

Embarrassment

I'm lying in bed in the morning. It's that time between being asleep and being awake – halfway between dreams and consciousness. A memory comes. My eyes fly open. Oh, God! I grab my head with two hands. Oh, man . . . It all comes back. What I did the night before. Seemed just fine then. Now . . . the embarrassment! The shame!

That happened a lot before my last drink. Never happens now. I still make mistakes. Sometimes I say something I wish I could take back. But, none of those times comes close to equaling things I did when I was drinking alcohol.

Here's one. I still grab my head on this one three decades later. When Pat and I were married, we did not pledge fidelity. Those were the days of "open marriages." We would be free to relate to other people as we wished. As it turned out, we didn't act on that much. For one thing, the nature of sexually transmitted diseases changed. Back then, STDs were relatively benign and curable. A little penicillin would do it. Shortly after we were married, AIDS became known. People were dying from it and there was no cure. Incurable herpes became widespread. Hepatitis C began killing livers, then people. Infidelity had become life threatening.

And, as I experienced life, I figured out there are good reasons for fidelity to be a part of the marriage vows. Sexual relationships result in all sorts of other issues being brought forth besides having a good time. A married friend of mine says, "The problem with messing around with other women is they want to fall in love." That even happens to men, too. When the love thing happens, things get real complicated. Marriages are destroyed even when messing around is it s'posed to be OK.

None of that's to say I didn't try a time or two early on. Not long after our marriage, I went to a conference in Atlanta. As soon as I unpacked, I opened my half gallon of vodka. I loved going to conferences because I could sit in my room and drink without monitoring myself. No one else was there but me. I didn't have to dig around under the kitchen cabinet, always fearful Pat would unexpectedly appear.

As I drank the liquor, I thought of a woman I'd known a few years before. We had worked together and I liked her . . . a lot. After a couple of dates, she told me she wasn't ready to be serious. We remained close friends. Now, years later, I still felt a great deal of affection for her. She had moved Atlanta, and as I sat in the hotel room thinking about her, drinking my alcohol, giving her a call grew to be a better and better idea. Fortified by the vodka, I called and she agreed to join me for dinner.

As I drank the vodka throughout the day, I concocted a plan to treat her to a room service dinner. Why go out to a restaurant? We ordered dinner and sat in the room eating and talking. That part went OK, I guess. My main memory is that of being extremely drunk, having to work hard to focus my eyes as we talked. But, I had a great capacity to be very drunk and not show it. My recollection is hazy as to what I said, but I have an extremely clear memory of rising from my seat at the table, plopping on the bed, and expecting her to follow me.

She didn't. I don't recall what she said, except it was gentle. I remember walking her out of the hotel to her car and feeling like the biggest jerk that had ever lived. That feeling has never left me when that memory pops up. Even today, more than three

decades later, I still cringe and grab my head with two hands when I think about that moment when I fell on the bed.

Alcoholics don't learn from their mistakes as long as they're still drinking. It didn't take years for me to come to realize my behavior in that hotel was boorish, rude . . . just plain awful. I knew that the nanosecond after I was on the bed. I didn't forget about it when I sobered up. Yet, not long after that when I was drunk again, I decided it would be a good idea to show up at a friend's sister's house late one night. Rumor was that the sister was known to be free with sexual favors. The sister was gracious and invited me in. I made no obvious move this time, and when she didn't volunteer to jump right into bed on her own, I left. When I woke up the next day, I grabbed my head. My intentions would have to be obvious to even the dumbest woman, and that woman wasn't at all stupid. I couldn't believe it. Alcohol had done it again.

Embarrassment was often accompanied by its companion: denial. On October 13, 1971, I became legal to buy alcohol. I awoke that morning feeling a tremendous sense of excitement and relief. That's when I was in the Teacher Corps, and I called the school where I was working, and told the woman who answered that I would be late. I went to the liquor store and bought my first legal bottle of Old Granddad. Cool! I drank enough to get a good buzz, and then went to school.

I hadn't been at school long before one of the senior teachers asked me to join her in the teacher's workroom. She said, "Happy birthday."

"Thanks." I replied.

"I think you started celebrating a little early."

"What?"

"You've been drinking alcohol."

This was the first time anyone had confronted me about my drinking. I never drank before going to work at the radio station. I never drank before flying an airplane. While I'm sure somebody noticed my drinking before that chemistry class at the University of Georgia, nobody said anything to me about it. Now for the first time in my life, but not the last, I did what all alcoholics do when confronted about their drinking – denied the obvious. The odor of Old Granddad was indisputable and I knew it. Didn't matter. I said, "No. I haven't had anything to drink."

"Uh, huh."

I just stood there, humiliated. I knew what I had just said was stupid.

"OK. It's your birthday. Your twenty-first birthday. I understand. Go on home and don't do this again."

There it was. I'd finally turned 21 and was legal and I celebrated by feeling massively embarrassed and demoralized. So how does an alcoholic deal with those feeling? I went home, finished the bottle, and got totally smashed.

Alcoholism creates a severe learning disability. We keep doing the same dumb stuff over and over again. Years later I was teaching psychology at night for a nearby college. The class was held one night a week from six until ten – right in the middle of my drinking time. My job as a school counselor ended at four and, I had a couple of hours to kill before teaching the college class. I gutted out that time period for one week. The next week I brought a pint with me and took a few swigs before class started to get through the evening.

One of my students was a coworker at my school named Marsha. She came to my office one day and closed the door. She said another student in the night class was telling people she smelled alcohol on my breath. That stomach flip happened—the one that always appeared when someone said something about my drinking. Now, by that time in my drinking, I knew it was possible my drinking would be detected. I had a story ready. I said, “Yeah. I eat dinner before class and have a beer with it. Thanks for telling me. I’ll take care of it.” Politicians call that a non-denial, denial. Now, I call it lying. I quit the swigs before class after that and discovered I could manage to teach just fine without it. That didn’t stop the embarrassment. I still work with Marsha and the other student is now a teacher at my school. I still cringe from time to time when I see them and think about that.

I have tons of those stories. I used to write letters to the editor on a regular basis. When email became available, my embarrassing episodes skyrocketed. Before the advent of Email, I’d have time to rethink those letters before buying stamps and putting them in the mail. With email, all it took was hitting the “send” button. A pattern developed – drink as usual at night, deciding it’d be a good idea to write a letter to the editor at about eleven. Hit the send button. Waking up the next morning, remembering what the letter said, grabbing my head, running to the computer and sending a “never mind” message. Most of the time that worked, but from time to time they’d slip through. A few nights later, I’d do it again.

Alcohol addiction is a circle. It keeps going round and round and as long as I kept drinking, those embarrassing times and subsequent denial never stopped.