

Tragedy

Alcoholism is fatal. Drinking the stuff in excess is deadly. If we alcoholics keep drinking, we'll die in an accident, or because somebody shoots us while we're doing something stupid, or from some malfunction of a body part. Even harder, we often take things into our own hands and end it ourselves when life keeps getting worse and worse and we just can't take it anymore.

Before going further, we need to define "excess." Alcoholics want to define it way different than the reality of it. Excess means more than three ounces worth of alcohol a day if you're a man and 1 ½ ounces if you're a woman. That's one beer for women and two for men. One 12 ounce glass of wine for women, two for men. That's one jigger of liquor for women, two for men.

That's it. That's not much. If you're reading this and thinking you might have a problem with alcohol, I guarantee you're drinking more than that. Probably a lot more. Now, let's get this out of the way, too: Medical science has research indicating alcohol improves heart health. It appears to raise our HDL, the good stuff that can provide protection from heart disease. Wonderful! Wait, not so fast. That works using the same formula – two drinks for men, one for women a day. More than that, and you *increase* the odds of getting heart disease and a bunch of other bad stuff, too.

The thing about alcohol is that if you don't die of an accident or a gunshot, or you don't die at your own hand, it usually takes a while to kill you. In a long-term study started in the 1960s, the average age of death for alcoholics was found to be 56. When you're twenty that seems old. Seemed like it to me back then. As I approached fifty, it didn't seem old at all. My dad does yard work every day. He's 88, thirty-two years past when the average alcoholic dies. If I can help it, I want to be more like my dad than those alcoholics who are dying younger than I am now.

We all know about liver disease killing alcoholics, but there are a bunch of other things alcohol does to our bodies. Bad things. I developed heart disease and drinking and smoking undoubtedly were big factors. Since I stopped drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes, my heart disease doesn't appear to have progressed. In fact, it may have regressed a bit.

I had some microbiology stuff going on, too. Alcohol caused my bone marrow to do bad stuff, causing my red blood cells to get big, and they kept getting bigger. That can lead to macrocytic anemia, which eventually could have killed me of pernicious anemia. In short, your liver may survive excessive alcohol consumption if you're lucky, but there's a bunch of other stuff that's laying in wait to kill you way before your time.

It's easy for young alcoholics to figure they've got time to quit before it gets bad. The problem with that is twofold. First, there is absolutely no way to tell who'll be able to stop drinking in time. Second, alcoholics often die of something else first. Take T.J. McComb's best friend. I'm sure he didn't expect to die in his twenties.

It was the mid seventies and the New Year's party was at Jim and Anita Perkerson's house. They owned an A-frame home near the shores of Lake Temple, outside of Carrollton. All the radio station people I worked with were there. Some other guests, too. Sometime early in the evening, Jim and Anita's next door neighbor appeared at the door. His name was T.J. McComb and his best friend, Harold, was with him. The wooded neighborhood was new and sparsely populated. T.J.'s house was through the woods and

down a half-dirt, half-gravel road. On this rainy night, it was mostly mud. T.J. and his wife were having a New Year's party, too. Though the evening was young, it was obvious T.J. had started celebrating early. He said his phone was out and asked to use Jim and Anita's phone. T.J. and his friend left, and we continued to party.

Most of Jim and Anita's guests left after midnight, but, as was traditional, a few of us hardliners stayed around to celebrate New Years in New Orleans, Denver, and points west. As we toasted the New Year for Los Angeles, the doorbell rang. I answered it. A man I didn't know was there, obviously agitated. "I need your phone, man," he said as he entered without invitation. As was my practice, I'd slowed down my drinking as the evening moved toward a conclusion. Avoided hangovers that way. I wasn't nearly as drunk as I had been earlier. "Something wrong?" I asked.

"Got to call the sheriff." He picked up the phone.

"The sheriff?"

He looked at me. "T.J.. just shot Harold. I think he's dead."

"What?" Jim was behind me now.

"T.J., man. Shot the hell out of Harold."

Jim and I put on coats and walked down the muddy road to T.J.'s house. Spotlights hanging on the corners of the house cut through the mist, illuminating the driveway. People, clearly drunk and appearing dazed, were milling around – aimless, crying, holding on to each other, looking shocky. Cars were parked on the road and in the yard to the right of the driveway. I looked to the right and could see something in the shadow next to a station wagon. I moved toward it, but quickly stopped. My stomach flipped. It was a body—the arms and legs splayed at odd angles.

The body lay there by itself. It was the strangest thing. Really weird. A dead guy was laying there and it seemed nobody wanted to get near it. It was as if there was a disconnect between the body and the chaos it had created. A wail came from the direction of the house. I looked up and saw a woman come running through the open garage door. As she entered the spotlight's illumination, I saw it was T.J.'s wife. She was screaming, "Oh, my God! Oh, my God! He killed Harold! He killed Harold!" She ran straight to me, pushed her arms around my waist, and buried her face in my chest. The smell of alcohol was overwhelming. She kept screaming.

"Shhh," I whispered toward her ear, stroking her head with my hand. She quieted.

I had no idea why she'd run to me. I'd met her a couple of times, but didn't know her at all. I guess I was just there. Another woman approached from the house and stood just behind the wife. I looked at the newcomer and asked her what had happened.

This woman seemed calm and sober. At least, more sober than the others. "T.J. found them in the car."

"Found who?"

She glanced toward the body. "Harold and . . ." She nodded toward me, indicating T.J.'s wife. "He saw them in the car together, went back in the house, got his gun, came back out, and shot him."

"Uh huh," I said and immediately reached behind my back to pry T.J.'s wife's hands apart and move her arms from around me. T.J. killed his best friend when he found him messing around with his wife. I hardly even knew T.J. and his wife was all over me. As I extricated myself from her, I asked, "Where is he?"

"In the basement."

The woman took T.J.'s wife by the hand and led her away. A sheriff's car arrived and we left. Back at Jim's house, we told the others what had happened. That pretty much ended our celebration. Everybody left.

As I drove home, I couldn't shake the vision of Harold lying on the ground. Just a short time before, he'd been in Jim and Anita's house with his best friend, T.J., anticipating an evening full of fun. Now he was dead – killed by that best friend.

It was all about alcohol. I knew that. Without the alcohol, Harold and the wife probably wouldn't have gone to the car. They may have made plans to meet some place. People do that. But, doing it in the car was in all likelihood alcohol induced. Absent alcohol T.J. probably would have yelled, screamed, maybe hit his friend. I doubt he would have killed him. At least there's a real good chance that's the case.

Then there's Kenny. He died in his early thirties. I met him after I'd quit drinking. He was a recovering alcoholic who drank again. He was brilliant. I loved talking to him. He had quit high school before graduating, but was making a good living in construction. I saw him after he started drinking again and he was an entirely different person. He was drunk one night and decided to drink liquid morphine. It killed him. Damn.

Alcohol didn't kill him directly, but I knew Kenny well. If he hadn't been drunk, he wouldn't have drunk the morphine. Alcohol destroys our ability to make sound judgments. It creates lousy decisions. It makes us forget how much of something we have eaten or how much we've had to drink. It makes us forget how many pills we've taken. Alcohol leads to overdoses. Alcohol kills us.

Fred Shirley saved my career in education. My first real year of teaching was at Lyons Middle School in Athens in 1975. I'd taught a year at a private school before that, but I had four classes at that school with the biggest having about twelve students – all well-behaved kids. At Lyons I was teaching mostly non readers in sixth and seventh grade—a real different bunch from the kids I'd taught the year before. By Christmas I was applying for any kind of job I could think of that didn't involve kids. I didn't have a clue how to control them. Fred worked with me. He saved me. Within a couple of years I became known for my ability to produce order among middle school chaos. Later, I was asked to conduct classroom management seminars for student teachers. All I did was pass along stuff Fred taught me. During my sessions with him, he told me his goal was to be a school superintendent some day.

He didn't become a superintendent. Instead, he acted on his alcoholism. He became a principal, and then he was demoted due to drinking and was placed in a position that was out of sight. Eventually, he left town. He died in his fifties.

When I was student teaching at Cedar Shoals High School in 1973, Dan Ward was the chairman of the high school's English department. He was another brilliant guy in his early thirties. He came to the seminars my professor had at his house on Thursday night. When the seminar part ended, we spent the rest of the evening drinking and dancing. Dan retreated to the kitchen, drank beer, and made beer can pyramids. He went camping with us once and drank a lot of tequila. We had to carry him out the next day. He was too sick to walk out.

Dan was hired by the Georgia State Department of Education to direct the instructional program for the state's Language Arts programs. He was a highly respected, successful professional. He was found dead in a pool of blood in his kitchen. His drinking had produced esophageal varices. Those are veins in the throat area that

become extremely thin due to liver damage from alcoholic drinking. Eventually, they just burst and the alcoholic bleeds to death. It doesn't take long. Like Fred, he was in his early fifties.

Richard was a friend from my early days in sobriety. I enjoyed talking to him. He had such good things to say about how to stay sober. He didn't, though. He got drunk and was arrested on a gun charge. They found him dead in his cell. He had hung himself.

And I could go on and on.

Miss Maryella Camp was my senior English teacher. It drove her crazy when people misused the word 'tragedy.' She told us it wasn't a tragedy when a meteor fell on a house and killed a family, or when a tidal wave killed thousands in Indonesia. Those things were horrific, terrible, unimaginably bad events. But, they weren't tragedies. A tragedy occurred when bad things happened to someone due to a tragic flaw in the person's being or character. Kenny, Fred, Dan and Richard meet that definition. They were good people and their tragic flaw was their alcohol abuse. They're not unique. Alcoholism is a fatal disease.

It creates tragedy.

It kills you