## The Way Back

A lawyer's story of alcoholism and recovery.

**BY ANONYMOUS** 



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What did I do last night? Who is mad at me? What did I do at work yesterday afternoon? Did I commit malpractice? Surely a client will sue me soon. I wonder if anyone knew I was drunk when I came back to court after lunch last week. I'm not going to drink today. Maybe I should end it all. If being a lawyer wasn't so stressful, I wouldn't have to drink like I do. Screw it, I'll quit drinking tomorrow.

Those thoughts, or some variation of them, came to my head every day in the last years of my drinking. I imbibed a fair amount in college, and my drinking progressed rapidly in the brief time between getting my undergraduate degree and attending law school. Drinking was fun, and it fit in well with the lifestyle of my early 20s. I quickly discovered that being a law student was not compatible with my style of drinking, and as a result, I found myself able to quit on my own. Not drinking at all during that first vear proved a wise decision: I finished in the top 10 percent of my class. I started consuming again during my second year, but I was drinking wine only. I didn't think it was a big deal and was able to maintain my grades.

After law school, I got a job with a 100-plus firm. I ratcheted up my drinking during that time—it was a great stress reliever. I didn't drink much in the daytime during the week, but my weekends were packed with all sorts of excuses to start in the morning. Brunch was a great one. I began to realize, though, that I couldn't have just one or two drinks. On the rare occasion when I did, I would become irritable or obsessed with getting home and away from the people I was with so that I could drink the way I wanted to, which was more. By "more" I mean all. I eventually left the firm and went to work for myself. It was magical. I did not have a boss to look over my shoulder. In fact, my boss thought it was OK to have a little drink in the morning to help ease the hangover. Gone was the time of drinking to party or relieve stress; I wanted oblivion to drown out how intolerable my life was becoming. And down it went for a couple more years.

I showed up on the doorsteps of Alcoholics Anonymous with dozens of failed or failing personal relationships; my business in the gutter, operating on credit and living on borrowed time with the few clients I still had; and a bad case of delirium tremens. (The convulsions and fainting had ended, but my hands still shook quite a bit.) I wanted to end my life but did not have the courage, and I realized that alcohol was going to take at least 20 more years to do the job for me. I couldn't keep living life as I had been living it, and I couldn't stop drinking, not for anyone or anything. I handed my relationships, money, law practice, and those hard years of law school all over to alcohol without a second thought—and it ruined me. However, in the face of all this evidence, it was nonetheless difficult to convince myself to darken the door of an AA meeting.

At my first meeting, I heard people talking about alcohol in the same manner as I thought about alcohol. I couldn't believe these people existed. I thought I was the only one who counted everyone else's drinks at the table, who thought it was ridiculous to only have a few drinks, or who thought it incredulous to stop drinking because "I'm starting to feel the alcohol." (NOTE: That is when you start drinking faster and more, in my book.) These AA people, who didn't look like I had imagined they would, also talked about their antics in a comical tone and were able to laugh at how they used to live, while at the same time speaking surprisingly reverently about the problems that active alcoholics face. I decided I would give it a try. I met someone in my first few meetings who told me to start reading the "Big Book" (AA's term of endearment for Alcoholics Anonymous, the group's basic text from where it gets its name) and introduced me to the person who would become my sponsor. At first, I did not believe AA would work for me, but I did believe it worked for the people at the AA meetings, and that was enough for me to try.

It has been a few years since that initial meeting. Both my professional life and personal life are better than I could ever have imagined. In sobriety, I have met a core group of other sober lawyers. I never imagined, though I should have, that there are so many lawyers who are recovered drunks. Some of these people I met in the rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous, others through the Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program. The most important change in my life is that instead of being crippled by fear and totally devoid of hope, I'm engaged in my own life in a hopeful and healthy manner. The rainbows and unicorns of Pollyanna thinking are not a part of my everyday life, but at the same time, I don't wake up with my hands shaking, wondering if a judge or client realized I was drunk yesterday. I am learning, slowly but surely, how to live a balanced life. To borrow from Brett Dennen, I believe in hope for the hopeless, and I have AA to thank for that. TBJ

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