



The First Step The First Truth

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RECOVERY TODAY

"We admitted we were POWERLESS over alcohol ... that our lives had become UNMANAGEABLE."

This is the only step you have to get 100% right. No half measures. Your ability to grasp this step may be the difference between life and death. Period.

Powerless and unmanageable? I zeroed on those two words like a heat-seeking missile. That is ridiculous I thought. For, I was the great 'I am' with a maniacal ego masking a well-concealed inferiority complex. I was a Boston - New Haven - New York dope fiend alcoholic. You people were losers who couldn't even hustle a cup of coffee; you met in church basements and spoke of things you had never done. I referred to you as losers and hope fiends, and, I secretly entertained fantasies of eradicating the lot of you. Ending up naked in five-point restraint, riddled with hepatitis C, cirrhosis, cellulites, a knife wound in my gut, being acutely alcoholic and a junkie was not my bottom. Ending up in a basement listening, (when my mind would shut up and focus,) to self-proclaimed, smiling, well-fed, well-dressed alcoholics speak about powerlessness - that was my bottom. You folks had nothing to teach me.

Upon darkening the doors of the fellowships, I saw the slogans hung on the pretty little banners with these simplistic slogans such as "first things first", "easy does it", "live and let live", "one day at a time" and "turn it over." You baked cakes, celebrated anniversaries, hugged strangers, smiled, smelled good, many drove nice cars and had good jobs and you actually seemed happy. Your eyes twinkled alive with a spirit, a power I had never known, as if to say, "I know". You remembered my name and I hadn't even given you something. You had bumper stickers and silly little meditation books. The one that caught my attention initially was "Stools and Bottles." I was a bit confused about the meaning. I didn't get that it was a bar stool and not a biological waste stool.

So I had nowhere else to go. No family, no sober friends, just a filthy apartment where I could sit alone and feel the emptiness, the remorse, the despair and the hopelessness. I felt like Bambi on ice. I had no idea how to live or how I was going to survive. My life had been about my disease and now there was nothing and I was no one. I was terrified. I sat in the back of the room shaking and secreting acetone from every pore in my body. My biggest fear was to be asked to read or be called upon. My speech was aphasic from prolonged daily use of alcohol, barbiturates and benzodiazepines, and, as I had been on methadone for 13 years, I was only sleeping 1 hour per night and existing on milkshakes. I was living in a speed freak's apartment whom I had met and left in rehab. I had a hefty bag (steel sack) full of dirty clothes, a toothbrush, a razor, and an old junk car that was caved in on the right front panel from kissing the stone column on my way into my final detox (I had been in 32 programs). I was no longer having seizures, was not

camping under Grand Central Station and hadn't been across 110th Street or in a shooting gallery for several months. Life was good. My denial was kicking in; I was getting it together.

Unmanageable? Powerless? I didn't think so. It couldn't be. Since I was in a group home when I was 10, I had been a survivor. I had learned to hustle, to lie, to cheat, to steal and to fight. I had survived on the streets since I was fifteen. When things were bad and I was homeless, I slept in basements, on subways or waited for the dawn on rooftops or at all night diners. I had survived jails, mental hospitals, drug rehabs, methadone, LAAM and Naltrexone programs, hard core TC's, SWAT teams and partial paralysis. This was the insanity of my disease. I watched it steal my life, my health, my soul and destroy my relationships. It was as though I was possessed. Why couldn't I admit that I was powerless and my life was unmanageable? Why couldn't I surrender and understand that my addiction was bigger, stronger and more patient than me? Why couldn't I accept that this powerlessness and unmanageability was killing me?

I raised my hand and uttered the most profound and empowering words of my life. Words that saved and changed the course of my life: "Hi, I'm Tim, and I am an Addict and Alcoholic."

"Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose," sang Janis Joplin days before her death from a heroin overdose in 1970. I was still breathing and realized that I now was free. My freedom came from having nothing left to lose. I had reduced my being to a transparent hollowness akin to a shell. My pride was gone. Self-sufficiency became a neurosis-generating, destructive myth. I realized I could not take this journey alone. For my best thinking and my ingrained instincts, finely honed from years in the street grappling with my disease, had brought me to my knees. I realized that I could learn how to live clean and sober from these folks I had thought were losers and hope fiends, and that if I worked as hard at getting sober as I had at getting high and followed their suggestions, I could live.

We all come in to the rooms suffering. Many stories have more drama but the feelings we experience in our disease and our recovery are our common thread and our bond. Listen and identify with the feelings and do not compare. Comparison leads to thoughts of uniqueness or "I wasn't that bad so maybe I am not an alcoholic" or "they are lightweights, it won't work for me."

Although our paths to recovery may in many ways be different, there are certain truths about addiction and the road to recovery that we must all embrace if we are to survive.

The first truth is the first step. We need to totally surrender. We cannot simply quit our addiction, for that implies that we have control for which we obviously had none. We need to understand that powerlessness equals unmanageability, and we not only have to admit it (out loud) to own it, but also understand that we must accept the truth that we have a disease.

It is also true that we cannot do this alone. It is a long journey. We will always be in recovery much like a former cancer patient is in remission for life or a diabetic will always be a diabetic. We were once cucumbers that became pickles and there is no way to unring that bell. We will always be pickles.

Today's science confirms the wisdom of the founders of AA. They understood that alcoholism was a disease that was characterized by an uncontrollable obsession and a compulsion to drink that would destroy us. We now know with the recent advances in medical neuroscience that

addiction is a chronic -often relapsing brain disease. There is no magic bullet or cure. Continuous sobriety requires constant vigilance. Understanding this, today I treat this disease with the respect and devotion that my life deserves. My name is Tim, and I am an Addict and Alcoholic. It is still the most important thing I say and the foundation for my life.

About the Author

Tim C. has been in long-term recovery for over 30 years. He is the co-founder and managing partner of Chooper's Guide, a web-based treatment and information resource for addiction and owns and operates an apple orchard in Maine. He is active in the recovery movement in Florida and nationally and has been active for 28 years as a volunteer and advocate for substance abuse and child abuse.

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