

The Long & Winding Road by Anonymous

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On March 28, 1984, I received a phone call that my 17-year-old cousin had disappeared while camping. When I arrived at the search spot, I heard his father say, "I won't take another drink until I find my son." I told myself I wasn't going to screw things up this time. I would be there for the family. I swore off alcohol and drugs... again. For the next five days and four nights, I combed every square inch of the woods looking for some sign of life. My body broke out into a terrible rash -- I thought it was poison oak. My arms and legs began cramping -- I thought I was out of shape. My body shook uncontrollably -- I thought I was cold and feverish. I couldn't see straight. I couldn't think straight. I felt like I was going to die. Only later did I learn that I was suffering from delirium tremens -- and could very well have died. On April 1, 1984, they pulled my young cousin's lifeless body from the bayou. After years of drinking and smoking pot, after years of hiding my drug use, after years of pretending to be like everyone else, after years of running away from myself, I was finally compelled to my knees. I remember thinking, 'Now that we know he's dead, I am going to get blitzed!' Then, something happened. On my knees in the mud, my life flashed before me. All I saw was pain. For the first time in my life, I knew there was not enough alcohol or drugs in the whole world to keep the pain from coming in. To this day I cannot begin to describe the pain. Even before the autopsy results came back I knew my cousin had drowned under the influence of alcohol and drugs -- after all, he was a lot like me. I felt as dead as he looked, and I could not imagine how it was that I wasn't dead, too. I could not imagine how I still functioned. I hit bottom.

My first year of sobriety was typical. Without alcohol and drugs in my body, I had discovered an enormous amount of energy. Since I no longer had to cover up my alcoholism and the numerous mistakes I made as a result thereof, I had an abundance of free time. I discovered that people in Alcoholics Anonymous liked me, God loved me, and things got better *just* because I stopped drinking beer and smoking weed. My paranoia of the Houston Police Department left me. My frequent single-car collisions stopped happening. My physical health improved. I could see and walk a straight line, and life felt great. If I encountered a jerk (as those of us in the legal profession often do) I said, "Let go and let God," and didn't let it get me down. I memorized all the 12 step prayers, quotes and acronyms and began espousing them everywhere I went. I met hundreds of AA'ers who laughed a lot, opened their hearts to me, and didn't kick me out. (Like most alcoholics, I had been kicked out of lot of places.) Hearing their stories, I was convinced that I'd never been anywhere close to being sick as these people! I was a "baby" alcoholic compared to them. Everything was wonderful! Then it happened...

After 12 months without alcohol and drugs, I began to feel. During my second year, there were no more sayings to memorize and no more one-line answers to

my problems. I had already led numerous meetings, told my story, and made frequent trips down Telephone Road trying to save all the drunks. My AA friends began telling me that my outbursts of rage were inappropriate. People started talking to me about “boundaries,” and they suggested that perhaps I was sicker than I’d earlier thought. Finally my AA sponsor told me that I needed professional help, that I needed therapy.

When I went to my first therapy session I brought along a contract and asked my therapist to sign it. I listed 56 issues such as: overcoming my lack of trust in God and people; developing healthy relationships with others; overcoming anger; overcoming procrastination and avoidance; finding peace; losing weight; quitting smoking; learning how to play; overcoming fears such as the fear of being crazy, fear of pain, fear of intimacy, fear of success and failure, fear of rejection, etc. I then added two lines in case the therapist wanted to add her own suggestions. I told her that I didn’t believe in long term therapy, so we had better get started. I fully expected to resolve all 56 of these issues within eight weeks.

I cried during every session. I slowly began melting the “plastic doll” and the “lean green killing machine” I had spent so many years building. These were personae I had used to keep functioning in spite of so many fears. For the first time in many years, I began to feel human. I began to feel real. Underneath all of my talk, intellectual prowess, aggression and success, I’d always been convinced that I was subhuman scum. Only when I began getting honest with myself and began feeling my feelings would I truly begin to get well emotionally.

As the feelings became more intense and more painful I started looking for another drug. I knew I could no longer drink or drug, but I desperately needed something to take the pain away. At the end of my second year of sobriety and first year of therapy, I decided I had more important things to do than wallow in all this pain. I created a new drug. Burning the candle at both ends I finished my last semester at law school, worked 35 hours per week, sponsored three women in AA, jogged three miles a day, walked my dogs, went to five AA meetings per week, taught Sunday School, read all the current self-help books, talked incessantly on the phone to those who were still awake late at night -- and, of course, I studied for the bar exam.

After an exhausting first day of the multi state bar exam, I left the coliseum only to collapse at the park across the street. I absolutely, positively *knew* I had gotten only two answers right. One of my strengths, however, is persistence, so I came back the next two days to complete the exam. (I actually scored exceptionally well but didn’t have any confidence back then.) I probably would have been depressed, but I was far too hyper. With all the energy I had accumulated during my months of “working hard” I continued my frenzied pace so I wouldn’t have to feel the pain of getting honest with myself. Since I seemed to have so much energy I enrolled in classes at the University of Houston to work on a masters’ degree in Psychology. After class, I’d go to an AA meeting, then home to call someone. Anyone. I couldn’t

stand to be alone. I couldn't stand to be still. I didn't sleep much. At night I would listen to self-help tapes on overcoming something. I listened to so many of them, thinking that perhaps in my sleep I could build self esteem. In the morning I'd just start running again.

Of course, I *acted* like what I thought was a good lawyer. I acted like I knew all the answers, and I loved to win. In other words, I was once again the "Lean Green Killing Machine." I no longer had time to deal with therapy. On November 7, 1986, I called Austin and discovered I had passed the bar and was a licensed attorney. For some reason, after I hung up the phone I thought, "What I *do* means nothing." With these words the built up energy of the previous year abruptly disappeared. I felt weak, lethargic. I felt like I had crashed into a black hole. A hole that took me three long years to crawl out of.

All my AA friends thought I should be happy. I had finally completed years of study and hard work to achieve my "dream." Why was I so depressed? Although I attempted to resume my therapy, it didn't take long for my therapist to realize that I needed medical help. She eventually refused to see me unless I started taking medication. Although I desperately wanted to get well, I could not go to see a psychiatrist. My mother had seen psychiatrists all her life. My experience was that they fed her pills and used her as a guinea pig. I had seen her depression, her suffering, her reaction to shock treatment, and her pain. The psychiatrists had never seemed to make her well. Even more importantly, I knew that I would rather die than to end up taking every new pill that came out. (Fortunately the field of psychiatry has dramatically improved since then.) Being a good lawyer I found other people who would support my insane thinking. I only went to the hard-core meetings where people often say that 'the 12 steps of the program are all you need to get well.' In other words, I hung around only the *really* sick people.

I can remember canceling numerous appointments because I couldn't get out of bed. I would interrupt negotiations by telling everyone to get coffee or a snack, then I would run into my office, crawl under my desk, and burst into uncontrollable tears. After a while, the other lawyers would knock on my door. For a while I was able to pull myself together, emerge from my lair and rise to the occasion. Unfortunately these bursts of energy were short lived and gradually became more and more difficult to invoke. I thought all this blackness was me. I felt totally empty.

My healthy friends stopped hanging around because they were tired of hearing about my endless sadness and gloom. My sicker friends offered a wide variety of quick fixes. I was told that jogging would cure my depression, a man would cure my depression, helping other alcoholics would cure my depression -- and a million other remedies that never seemed to work. I was even told that I was deliberately forcing myself into this black pit, and I could crawl out of it any time I wanted to. I just got sicker. I started believing that I was deliberately making myself sick. I became obsessed with suicide. I felt an overwhelming urge to fling my car into eighteen- wheelers driving by. On two occasions, I unwittingly crashed

into them, escaping both times with minimal injury. Twice I played Russian Roulette. In my saner moments, when I was afraid that I really *would* shoot myself, I'd give my gun to a friend and then demand its return a few days later. I stopped going to AA. I remember once waking up in my car 50 miles from home at midnight. I had simply stopped driving. The motor was running. The lights were on. I literally did not have the energy to press down on the gas pedal. Suddenly I flew into a rage, slammed my foot on the gas and was doing 100 miles per hour down a road I'd never seen before. I don't know how I got home that night. How could I be so insane without using alcohol or drugs? When my thoughts were coherent, I cried -- but most of the time I couldn't even think straight. I was dying, and I knew it. It was only then that I was willing to see a doctor.

On August 7, 1987, I went to a psychiatrist who began treating me for major depression. Because my energy level was so low and because he was concerned about my unconscious suicidal behavior, he had me check into a psychiatric hospital for treatment. I began taking an antidepressant. Four months later I checked into the hospital again. For me the medication had been helpful, but it was not enough. I needed therapy as well. As a result, in addition to learning about clinical depression and regulating my medications, I began having feelings once again. Slowly but surely I began to get well.

Most of my clients had left me. The few who remained were often as sick as I was. During those three years it's a wonder I wasn't sued. Luckily my lifestyle didn't require much income, and I had a secretary who practiced law better than I did. I remember how I excitedly called my psychiatrist one day to tell him I'd had an anxiety attack. For me, this was a sign of improvement! I began working for four hours three to four days per week, and later went back to working full days. I came back to life. When I look back on those three years, I am amazed that I managed to survive.

Every few years, I decide it's time to get off the medication, and about nine months later I wonder why I'm depressed. Fortunately my friends (this year it was Don Jones, Director of TLAP) know me well enough to remind me that I am suffering from clinical depression. Today I never allow my depression to remain untreated as long as I did the first time. I don't allow myself to endure that much pain. This journey has drawn me closer to God, and therefore, my humanity. Each week I attend two meetings in Houston where lawyers open up and talk about recovery from alcohol, drugs and depression. At one of these meetings I heard a lawyer say that some days the best he could do was to show up at work and "rearranged paper clips" for hours at a time. I laughed with him because I understood.

I no longer feel the need to produce documents all the time, and my practice is less stressful than it was. I don't burn the candle at both ends any more. In fact, I had to change the type of law I practiced so I could slow down the pace. My "Lean Green Fighting Machine" is long gone, and so is the "Plastic Doll."

Today, I take the time to feel... in other words, I take the time to heal.