

Isolation

Eventually, alcohol wore me out. That happens to all alcoholics who keep drinking sooner or later, especially the functioning kind, if they don't die from the addiction first. It's hard work to do what it takes to drink as much as our addiction requires while keeping others from knowing how much that is. We grow weary of enduring all those embarrassing moments and suffering through the trouble we create. The cognitive dissonance our behavior produces saps our energy. Sooner or later, something has to give. More often than not, what gives is human contact.

A close call on a bridge in a freezing night in Atlanta did it for me. It started when the Georgia State Board of Education passed a policy called "No Pass, No Participate." It was among the dumbest rules for schools ever conceived. High school and middle school students who failed to pass five of their six classes were prohibited from participating in extra curricular activities the next semester. Never mind that we knew one of the most effective strategies available to us to motivate low achievers was to get them involved in extra curricular activities. The data is absolutely clear on that. Students involved in activities make better grades. Up until that policy was passed, we made great efforts to encourage failing students to get active in something positive. That was one of the most effective strategies we had available to us to save them.

Now, incredibly, our State Board of Education had removed one of our most valuable tools. The policy might be an effective motivator for the students who wanted to play football or basketball. When students played those sports, they were the center of attention, often cheered for by the multitudes. That wasn't true at all for all the other activities the policy impacted. Most students, particularly those who were failing, weren't clamoring to belong to Future Farmers of America or the Future Homemakers of America. This no pass/no participate rule prohibited our farmer kids who had failed two courses from going to meetings where they learned about chain saw safety. Future mothers were prohibited from learning about how to be sure their future, and sometimes current, children ate nutritious meals. Even more astounding, students who failed two classes could not join Students Against Drunk Driving or Stop Drugs at the Source. How absolutely dumb-ass crazy is that?

The on-track provision of the rule was even more amazingly stupid. In addition to having to pass five classes in the previous semester in order to engage in a club activity like cleaning litter off a highway, students had to remain "on-track" for graduation. If a student had a difficult ninth grade year, which is common, it was possible for the student to make straight A's for the remainder of his or her high school career and *never become eligible* to participate in extracurricular activities again. Just can't get dumber than that – no possibility of redemption for a fourteen-year-old.

I began working to have the rule rescinded. Early on, I wrote a guest column for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution pointing out that the policy prohibited students from joining anti-drug and anti-drinking clubs. Maybe it was happenstance, but the next week the state board of education met and exempted anti-drug and anti-drinking clubs from the policy. That was progress, but a lot more needed to be done. I began speaking to civic clubs and similar groups asking for their help in persuading the board to give us back one of our most effective tools for student improvement. I also met with numerous state legislators.

After writing many letters to state board of education members to no avail, I decided to go to a state board meeting and address its members in person. Because I abhor driving in Atlanta's rush hour traffic, I made a reservation for a Holiday Inn near a subway station and headed to Atlanta the night before the meeting.

It was a miserably cold February night. As usual, I began my vodka drinking upon arriving home from work. I was looking forward to going to the hotel that night. When I was in a hotel, I did not have to monitor my drinking because I wouldn't be interacting with anybody.

As it turned out, I did interact with someone that night.

One of the definitions of insanity recovering drunks often repeat to each other is "doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." It had been around fifteen years since the DUI arrest I had while going to the airport due to my parents' car wreck in Tennessee. Back then, I'd come home from work and began drinking, and bought beer on the way out of town. On that February night fifteen years later, the only difference was I bought a pint of vodka rather than beer on the way out of town.

I knew the hotel was on I-285, the Interstate highway that loops around Atlanta, and I knew it was near the MARTA station which was close to Memorial Drive. I knew how to get to Memorial and 285, so I headed in that direction and planned to ask for directions to the hotel once there. By the time I arrived at I-285, my head was swimming from the vodka. I had started drinking without monitoring myself a little early. After crossing the Interstate, I went into a convenience store and asked the clerk for directions. He said the Holiday Inn was one exit north. As I pulled out of the store's parking lot onto Memorial Drive, I took another swig of vodka from the pint bottle in the paper bag. I'd been in the convenience store for about ninety seconds, which meant I was anxious for more alcohol by the time I was back in the car. I didn't want to wait. Between the darkness and taking the swig, I failed to see a raised, concrete median in the middle of the road. As I bounced over the median, vodka splashed all over me. I was drenched.

When I moved onto the bridge that crossed the Interstate, lights blazed in my rear view mirror. Bright, flashing, blue lights. I stopped my pickup truck in the middle of the bridge and sat, trying to blink away those hideous lights that pierced my eyes. There is a passage in the book "Alcoholics Anonymous" that talks about the "incomprehensible demoralization" alcoholics experience. At that moment, I could not have been more demoralized. Jail again. No doubt about it. I was drenched in vodka and I was flat-out drunk. As I looked in the mirror, I saw a police woman climbing from her car.

Something born of desperation clicked in my brain. No thought was involved. It must have come from the survival instinct that resides in the depths of our cortex. I jumped out of the truck and hollered "Good evenin'." I had to yell because the wind was howling. It was blowing a million miles an hour right down the interstate highway, perpendicular to the bridge we were on. The temperature felt like it was minus a thousand degrees. Real unusual for Georgia, even in winter.

The policewoman was wearing a heavy coat with the collar turned up. She stopped short of my truck, pointed over her shoulder with her thumb, and said, "You just ran over that median."

I grew up in the south, but my parents are from the Midwest. My southern accent is slight. Not that night. I'd worked in Jackson County for fifteen years by then. I knew

how to do the good ol' boy thing. "Yes, ma'am! I shore did. I'm from *Jackson County*, and we don't have them things up there." I could smell the vodka stinking up the air around me. But, the wind was blowing hard from right to left, not toward the police officer. "I'm gonna speak to the state Board of Education tomorrow morning and come up here to spend the night in a *hotel*. Can't stand that morning' traffic y'all got up here, you know?"

She stood looking at me.

"Thing is, I can't find the Holiday Inn. It's s'posed to be 'round here somewhere. Do you know where it is?"

After a pause, she pointed to her left. "One exit down."

I turned to climb back in my truck and said "Thank you, m'am. You been real helpful and I'm real sorry for running over that thing y'all have in the road back there."

As I drove away, I glanced in the mirror. She was standing, watching me leave. I used my blinker and turned left onto the interstate's entrance ramp, being careful to not go too fast or too slow. Once I was on the Interstate, the relief was massive. I'm not sure that God gets us out of DUIs, but I thanked Him profusely anyway.

As I approached the hotel's registration desk, I became aware again of the alcoholic stench emanating from me. My vision was blurry and I had to touch chairs in the lobby as I passed them to steady myself. I told the clerk I had a reservation. And then I did the normal drunk thing—talked too much when intoxicated. I was still feeling enormous relief and wanted to share that. I said, "Boy, I was just stopped by the police."

The woman looked up from her computer screen. Her voice was incredulous when she said, "And they didn't arrest you?"

"Amazing, isn't it."

"It sure is."

I rarely had hangovers. The next morning was an exception. I felt horrible – headache, extreme thirst, nausea – the whole deal. I rode the MARTA train into downtown Atlanta. As I walked into the building housing the Georgia State Board of Education, I saw a legislator who'd I had met with months before regarding the no pass-no participate policy. He was there for an appointment and was early for his appointment. He said he'd like to attend the board meeting.

The time came for me to speak to the board. I was articulate and passionate. That's another one of those paradoxes. The anticipation of public speaking was excruciating so I avoided it if I could. But, once I got started actually doing it, I did just fine. Problem was, I couldn't seem to translate that experience into relaxing for the next one.

When I explained how unreasonable it was to permanently ban a student from extracurricular activity because of a bad ninth grade year, one board member dismissed my concern saying students can go to summer school to make up the classes and become eligible. He was an attorney who was the representative from part of Atlanta, and lived in an affluent suburb. I told him the cheapest summer school cost in the neighborhood of three hundred dollars a unit. I pointed at him. "Three hundred dollars may not seem like much to you, but to kids I work with three hundred dollars is impossible." I suggested he travel outside of his comfortable environs and visit around the state. He'd find that most districts didn't offer summer school at all. I gave many more examples of the damage being done to kids by the policy. After the meeting, I was congratulated by others for my

performance. The legislator said he couldn't believe the board wouldn't change the policy after that presentation.

The board did change the policy, but they had to be forced to do it. The legislature passed a bill prohibiting the board from having the policy, but Governor Zell Miller vetoed that legislation. At the time he said he didn't want the legislature managing our educational system, but warned the board that they should change the policy. They did.

All that would happen later. On that day, I rode a MARTA train back to my car. My head was still throbbing. That wasn't the bad part, though. As I sat, gazing out the window as the backside of Atlanta slid by, my soul was filled by a huge, vacuous chasm. From time to time, depending on the angle of the sun, my reflection appeared in the window. Each time that happened, my mind returned to the previous night on the bridge, then to the presentation I had just given and the comments I heard afterward. The thought wouldn't go away: How can somebody who gave that presentation this morning be the same person who stood on the bridge screaming, "I'm from Jackson County, and we don't have them things up there!"?

Incomprehensible demoralization.

Everything changed after that. Not the drinking, though. I had to do that. Not drinking alcohol was impossible. Instead, I did what I could to be certain I would never, ever find myself on another freezing bridge terrified that I was on my way to jail. I quit going out at night, which was when I drank, unless I simply had to. When I had to go out, I wouldn't drink until I came back home. Those times were wretched. My body needed the alcohol around five each day. To delay that was misery. Those occasions didn't happen often though. I went to soccer games and band concerts to watch the kids. Occasionally my school had an activity I had to attend—stuff like that from time to time.

As the years passed, my isolation increased. I'd arrive home, pour my vodka, cook dinner for the kids, and retreat to my office. I taught myself HTML coding and built a website for our counseling department so students would have access to helpful information from anywhere that had an Internet connection. With that skill developed, I began sending web based staff announcements for our faculty each evening. I could do those sorts of things while I drank alcohol. I continued to maintain my steady level of intoxication – enough to get into the proper zone, but not so much as to lose control. I quit writing letters to the editor. I quit making phone calls. I quit any attempts to socialize.

I was forced out of my office when we received the devastating news that my sixteen-year-old nephew, Jonathan, died suddenly of a previously undetected heart defect. I left for my sister's house immediately – two hours from our home. My parents live a short distance from my sister, but I couldn't stay there. I didn't drink alcohol or smoke cigarettes around my parents, and I had lost all interest in going through the agony of abstinence. Instead, I secured a hotel room. My excuse was I was having trouble sleeping and would sleep better in the hotel. I wasn't lying about that. If I couldn't drink alcohol and smoke cigarettes, my body rebelled so badly sleep never happened. But, I didn't sleep much anyway. The hotel had rocking chairs in the front, overlooking downtown streets. I sat there throughout the night, smoking, drinking, and hurting for my sister, her family, my parents, and, of course, Jonathan. I hadn't lost the capacity to feel pain. Not at all. Far from it. But, I had no interest, or ability, to share the pain. I just wanted to be left alone.

Life sucked during those ten years. Looking from the outside in, it didn't look like it to others, but it did. What made it even harder was acting as if everything was OK. I had a student in my office who was telling me about her father. She said that he got drunk every night. The night before he'd gotten out of his chair, urinated in the corner of the trailer's living room, and made her clean it up. As she was telling me that, I saw myself in my office, working on my computer, with the vodka and water sitting next to the monitor. Daddy's water. I never urinated in the corner of the living room, but I understood that guy. I did what I could to help the girl deal with her dad's behavior, but I had to do that while slogging through my own swampy mess. That was just so very hard to do. And I did it day after day.

Life's good now. Glorious. Escaping from hell changes everything. A completely new perspective is born. But, before that happened, it got awfuller, and awfuller, and awfuller.

And then it ended.