. unity depend our lives and the lives of those to come.

I am responsible...

When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be there.

And for that: **I am responsible.**

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