COLLECTED ESSAYS · 2018–2025

# The Recovering Urchin

*A place for recovery: essays on sobriety, AA and hope*

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# 2018

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# Role Models

JULY 7, 2018

Role models are incredibly important for me in recovery. Why are role models important? My role models show me healthy ways to live.

I believe that my problem in recovery is more than just a problem with alcohol and drugs. I believe that (by myself) I do not know how to live my life.

How do I know this? For one, I tried to quit (by myself) several times before I came around to AA. Four times I quit, “once and for all, I mean it this time”. And for times I stopped temporarily, only to go back to drinking and using.

I can also tell you that I had plenty to write about in my fourth step, and I had plenty to write about in subsequent fourth steps. I kept doing the same things in recovery that I had been doing in my alcoholism. There is a passage in the book Alcoholics Anonymous that notes that “our liquor was but a symptom. So we had to get down to causes and conditions”.

So what did I do about that? Briefly, I worked the twelve steps with my sponsor, and I continue to do so. I try my best to practice these principles in all my affairs. But since I had no experience practicing a principled life, I had to find people who lived principled lives, and I tried to model my life on the way they are living their lives.

So here are some thoughts and observations on four of my role models. They are also my heroes.

I have four role models. These are people I have known and watched forever. One of my friends calls them “angels”. I won’t name them by name here, but they know who they are.

A few years ago, there was a TV commercial about role models. In that commercial, a famous athlete came on screen and said “I am not a role model”. He was incorrect. You don’t choose to be a role model. You are chosen to be a role model. And sometimes you don’t know that you’ve been chosen.

My role models have several things in common:

They have all been married to their original spouses, all the days of their lives. One of my role models has been married for 63 years, so far. My role models are all happily married, too. I know because I know their spouses. Their spouses are crazy about them, and would marry them again in a minute.

With their spouses, they are great parents. They provide their children with even better lives than they have had. They provide their children every possible opportunity in education, culture, athletics, arts….and they do it with great love.

They all work for a living- and they make it look really attractive. They don't complain about it- they view it as a privilege. (A quick story- one of my role models is 90 years old. He still works for a living. He does my taxes. Whenever I ask him when he is going to retire, he replies "Retire?! Why would I do that? I love what I'm doing!") These 4 people never ever call out sick. Why is that? I think it because they love what they are doing. No matter what it is that they are doing, they do it with great love. They have great passion about their lives, and what they are doing with their lives.

None of them complain. Maybe that is because they love what they are doing?

A subtle trait- they are all great listeners. Whenever I speak with any of them, I notice that they give me their undivided attention. And they do that for everyone that they speak to. They make other people feel really important- and it is genuine. I know that they do that for everyone that they speak to. They aren't looking at their smart phones, or watching TV. They don't have headphones in their ears. They make time to speak with me, with total attention. And they do that for everyone.

They all give back to their communities. They do so in different ways (charitable foundations, coaching, mentoring programs, volunteering) and they do it with a great sense of purpose.

They show up when they say they are going to show up. They RSVP, too. For everything. For weddings, funerals, baptisms and Bar Mitzvahs. For dinner, and for coffee. For dates. For everything that they say they are going to show up for.

They all have an insatiable curiosity. They read a lot. They travel a lot. And they ask a lot of questions. They love to learn.

Interesting thing- they all love to eat. They eat with a passion. When food comes, they light up. Food isn't just something that they eat- food is life for them. Meals get loud when they are around. Loud with laughter, and stories, and a lot of fun.

This is important-maybe most important- they have the highest integrity. I can't stress this enough. They always (always!) do the right thing, regardless of the consequences to themselves. They do what they say they are going to do.

How do I know all of this? I watch them. I don't ask them- I watch them very carefully. I watch what they do, not what they say.

✦

Why do I write this? What is the point?

My role models lead very attractive lives. Each one of them has a life that looks like the kind of life that I want to live.

I like to say “when I grow up….”. When I grow up, I want to lead a life that looks like the kind of life my roles models lead. They live rich and rewarding lives. Lives that matter to them, and to those around them as well. They live purposeful lives. I have been blessed to know each one of them.

When I grow up, I want to be a great husband. And a great father. A great son, and a great brother. And a great employee. I want people to feel that they were lucky to know me. I want to be a great role model for someone else someday.

That day is today.

## The Most Important Thing

JULY 8, 2018

Several years ago, I made a list of all the people I knew who had 30+ years of sobriety. I referred to these people as “oldtimers”. My list was a small one at the time. I knew five people who had 30-40 years of sobriety, and two people had 40+ years of sobriety. That meant that I knew seven people with at least 30 years of continuous sobriety. (I had met a couple of people who had more, but only met them once or twice, and didn’t know them on a first name basis).

I decided to ask these seven oldtimers the following question: “what is the most important thing in your life?”

✦

I have asked a lot of people this question. I have asked people in the rooms of AA, and I have also asked work colleagues, relatives, and friends who are not in recovery. It is a great conversation starter at a party or a work function. I have heard many answers, like “my spouse”, “my children”, “my pet”, “my career”, and many others. And all of those answers are correct. There is no right or wrong answer. Whatever your answer is, is the most important thing in your life.

When I asked the seven oldtimers what the most important thing was in their lives, they all said “my recovery” or “my sobriety”. (One fellow did say “my relationship with my Higher Power”, but I think that is close enough). None of them said “my career” or “my investment portfolio”. They all mentioned recovery.

I think that it is significant that all of the people I knew who had long term sobriety said that their recovery was the most important thing in their lives.

✦

A couple of weeks later, I realized that I had to ask these seven oldtimers another question. I went back to them, and I shared with each of them that they all answered the “most important thing” question the same.

Then I asked each of them, “how did recovery become the most important thing in your life?” Within 60 seconds, all seven of them mentioned working the Twelve Steps.

✦

Several years have passed since I asked these questions of the seven oldtimers. Luckily for me, I now know five people with 40+ years of continuous sobriety, and another twenty-five people with 30+ years of sobriety.

I have asked all of these people the same “most important thing” question, and always receive the same answer.

I know that recovery from alcoholism is supposed to be done “a day at a time”. So I hope that I do not offend you with what I am about to say. Someday, I want to be an oldtimer with 50 or 60 years of continuous sobriety. That looks really attractive to me.

I believe that the way for that to happen is that my recovery must be the most important thing in my life. I also believe that I need to continue working the twelve steps in my life, a day at a time.

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

## Welcome to The Recovering Urchin!

JULY 8, 2018

Welcome to The Recovering Urchin. This is a website for recovering alcoholics and addicts, and people who love us.

I am a recovering alcoholic and addict. I have been sober for 36 years (as of November 2026), and I believe that my experience, strength and hope can benefit others, and hopefully help someone recover from alcoholism/addiction. I will share my story sometime soon, in a post on this website.

✦

You are probably wondering "why use The Recovering Urchin as a website name?" Good question. Some of the answer has to do with AA's Traditions, and some of it has to do with me.

AA's Eleventh Tradition notes that "we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films". That was published in 1950, and it is as true today as it was when it was written. When it was written, there was no internet. Had the internet existed in 1950, the Eleventh Tradition would state "at the level of press, radio, films and the Internet". An A.A. Guideline on the Internet notes that "the internet, social media, and all forms of public communications are implicit in the last phrase of the short form of Tradition Eleven, which reads "at the level of press, radio and films"". The Guideline later notes that we should avoid using our full name, or full-face photographs.

So you won't see my full name or my photograph on this site. Because of the need for anonymity at the level of the Internet, I am using a pseudonym on this website: The Recovering Urchin. I am in recovery (36 years as of November 2026), and I refer to people as "urchins". I don't know why, but I do. I refer to my children as "the little urchins", my wife as "Mrs. Urchin".

I am the Recovering Urchin.

✦

I promise you a few things about this website. First, I will remain anonymous. Second, I will not share any of your personal information with anyone, ever.

If I share parts of any of your stories (I am considering some guest blogs) I will either use only your first name, or a pseudonym.

I will try to write something recovery-related to you, about once a week. I may miss a few weeks for travel or work, but I will try.

I promise that all of the content on this site will be free.

There will not be a “Comments” section on this site, because I do not want to monitor the Comments section for trolls. I did that on another site, and it wasn’t any fun. So no Comments section.

I will try to share my experience, strength and hope with you, as it pertains to alcoholism and addiction. My hope is that my experience may benefit someone that I may never meet.

I will try to follow the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions on this website to the best of my ability. Some of my recovering friends have promised to check on me, and let me know how I am doing. I will try to be free of resentment, fear, and ego on this site, unless I am sharing an experience where those topics are warranted.

I wish you peace in sobriety.

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

# I Was Wrong

AUGUST 17, 2018

I recently heard someone say at a meeting “I reserve the right to be wrong”. On the same day, I saw a bumper sticker that said “Don’t believe everything that you think”.

In recovery, I have learned how to make mistakes, and how to admit that I am wrong. One of my favorite bits of wisdom is the part of Step 10 that says “...and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it”.

I don’t fight well. When I get into a heated disagreement at home (it happens sometimes), I retreat and stop communicating with anyone. I isolate, and refuse to talk. Sometimes for a few hours, sometimes a day or more.

I am wrong when I do this. I know it.

We have a thing that we do in my home. We try to make peace with a symbolic gesture. Remember ET in the movie of the same name? Remember when he sticks his finger out? We do the same thing, and we say “Peace?” Extending our finger out and saying “Peace?” is our symbolic peace offering.

I know that probably sounds weird, but it works.

One of my challenges in “making peace” is that I convince myself that I am right. I justify my actions by convincing myself how right I am. My sponsor asks me “would you rather be right, or would you rather be happy?”

As I write this, I would rather be happy. But when I get in that weird space, sometimes I convince myself that I would rather be right.

Being wrong is one of the greatest gifts I have received in recovery. Being wrong allows me to change direction, and try something else. Being wrong allows me to apologize, and take responsibility for my actions. Being wrong allows me to make peace with those I have harmed.

I used to think that being wrong was one of the worst things that I could admit. Now I think that it is one of the best things I can admit.

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

## I Need Help

AUGUST 17, 2018

I heard someone say at a meeting that three of the most spiritual things she had learned
were:

*I need help*
*I was wrong*
*I don’t know*

I certainly need help. I need help staying sober. I have had that demonstrated to me again and again. At the end of my active alcoholism, I tried to quit drinking, once and for all (I mean it this time!) four different times. Four different times I stopped temporarily.

The first time I stopped, I lasted about a week. The last time I stopped, I couldn’t make it through 24 hours. When I was finally introduced to Alcoholics Anonymous, a gentleman shared his story, and explained to me what worked for him (the Twelve Steps). He also explained to me that he attended AA meetings frequently, and that meeting attendance helped him to stay sober.

I listened to him, I followed his advice, and I haven't had a drink or a drug since that date. That was May 2, 1990.

Frequent attendance at AA meetings helps me to stay sober. I need the experience, strength and hope that I find at every AA meeting.

I need help with more than only the "not drinking". I need help and direction in how I live my life. I wrote an essay entitled "Role Models". I have four role models, and they show me how to live through their actions. They show me how to be the best father, husband, son, employee, and member of AA that I can be. They show me because they are the best parents, spouses, employees, and sober people that I know.

They truly are role models.

When I was young, I remember saying "I can do it myself". That may have been an acceptable strategy when I was a toddler, but it doesn't work for me anymore. I have no problem asking for help with car maintenace, lawn mowing, income tax preparation, or medical advice. But for some reason, I sometimes think it is a good idea to "go it alone" on really important things. In the book Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, there is a passage that states "It is worth noting that people of very high spiritual development almost always insist on checking with friends or spiritual advisers the guidance they feel they have received from God".

If people of very high spiritual development can ask for help, why can't I?

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

# I Don't Know

AUGUST 17, 2018

Once a month I get a haircut. The woman who cuts my hair (let's call her "G") likes to say "you know nothing".

(In the interest of full disclosure, G is married to my sponsor, and is in recovery herself). She shares with me something that her sponsor shared with her- "you know nothing!". I thought that was so harsh the first time I heard it. It turns out that she was right.

When I am in the moment, I convince myself that I know what is best for me. But my experience teaches me otherwise. I'll give you an example. I was interviewing for a job about a year ago. I thought I was the best candidate, but I didn't get the job. I was devastated.

A couple of months ago, that company was on CNN, for some really bad stuff. I'm glad I didn't get the job.

Last year, I was certain that I wanted that job. Now I'm delighted that I didn't get it.

Sometimes I don't know what is best for me.

As G likes to say, I know nothing.

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

## Roll Call

AUGUST 17, 2018

When I was in elementary school, my teachers assigned us seats in every class, and they took "roll call". Roll call meant that the teacher read out the names of the students, and we had to respond if we were present. (By the end of the first week, the teacher could take attendance without roll call, once the teacher knew our names).

The point of Roll Call is to know who is present, and who is absent. The point is also to make it obvious that someone is taking attendance, and to show that there are consequences for not attending class.

I sit in the same seat at every meeting. I receive some good-natured teasing about this, but I have a reason why I do it. I do it because I want my home group to know if I am present or absent. (Unless I am travelling, I am present. I have been present at my home group for almost every meeting for the past 25 years).

I apologize if this offends you-but twelve step groups and meetings are easy to disappear from. It is too easy to sit in the back, be invisible, and stop attending. That is not what I want from my recovery. I want to be right in the middle of the pack, present and accounted for, at every meeting that I attend.

I want to act like my life depends on my recovery, because it does.

When I was young, I learned to swim at a crowded public swimming pool. The lifeguards used "the buddy system" for our safety in the pool. Everyone in the pool had to have a "buddy"- someone who we stayed with at all times in the pool. When the lifeguard blew the whistle, we were supposed to check on our buddy, and make a lot of noise if we couldn't find them. Between the times of whistle checks, if our buddy was in trouble, we were supposed to make a lot of noise.

We took some responsibility for the welfare of our buddies. We did that in the swimming pool. We do that in my family. I try to do that in my recovery, too. If someone is floundering, I try to help. If I am floundering, I want someone to call the lifeguard (my sponsor, my wife, anyone).

I sometimes wish that we took Roll Call at meetings.

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

## What's The Problem?!

AUGUST 28, 2018

About 35 years ago, I was driving a clunker of a car. One day I hit a pothole in my city, and my car started making a lot of noise. I thought the noise might be my muffler, so I drove to the muffler shop. I told the mechanic that I thought I had a muffler problem. He lifted my car up on the jack, took one look at the underside of my car, and said "the problem is that you no longer have a muffler".

I have a friend who likes to ask "What's the problem?" when he hears people complaining. What he means is that he wants to know what the root cause is. Until he understands what the problem is, he can't possibly know what the solution is.

When I first realized that I had a problem with alcohol and drugs, I decided that I was going to quit. That seemed like a reasonable solution. I thought that the problem was alcohol and drugs, and that the solution was quitting.

So I quit ("once and for all, I swear I mean it this time!"). I quit "once and for all" four different times in the last 18 months of my active alcoholism. I did not understand why I kept relapsing after I had quit with the best of intentions. After all, hadn't I quit forever?

At my home group, I sometimes share that "the problem isn't alcohol". That seems like a provocative thing to say at an AA meeting. I believe it to be true.

I believe it to be true for several reasons. The first reason is that that is consistent with what is in the book "Alcoholics Anonymous". On page 103, it says "our bottles were only a symbol" (of our problems). On page 64, it says "our liquor was but a symptom".

I also believe that alcohol isn't the problem because I quit "once and for all" four different times. If alcohol was the problem, then quitting would have been the solution.

Lastly, I can share with you that my life actually got worse early on in AA. I was abstinent for 90 days in AA, but I was in so much pain that I finally asked my sponsor for help. If alcohol had been the problem, shouldn't I have gotten much better after 90 days of not drinking?

So as my friend likes to ask- What's The Problem?

I believe that the problem is that I do not know how to live my own life. That is a difficult thing to admit. In my culture, and my upbringing, I was taught to show self-confidence, and never admit problems publicly. Admitting problems would not be consistent with "keeping up with the Joneses".

But in AA, after working through the Twelve Steps, I finally had to admit that I had made quite a mess of my life. Only with the help of AA, my sponsor, and the Twelve Steps, have I been able to reconstruct my life and rebuild trust with my family and friends.

So I ask you-if you are struggling to stay sober, or if you are struggling with some major life problems- what's the problem? The problem may not be what you think it is.

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

# Recovery Resources

SEPTEMBER 3, 2018

When I work with newcomers, I try to work the Twelve Steps with them. I encourage them to attend as many meetings as possible (a "90 in 90"), especially as they begin their journey. I encourage them to have a sponsor, and a prayer life, if possible.

What follows is a list of additional ideas for people in recovery, especially for those times when a meeting or a sponsor is not available.

**Speaker Recordings:** I almost called these "speaker tapes", because when I first came into recovery, the speakers were recorded on tape. That was a while ago. There are thousands of recordings of speakers available in almost every twelve step fellowship. If you do an internet search on "twelve step speakers", several sites display. Many of these speakers are available as free downloads. (This is useful for those of you who travel by airplane a lot).

**Telephone meetings:** do an internet search on "twelve step telephone meetings". Most Twelve Step fellowships have telephone or internet meetings. I don't find them as useful as face-to-face meetings, but there are times I cannot attend a face-to-face meeting, and a substitute is helpful for me.

**Using the Telephone -** it is easy to collect telephone numbers. For me, it is difficult to use those numbers. I try to practice my dialing skills 2-3 times a week at a minimum.

**Literature -** I cannot emphasize enough how important the Big Book (Alcoholics Anonymous) and the "12/12" (The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions) have been to me. There are now electronic, searchable versions of these books available for download, or available on the internet for browsing. E-readers are useful for finding a favorite passage, when I can't remember where the passage is in the literature. They are also helpful for reading on an airplane, because there is no book cover to hide. There are also audiobooks available for some of the most popular recovery texts.

**Joe and Charlie** - I will write about them in more detail sometime later, but I strongly encourage people in recovery to listen to the full Joe and Charlie series. For the uninitiated, Joe McQ and Charlie P were two fellows who started a 12 hour (approximately) study of the Big Book, and the Twelve Steps. They conducted hundreds of weekend-long workshops. One of my sponsors told me "Joe and Charlie changed my recovery". I encourage you to listen to them.

**E-mail and Text lists:** some of my friends have started e-mail and text distribution lists as a way to stay in touch with each other. Some send daily text "Thought for Today" messages. These are nice recovery reminders.

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

# The Purity of the Message

SEPTEMBER 10, 2018

I attended a meeting this week where the topic was the Eighth Tradition. The Eighth Tradition states “Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers”. We also touched on the Sixth Tradition, where the second part of the tradition states “...lest problems of money, property and prestige divert us from our primary purpose”.

Our “primary purpose” in AA is to stay sober, and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety. If you are a member of another twelve-step fellowship, your fellowship has a primary purpose focused on something else-but the principle is the same. You have a primary purpose.

One of the reasons that the message of recovery works is because it is pure. When I hear the message of recovery in a meeting, I know two things about that message:

1) The person who is sharing it has had the same (or similar) experiences as me.

2) The person who is sharing it is sharing it freely, without thought of personal gain or profit.

They aren’t charging me anything to hear that message. They are sharing that message because they have the same primary purpose that I do.

If I thought that someone in a meeting was there to make a profit off of me, I would have the same type of skepticism that I have when I go to purchase a car. I know that the salesperson is there to make money off of me (I’m sorry if you’re a salesperson, I am not a very trusting buyer). In the back of my mind, I wonder if the salesperson wants the best for me, or if that person just wants my money.

People who go to twelve-step meetings aren’t selling anything to anyone. There is no profit motive. As it says in the Preamble, “....there are no dues or fees. The only requirement for membership is the desire to stop drinking”.

That is a pure situation, as pure as it was when first designed in the late 1930’s. Had it been any less, I don’t know if I would have stayed for a second meeting to hear the rest.

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

# Honesty

SEPTEMBER 17, 2018

Early in my sobriety, my wife and I received our monthly credit card bill. My wife noticed that there was a $1500 credit. The credit was a mistake-it should not have been on our bill. This was a big mistake. $1500 then was like $10,000 now.

My first reaction was “Shopping spree!” My wife (let’s call her Mrs. Urchin) reminded me that:

- the money wasn’t ours
- we had an obligation to notify the credit card company of the mistake
- the credit card company was probably aware of it already anyway

She called the credit card company, and just as she had predicted, the company had already corrected the error.

I share this story with you because it shows that my first reaction is not my best reaction. I find it difficult to be honest sometimes. Dishonesty is one of my character defects.

I don’t think I am alone here. In the first 100 words of “How It Works”, the root word “honest” appears three times:

1) ...”usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves”....

2) ...”they are naturally incapable of grasping and developing a manner of living which demands rigorous honesty”....

3) ...”but many of them do recover if they have the capacity to be honest”.

In the first 164 pages of the Big Book, the word “honest” (or honesty, or dishonest) appears 38 times.

It must be an important part of sobriety.

Bill W. understood this. Several times he wrote about Fear, Selfishness, Resentment and Dishonesty in the Big Book as the primary character defects to be analyzed (and hopefully relieved).

My experience is that dishonesty with others is only part of the problem. I understand that it is wrong to lie to other people. I think I do much better with this today. But for some reason, I struggle to be honest with myself. The word for this is “denial”. I was in denial for years about my alcoholism. I have company here. I recently heard someone say that “my alcoholism was bad only for the last 15 years”. Only 15 years?!

I have blind spots in my life. There are things that are present in my life that I don’t want to see, so I choose not to see them. Then other people take a quick glance at me, and they see those things immediately.

My sponsor and my wife (two of my role models) help me with this. They gently nudge me towards seeing the truth about myself. They help me with those blind spots that I can’t see.

Lord, help me to be honest with others, and myself, today.

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

## Humility

SEPTEMBER 20, 2018

I attended a meeting today where people were talking about humility. In the book 12 Steps and 12 Traditions, in the chapter on Step Seven, the author (Bill W.) writes about humility, and provides a good definition: “the basic ingredient of humility, a desire to seek and do God’s will”....I would like to say that I always have the desire to seek and do God’s will, but sometimes I find myself thinking much more about seeking and doing my will.

Humility is one of those things that I struggle with. I know that I am struggling with it when I say something snarky like “Do you have any idea who I am?!”

I am lucky enough to live in a prosperous place. I am blessed. I know that, most of the time. But every once in a while, I see someone driving a status symbol car, or I drive by a status symbol mansion, and I think “what is wrong with me?”

The truth is that there is nothing wrong with me. A Ferrari or a mansion won’t make me any better of a person than I already am, and not having those possessions doesn’t make me any worse, either.

But for some reason, I notice status symbols more than most of my friends. When I get on an airplane (a frequent occurrence in my life), I notice who gets to turn left and go into business class. Then I spend some time feeling "less than". I forget that I am lucky enough to be on that plane, healthy enough to walk onto that plane, and free to go wherever I want, whenever I want. So who cares if I have to sit in the back of the plane?

My sponsor used to say "compare self to self". He meant that I should try not to compare myself to other people, because I will always find a way to make myself feel less than I should.

Early in my sobriety, he shared the following prayer with me:

"I am no more than I am

I am no less than I am

I am the I am that I am

And AA teaches me to be

the I am that I am"

I pray today to be the best I am that I can be.

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

## Page 87

SEPTEMBER 24, 2018

Several years ago, one of my colleagues sent an email to his boss's boss. He sent the email in anger. The email was typed in capital letters, with multiple colored fonts. Some of it wasn't very nice. There were curse words and accusations. He lost his job the next day.

My guess is that he regretted hitting the "Send" button on that email.

One of my friends in the program likes to say "let's think about Page 87" when things get heated. Anytime there is a clash of personalities, or someone gets upset, he says "it's Page 87 time!"

He is referring to a passage in the book Alcoholics Anonymous, on (you guessed it) page 87, that states "...we pause, when agitated or doubtful, and ask for the right thought or action". A couple of sentences later it says "we are then in much less danger of excitement, fear, anger, worry, self-pity or foolish decisions".

My guess is that the colleague who sent the email in different color fonts (and lost his job) would have benefited from pausing.

I attended a training course at work a few years ago, and they described "the 24 hour rule". The idea was that any time I see an email that makes me want to yell, I should wait 24 hours before responding. In other words, I should pause. (By the way, I am convinced that World War III is going to start with an email).

In our society, we put so much emphasis on acting quickly, on responding right now. That makes a lot of sense if you work in an emergency room, but for the rest of us, it pays to wait sometimes.

I use this tool at home a lot. I will ask for a day to think about something ("can I think about this overnight and get back to you?"), and I wait. That gives me time to ask my sponsor, or one of my role models. I can pray and meditate. Whatever I do, if I take my time, I avoid some foolish decisions this way.

Just after the text on page 87, at the top of page 88, is a one sentence paragraph:

"It works -it really does".

They were right. It really does.

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

## Guest post: The Opioid Crisis—Personal Responsibility, Choice, and the Law

SEPTEMBER 27, 2018

In Commonwealth v. Eldred, an underreported July 16 case with nationwide implications, where addiction was an underlying issue in a criminal case, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled that it was not cruel and unusual punishment to put a person who is on probation in jail after one positive test for drugs.

Less than two weeks after a court ordered Julie Eldred to not use drugs while on probation, she tested positive for the opioid fentanyl. Consequently, Ms. Eldred, a chronic substance abuser, spent about 10 days in jail until an inpatient treatment bed was available.

In the subsequent appeal, Lisa Newman-Polk, Ms. Eldred's attorney, argued that incarceration was unconstitutional cruel and unusual punishment because Ms. Eldred's substance abuse disorder made her incapable of remaining drug free.

Newman-Polk, a certified social worker with clinical experience treating addiction, called the decision a "massive blow" that would place the court "on the wrong side of history."

The court did not agree. Nor do I. To the contrary, adoption of Miss Eldred's disease theory would dangerously undermine America's efforts to combat its metastasizing opioid epidemic, almost certainly lead to increased drug related deaths, increased risks to public safety, increased recidivism, longer prison sentences for addicts without the possibility of probation or parole, fewer options like drug courts to incentivize recovery, and millions of new dollars invested in unproven community drug treatment programs.

Most important, it would remove an addict's personal responsibility in the recovery process, the sine qua non of successful recovery.

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, substance abuse disorder (SUD) occurs when a person's use of drugs or alcohol leads to health issues or problems at work, school, or home. Relapse is often a part of the recovery process.

But not everyone agrees with the disease model.

The court cited the Commonwealth's behavioral model which postulates that SUD may affect an individual's urge to use substances, but it does not render that individual without the free will to use substances.

The majority ultimately concluded that the defendant's claim of SUD rested "on science that is not tested."

Justice David J. Lowry, writing for the majority, emphasized that a defendant who violates probation is not being punished for the violation (drug use), but "anew on his [or her] underlying conviction." The court recognized that "addiction is a status that may not be criminalized."

Continuing, the requirement of remaining drug free is not, as Ms. Eldred contends, “an outdated moral judgment about an individual's addiction. Rather…. the requirement is based on the (sentencing) judge's consideration of the defendant's circumstances and that she committed the underlying crime to support her drug use.”

Having worked with many addicts for many years, I can attest that many former users credit a stint in jail (or the mere threat) for jump starting their recovery.

Justice Lowry’s well-reasoned opinion will help protect defendants by giving them clear motivation to remain substance-free while providing for the protection of the public.

Ironically, should she remain clean and sober, Ms. Eldred may one day thank the sentencing judge for saving her life.

*This article was written by a friend of the Urchin who practices law, and has a long-term interest in the legal and scientific study and treatment of substance abusers and substance abuse issues. He is a regular contributor to articles pertaining to these topics.*

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

## Seven Things My Sponsor Suggested

SEPTEMBER 29, 2018

When I was about 90 days sober, I thought I was going to drink again. I knew what “drinking again” felt like. I had previously relapsed four times in the last 18 months of my active alcoholism, after repeatedly vowing to never drink again.

After a Tuesday night meeting at St. Asaph’s, I approached my sponsor, and I told him the truth-that I felt like I was going to drink again. He reached for a piece of paper, and he quickly wrote the following:

I still have this piece of paper, 28 1/2 years later. Of course I do-it helped save my life. What did he write on that piece of paper?

**1) Ask God for help staying sober in the morning.** My recovery doesn’t come from me. My recovery is a gift from a Higher Power. I am convinced of that. On April 30, 1990, I got down on my knees, crying, and said “Help me God”. God helped me that day. Two

days later I was at my first AA meeting, and I haven't had a drink since. So I don't mind asking my Higher Power for help. I need it. For more on this topic, see my essay "I Need Help".

**2) Thank God at night for that sober day.** Every day that I have asked for help staying sober, I have been kept sober. Every one. As of today, that is 10,379 days. So I thank my Higher Power at night for this sober day.

**3) Go to a meeting.** At the time, my sponsor was gravely concerned about my sobriety, so he suggested that I go to a meeting every day. So I did. I don't get to a meeting every day now, but I do have substantial contact with the program every day. Every day I listen to the First Step or the Second Step in my car, and talk to another alcoholic. When I'm on an airplane (a frequent happening in my life) I listen to a meeting on my phone.

**4) Call your sponsor.** My sponsor is one of my role models. I speak to him as much as I can. For more about this topic, see my essay "Role Models". My sponsor always changes my perspective when I speak with him.

**5) Read the Big Book.** I believe that the first 164 pages of the book "Alcoholics Anonymous", (also known as "The Big Book") represent the best spiritual writing I've ever read. I have copies of all four editions of the Big Book, as well as copies on CD and on my phone. When I can't get to a meeting, I read or listen to the Big Book.

**6) Avoid Hungry, Angry, Lonely & Tired ("HALT").** Alcoholics are susceptible to "triggers"- things that make us susceptible to a drink. For me, some of those triggers include being hungry, angry, lonely or tired. In order to practice self-care, I need to avoid these triggers, using tools like having a healthy snack, talking to my sponsor, being with my family and friends in recovery, and taking a nap.

**7) If all else fails, help another alcoholic.** On page 89 of the Big Book, it says "frequent contact with newcomers and with each other is the bright spot of our lives". It's true. Speaking with a sponsee, or another alcoholic in distress, helps me like nothing else can.

Now there is a postscript to this story. I looked at the list my sponsor handed me, and I asked him if doing these things would help me recover from alcoholism. I was absolutely certain that he was going to say yes. But instead, he said no. So I asked him what this list of seven tasks was, and he explained to me that since I thought I was going to drink, I needed to do these seven things every day until the feeling passed (and for a long time after, as well).

I then asked him what I think is the most important question I've ever asked any person: What do I need to do to recover from alcoholism? And he answered, "if you want to recover from alcoholism, you need to work the twelve steps".

We started working the twelve steps together that same Tuesday night, and my life has not been the same since. I'll write a lot more about the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous on this site. Those steps are the most important gift I've ever been given.

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

## Guest post: Zen Spot #143— Mindfulness, meditation and the intersection of Broad and Vine

SEPTEMBER 29, 2018

### The intersection

Traveling west on Vine Street, I ran a red light at the corner of Broad at about 9 p.m. on a Thursday night. Halfway through the intersection, I knew I was in trouble. The terror of such a mistake, in the moment before an impact, is hard to describe. Time slows down and speeds up simultaneously. The impact is expected.

There wasn't an impact.

I sailed to the other side of Broad unscathed. Cars going north and south narrowly missed me. Pursuant to the time warp, the vehicles never slammed on their brakes or honked their horns. It all happened too quickly—everybody was safe—never having time to react.

### Suspicion

Before I made it to the other side, I knew I had a problem with alcohol. In fact, I'd suspected a problem for about six months. My suspicions were confirmed as I crossed the double line on Broad Street.

I'd had two drinks, so I wasn't blind. One's accountability, however, is the same whether one drink or one fifth is involved. Drinking and driving had never been a problem to that point in my life—it just wasn't my thing. Doesn't matter.

A needle was awaiting thread.

### Grace, karma, luck, coincidence, nothing or being ferried by an angel?

For the previous seven years— perhaps more—I'd done little to earn favor from the universe— always taking more than giving. And, while I understand that the idea of karma is much more than cause and effect, I fundamentally believe in cause and effect, especially since the negative effect caused by a negative action can bring considerable suffering. Simplistic, I know, but it works for me.

Looking back, I wonder why I didn't kill somebody or myself. We were saved by inches and physics. The experience begs questions. What were the karma profiles of everybody involved? Those driving north and south? The pedestrians? Was it grace, karma, luck, coincidence, nothing or being ferried by an angel?

I threaded the needle.

### When the eye of a needle is a threshold

I committed to change. It took me another year to stop drinking but I never got behind the wheel of a car again. With the help of my first sponsor I stopped altogether and, as of the essay, it's been 5873 days.

### When the eye of a needle is a tunnel

Things got harder for a long time. The metaphor of the light at the end of the tunnel being a train ended up being true. It took time to learn, though, that I'd been in the tunnel long before the needle was threaded.

### Never coming out on the other side of the tunnel

Metaphors are sometimes inappropriate or ineffective. This is one of those times.

### Coming out on the other side of the tunnel

It was grace, karma, luck, coincidence, nothing ***and*** being ferried by an angel that got me to the other side of Broad Street—because they're all the same thing. Every time I cross that intersection I'm grateful.

With gratitude comes compassion. With compassion, anything is possible.

*This has been a guest post by DharmaMechanic.*

# This Is Our Plague

OCTOBER 1, 2018

Suppose I told you that a lot of people were dying from something and most people didn't know it?

Suppose I told you that a shockingly high number of people were dying from a disease, and most people had no idea?

Suppose I told you that more Americans died last year from this epidemic than died in any single war we've ever fought? Would you be surprised?

I saw an article in my news feed recently that noted that 632,000 Americans died last year from tobacco, alcohol and drug addictions. The data was compiled by the Centers for Disease Control. I have attached links to the CDC report at the bottom of this page.

632,000 deaths a year in the U.S. Think about that. By comparison, the most Americans who died in any war was the Civil War, where 620,000 died. Those 620,000 who died in the Civil War died over the course of four years (April 1861-May 1865).

About 1,264,000 Americans have died in all wars combined.

What this means is that every year, more Americans die from addictions than died in the entire Civil War. Every two years, we lose as many Americans to addictions as we have lost in all of our wars.

That is appalling.

The World Health Organization just released a report entitled "Global Status Report on Alcohol and Health 2018". In the report, they estimate that 3 million people died worldwide in 2016 from alcohol abuse.

Three million.

In 2017, Alcoholics Anonymous estimated its total membership at just under 2.1 million people.

That means that more people (many more) are dying every year, than are members of AA.

Whatever we are doing isn't working. Whatever we are doing isn't enough. It isn't enough for the 3 million people who died of alcohol abuse last year.

I will continue to do everything that I can to spread the news that there is a solution available for those who want help and are willing to work for it.

The Recovering Urchin

CDC references

https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/fact_sheets/fast_facts/index.htm

https://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/fact-sheets/alcohol-use.htm

https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2018/p0329-drug-overdose-deaths.html

WHO reference page XV

http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/274603/9789241565639-eng.pdf?ua=1

AA Membership

https://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/smf-132_en.pdf

# Guest post: Zen Spot #36—Mindfulness, meditation, autopilot and the internal gyroscope

OCTOBER 1, 2018

### Auto-pilot and gyroscopes

It happens, from time to time, that a memory returns from an alcohol-fueled blackout. There's no telling what will jar the memory loose. Sometimes, it's like walking into a wall. At other times, the memory fades in slowly, over the course of a minute. Even after fifteen years of sobriety, it still happens once in a while.

At its worst, while still drinking, I would end up passed-out on a park bench, in a nice business suit. It happened in New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Seattle, Miami, Washington D.C and other cities. Perhaps my physical size was the only thing that kept me safe. Predators must have moved on to easier targets. The police ignored me as well.

It is a time I never want to revisit.

### Washington Square, PHL

Walking from corner to corner, at about 9 pm on a recent Friday night, on my way to an art gallery, my memory opened up. This rarely happens in Philadelphia. My auto-pilot and internal gyroscope could always help me find my way through my hometown without having to sleep on a bench.

This time was different.

### Slow

I don't shuffle, but my foot speed is noticeably slower than in the life I have since forgotten. That night, I was taking my time, too. It was a beautiful evening. As I passed a particular park bench, my memory faded into a time having crawled across the sidewalk of rectangular flagstone, until I could pull myself onto the bench. To the best of my estimation, the year was 1998. I had probably been at Dirty Franks, a bar about twelve blocks away, which falls in line with my modus operandi of walkabouts while living in oblivion. No recollection of the stroll has returned.

### The bench

As the flashback fully returned, I stood looking down at the bench for a full minute. Shaking my head, I closed my eyes and swayed back and forth on unsteady feet. Shame accompanies these experiences no matter how much time has passed.

I chose to sit. Sobriety, and clarity, provided the option to choose. I further chose to take a breath, with my hands on my knees, in the dark, and make peace with the memory. The quiet was full of distant sirens, plates being cleared by waiters in a nearby restaurant and the sound of rubber tires turning on asphalt.

I imagined a space ship having departed some 5000 days before, disappearing into the blackness, only to return, unannounced, just minutes before. A guy about my size got out, sat down next to me and disappeared into nothingness.

*This has been a guest post by DharmaMechanic.*

# Meditations on Anonymity

OCTOBER 2, 2018

What is anonymity? Why do we need to maintain anonymity? What is the Eleventh Tradition all about?

The Eleventh Tradition states "Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; **we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films".** I'm going to focus on the highlighted part that states "we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films".

Why do we need to maintain anonymity? There are a few reasons. For the best discussion, it's best if you go read the Eleventh Tradition in the book Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. But briefly, imagine if a movie star or rock star goes on TV and talks about getting sober. Then imagine if that star then quickly relapses. You can imagine that someone at home might think "getting sober doesn't work-it didn't work for Johnny Rockstar". In addition, if you weren't a fan of Johnny Rockstar anyway, you might think "maybe that sobriety thing isn't for me- I never liked that guys music very much".

So one potential way of breaking with the Eleventh Tradition is **not staying anonymous enough.**

Another potential way of breaking with the Eleventh Tradition is **staying too anonymous.** I don't hear as much about this (compared to not staying anonymous enough) in my recovery community. There is a good discussion of this topic on pages 264-265 of the book "Dr. Bob & The Good Oldtimers". I won't repeat it all, but Dr. Bob was quoted as saying "If I gave my name as only "Dr. Bob" without my last name, people who needed my help would have a hard time getting in touch with me". He was quoted as saying "there were two ways to break the Eleventh Tradition: by giving your name at the level of press or radio, or being so anonymous that you can't be reached by other alcoholics".

In my recovery community, people know my name. I'm on my home group's telephone list. I have a unique name, and I'm easy to contact.

What about anonymity in the Internet Age? The Eleventh Tradition only states "....anonymity at the level of press, radio and films". It doesn't mention the internet, because the Eleventh Tradition (and all of the Traditions) were developed in the late 1940's and published for the first time in 1953.

AA published a Guideline on the Internet (https://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/mg-18_internet.pdf), which notes that "the internet and social media are implicit in the last phrase of Tradition Eleven which states at the level of press radio and films". In other words, anonymity should apply on social media and the internet. A bit further in the Guideline, the authors note that "AA's do not publicly identify themselves using full names or full-face photographs".

So there you have it. It is possible to be not anonymous enough and break the Eleventh Tradition. It is also possible to be too anonymous and break the Eleventh Tradition.

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

## Why Discipline Matters

OCTOBER 3, 2018

When I first started attending AA meetings, I thought that my problem was "just alcohol". I understood that I had a drinking problem, but I thought that the rest of my life was ok. I still had a roof over my head, most of my bills were paid, and I had a decent job.

When I came to AA, I was practicing as a healthcare provider in my community. I asked for help in my profession, and they were very kind in providing help. I attended a Twelve-Step meeting of people in my profession, and they helped me find a detox and a rehab.

I did have an unusual situation when I left rehab. I was asked, as a condition of continuing employment in my profession, to sign a "recovery contract". In order to continue practicing my profession, I had to agree to:

- attend 90 meetings in 90 days
- provide 2-3 urine screens weekly
- see a therapist one on one
- go to group therapy
- see a monitor from my profession at least once a month
- provide a written summary report of my recovery activity once a month

In order to maintain my professional license (and my career and my income) I had to agree to do all ofthose things for three years. I was really unhappy about having to do all of those things, but I didn't really have a choice. My boss knew about my alcoholism, and signing the contract was the only way I could keep my job.

I did all of the things required of my contract (and a lot more). I attended hundreds of meetings in those first three years, provided every urine screen, attended every therapy appointment, and showed up every place I was supposed to show up to.

When the contract was coming up to the end of its three year period, I could not wait to go to the first AA meeting that wasn't required. I couldn't wait to demonstrate to others, and myself, that I was serious about sobriety. I couldn't wait for "the training wheels to come off".

I sometimes speak in paradoxes, and I am about to do so again.

**I was not happy at all about having to sign that recovery contract. And I am so grateful that I did.**

That recovery contract provided discipline in my life at a time that I sorely lacked discipline. That contract forced me to go places that i might not have gone on my own.

Discipline is defined as "orderly or prescribed conduct or pattern of behavior". It was prescribed for me that I was supposed to show up certain places. Had that contract not been in place, I might not have survived.

If you're thinking "wait—a contract? That sounds weird", or "I totally disagree with the idea of a contract", let me ask you the following questions. Suppose the pilot of your airplane is a recovering alcoholic. Do you want to know that that pilot is sober? Or are you willing to take a chance with your life? Suppose that the pediatric anesthesiologist for your child is in recovery, and is about to administer anesthesia to your child—do you want that anesthesiologist to be sober?

Of course you do. You may not think about it, but there are people who have healthcare jobs or transportation jobs who get sober and stay sober. And you and I have a right to know that, while they are practicing their professions, that they are sober.

That was the belief of the profession I was in when I got sober in 1990. I didn't agree with them then, but I agree with them now.

On page 88 of the book Alcoholics Anonymous, it says "we alcoholics are undisciplined". That is so true.

We really are. How do we get help for this? Right after, the book states “so we let God discipline us in the simple way we have just outlined”, which refers to the steps discussed in the chapter Into Action

(steps 4-11).

I realize that this essay may be provocative. Most people in recovery are in a situation where they ‘do things “on their own”. They are not in professions where they are required to sign contracts, and they don’t have discipline required of them.

At the same time, most people coming into the rooms of twelve step programs don’t get sober and stay sober.

I’d rather have had required discipline (and stay sober) than not have required discipline (and not stay sober).

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

## Meetings When I Travel

OCTOBER 4, 2018

On page 162 of the book “Alcoholics Anonymous”, Bill W. wrote “someday we hope that every alcoholic who journeys will find a Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous at his destination”. These were amazing words for him to write, because at the time he wrote them, there were fewer than 100 recovering alcoholics in Ohio and New York.

Eighty years later, alcoholics journey all the time. I am one of them. I was lucky enough to go on a vacation in the first year of my sobriety. My sponsor suggested that I should attend a meeting (or 7) while on vacation. He explained to me that my alcoholism didn’t take vacations, even if I did.

I promised him that I would go to meetings, and I am so glad that I did. I remember those meetings even though 28 years have passed.

I am now in a position where I travel overseas for work. So I make it a point to go to meetings when I travel for work. As of today, I am lucky enough to have attended AA meetings in 14 countries.

I hope that you do not mind if I share some of my experience in locating and attending meetings when I travel. I hope that my experience is helpful for you.

**It helps me to do a little bit of research before I travel**. Since I have an internet connection at home (and I don't necessarily have one in every destination), it helps to find a meeting schedule in advance, and print it out.

**It helps me to commit to someone else (my sponsor, my wife) that I will go to a meeting** when I am travelling. The truth is that travel is hard. Sometimes I don't have a lot of energy after flying for 14 hours. But since I have made a commitment to someone else, I feel obligated to go to a meeting.

**It helps to have cell phone (mobile) service when I travel**. If you travel internationally, make sure your cell phone works in your destination. This is helpful for navigating from your hotel (or apartment) to a meeting.

**It is really helpful to do a bit of mapping, in advance,** if you are travelling to a large foreign city. Some places are complicated. Going to meetings in Tokyo, for example, is very complicated (at least to me). The layout of the city was confusing for me the first time I travelled there.

One of the great benefits of going to meetings in other places is that I have met wonderful people, and attended some of the best meetings I've ever been to. Here are a couple of travel stories from some of those meetings:

1) My wife and I attended a meeting in Bermuda. At the meeting, three gentlemen started talking to us, and were surprised that we were attending a meeting where this meeting was located. They graciously noted that the neighborhood was not very safe for visitors, and they escorted us to the bus after the meeting. Theirs was a kindness I have not forgotten many years later.

2) I recently attended a sunrise beach meeting in Florida. I did very little advance preparation (I ignored my own advice) and I came to the meetings with only a towel. I noted that every other person at the meeting had a beach chair, but I didn't think much of it. A few minutes into the meeting, I felt some pain in my feet and my ankles, and I realized that I was being eaten alive by a swarm of fire ants. I spent the rest of the meeting watching these ants carry parts of my body away for breakfast. Next time I'll bring a chair.

3) This year I visited Africa for the first time. I arranged to attend a meeting in Johannesburg. I connected with a wonderful man at Intergroup, and he picked me up at my hotel and took me to the meeting. The people there were so passionate about their

sobriety. One thing they did that I've never seen before- they lit a Serenity Prayer candle at the start of the meeting. I stared at that candle for an hour, during one of the best meetings I've ever attended.

4) Lastly, I attended a meeting many years ago in Hawaii. At the end of the meeting, it was the chairperson's prerogative on how to close the meeting. This chairperson announced that we were going to hold hands, and sing the first two verses of "Mustang Sally". I kid you not, we sang the first two verses of Mustang Sally.

I do hope that you have the opportunity to attend some meetings when you travel. And as it says on page 164 of the Big Book, "may God bless you and keep you until then".

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

## Guest post: Addiction and spirituality

OCTOBER 5, 2018

President Trump has declared the opioid epidemic a national health emergency, addiction experts compare it with the AIDS epidemic, educators grapple with drugs in schools, and parents lie awake at night dreading a 3:00 a.m. phone call.

Still, the body count rises. There were more than 63,000 drug-related deaths in 2016, up 21 percent from the year before and the biggest one-year rise in three decades.

This may be an opportune time to pause, step back and ask whether we are fully utilizing all the tools at our disposal.

David H. Rosmarin, an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School and the director of the Spirituality and Mental Health Program at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Mass, posits that spirituality may be one such instrument.

In a December 2017 Wall Street Journal article, Mr. Rosmarin wrote that in his first six months as a pre-doctoral psychology intern at McLean Hospital, he was approached by at least 10 patients asking to discuss their problems not in psychological terms but in spiritual ones.

Mr. Rosmarin is not a theologian. He is a practicing Orthodox Jew and clinical scientist. He smilingly credits his yarmulke with conferring an air of authenticity.

Although rarely mentioned in thousands of media reports about the current opioid crisis, the idea of a nexus between spirituality and psychiatry is not new.

Carl Jung called alcoholism "a spiritual thirst …. for wholeness: the union with God."

In 1950 Jung wrote that a "nodding acquaintance with the theory and pathology of neurosis is totally inadequate, because medical knowledge of this kind is merely information about an illness, but not knowledge of the soul that is ill."

A crusty former addict of my acquaintance declares that the next doctor who claims to have cured an addict will be the first. He concedes that addicts suffer severe mental distress ("dis-ease"), but favors "soul sickness" to disease.

A prominent local psychiatrist, now deceased, working in the addiction field once confided to me that the medical profession "knows (nothing) about addiction."

The issue then is whether education, therapy, treatment, needle exchanges, Narcan and the rest merely treat the symptoms of the "dis-ease" while the "soul that is ill" inexorably sinks deeper into John Bunyan's "slough of despond."

Mr. Rosmarin cites a 2014 study which concluded that "religion and spirituality have the ability to promote, or damage, mental health." It urged "an increased awareness of religious matters by practitioners in the mental health field as well as ongoing attention in psychiatric research."

A 2015 review examining over 3000 scholarly articles for the *International Journal of Emergency Mental Health and Human Resilience* found a "positive effect" of religion/spirituality on a variety of health outcomes, including: "……lower rates of suicide, *less use, abuse, and substance dependence* (emphasis added), greater well-being, and reported happiness."

The hope, meaning, purpose and connection to the divine that a spiritual life provides apparently can serve as a resource to cope with the mental distress that triggers flight into addiction.

McLean Hospital asks incoming psychiatric patients if they wish to discuss spirituality. If yes, they are then asked how is their spirituality relevant to their symptoms and treatment and 'the conversation typically takes off from there.'.

When nothing is working, what have we got to lose?

*This article was written by a friend of the Urchin who practices law, and has a long-term interest in the legal and scientific study and treatment of substance abusers and substance abuse issues. He is a regular contributor to articles pertaining to these topics.*

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

## The Cathedral of Chartres

OCTOBER 6, 2018

I heard this story and I would like to share it with you:

Several hundred years ago, a traveler was walking through the French countryside. He came to the site of the Cathedral of Chartres, which was being built at that time.

He entered the construction site, and saw a sculptor working. He asked the sculptor what he was doing, and the sculptor said “I am making a statue”.

He walked around, and he saw a glazier. He asked the glazier what she was doing, and she said “I am making stained glass”.

He then saw a carpenter, and asked the carpenter what he was doing. The carpenter said “I am making pews”.

The traveler then saw a janitor. The janitor was pushing a broom. That janitor was cleaning up pieces of marble from the sculptor, stained glass from the glazier, and wood from the carpenter. The traveler asked the janitor what he was doing, and the janitor replied “I am building a monument to the glory of God”.

I will go to my home group tomorrow morning, and I will make coffee. I am the Coffee Guy. I’ll get out the coffee, and I’ll find the coffee filters, and I’ll start the water. I’ll make a lot of coffee (we get about 100 people at the Saturday morning meeting).

If a traveler approaches me and asks me what I’m doing, I hope I remember to say more than “I’m making coffee”. I hope I remember to say “I’m helping alcoholics to get sober”.

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

# Guest post: Zen Spot #161—Mindfulness, meditation, the Beastie Boys, potato salad, the number 12 and a phone call from a Buddhist monk

OCTOBER 6, 2018

### Interracial

I married an African American woman. While dating, I was welcomed into her family and introduced to Black culture. And, for the politically correct in the audience, be assured that there is a black culture that is embraced and defended by the, well, black culture. Pursuant to full disclosure, I am white—bright white. My wife refers to my "tribe"—her words—as being comprised of "ish" people: Irish, English, Scottish, Swedish, Danish, etc. Further, I was not raised around many African Americans.

The learning curve wasn't so much steep as it was broad. It was like having played baseball on a traditional field all my life and realizing that the field of all cultures is played with four pitchers and twelve outfields, in a 360 degree circle. That said, once you know the rules of the game, and can read the third base coach's signs, sheer bliss is always nearby.

### My black family and potato salad

If a friend of African descent invites you to a picnic, or a family gathering, and you want to have a little fun, remark about how the homemade potato salad tastes almost as good as the stuff you bought at the supermarket. I should have prefaced this suggestion by recommending that you dress like a baseball catcher, with a chest protector, shin guards, face mask and a protective cup, because stuff will go sideways quickly.

Heads explode. Old women will throw whatever is close at hand—a ketchup bottle, soda cans, whole baked chickens. An eighty-six year old woman once grabbed a hot dog off a red-hot grill and whipped it at me. Grown men will shush you, trying to protect you from their relatives. You'd think you'd just mashed a sweet potato pie in their grandmother's face.

Good times. Pun intended.

### My black family and The Beastie Boys

A second suggestion, if you aren't up to demands of a potato salad shit-storm, is to offer a lesson in the history of Hip Hop. In particular, stand firm on the observation that The Beastie Boys were the first true rap act. This observation doesn't involve anyone's mother or grandmother, so the reaction is different. Someone might actually throw a paper-plateful of potato salad residue at you, but they'll probably just tell you you're an idiot and walk away.

It's fun, but make sure the group loves you and trusts you first. Besides, I'm an idiot.

### Sponsors and the Twelve Steps

Alcoholics Anonymous recommends the use of a sponsor as a newcomer is introduced to the Twelve Steps. A sponsor acts like a guide through rough mountain terrain, offering directions, guidance, support and, where necessary, criticism. That said, there's no perfect sponsor and their opinions vary widely. Some are hard core and unyielding. Others are analytical. Others are touchy-feely. It's the hard core sponsors that are problematic and, that, most often, provide the best rationalization for a newcomer to start drinking again.

Power corrupts. Heads explode. Fingers fly. Potato salad all over again.

### The night a Buddhist monk called me to disagree

I started drawing Dharma Wheels in 2013. Within twelve months, I had created over 600. Yes, 600. What some people think is compulsive, I think is focused. What others think is manic, I think of as energetic, knowing all the while that they are correct.

Some of the wheels were even good.

In 2013, I committed to posting one Dharma Wheel on Facebook each day in the coming year. Wanting people to know, I reached out to people across the globe via email to let them know about the project—monks, yoga instructors, practitioners, media people, etc.

One night, my phone rang and a monk in Detroit called to tell me that the Dharma Wheels were drawn incorrectly—that they should have twelve spokes, not eight. Now, while I may not listen to priests, I definitely listen to Buddhist monks. That said, throughout life, after I listen, I often respond. This case was no exception. Ask my sponsor.

I remarked about my research of the correlation between The Eightfold Path and the eight spokes of the Dharma Wheel. The monk wouldn't accept my posit, as if I was questioning his potato salad recipe. Having made no progress, and after having listened respectfully, we politely hung up when he was finished.

Fully believing he knew more than me, I was confused.

### I'm a simple dude

On January 1, 2014, with thirteen years of sobriety, I began to post my artwork daily and it was met with incredible approval, including from Buddhists of all backgrounds—and the approval was gratifying. Detroit's finest never left my mind, not because I felt vindicated but because I felt true respect. He was the person who took the time to call and teach, and the lesson was hard. He'd gotten his metaphysical crowbar underneath my manhole cover because, for whatever reason, he cared, and because he would not compromise his viewpoint.

Over the course of writing my Zen Spot essays, their mission, motivation and inspiration have evolved. In particular, the process has introduced me to my own soul dirt. In comparison to what I read in other Buddhist blogs or what I witness when around other practitioners, my lack of commitment to a pure path can appear to border on filthy defiance. I'm not clean, small, quiet, flowery or calm. I get angry. Compassion comes hard. I loathe dogma.

Despite all these things, I know, in my heart, I'm moving in the right direction.—and I believe there are a million other people just like me, all trying to get to the light. This essay is for those people. Especially those new to the Twelve Steps. Before I got to my current destination, I worked them with a hard core sponsor, and it hurt like hell—but it worked.

I believe in the Four Noble Truths. I practice the Noble Eightfold Path. I walk the Middle Way.

That's it.

*This has been a guest post by DharmaMechanic.*

# The Lou Gehrig of Recovery

OCTOBER 7, 2018

On July 4, 1939, Lou Gehrig stood in front of a full Yankee Stadium at his retirement ceremony, and said “Today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth”.

Remarkable words for a man who had been given a death-sentence diagnosis days before (Amylotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, also now known as Lou Gehrig’s disease).

He later acknowledged that diagnosis by stating “so I close by saying that I might have been given a bad break, but I’ve got an awful lot to live for”.

I think of myself as the Lou Gehrig of recovery. I am the luckiest person I know on the face of the earth. On the one hand, I am an alcoholic and a drug addict. Those are two diagnoses that have grim prognoses. Everyone that I went to rehab with is dead. Many of the fellows I got sober with in my profession are dead. The same with members of my home group.

On the other hand, I have been sober all day today (ever since I woke up at 5 am, walked my dog, and went to a 6:30 a.m. meeting). I’ve been fortunate enough to be sober for about 10,385 days before that, too.

I am incredibly lucky. Maybe it is blessed, maybe it is grace, I don’t know what to call it. But I haven’t had a drink or a drug all day, I am a free man, my dog is asleep next to me, and I don’t have any problems in the world compared to the problems I had in the last 18 months of my active alcoholism.

There is a thought that I’ve heard shared in meetings near me. The thought is “if everyone in the meeting threw their problems onto the table, and had a choice of which set of problems to take back, I would take my own problems back”. That is absolutely true for me.

Do I have problems? Sure I do. Everyone does. But the problems that I have today are living problems. The problems I had in the last 18 months of my active alcoholism were drunk and junkie problems.

So again I say, Today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the Earth-the Lou Gehrig of Recovery.

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

# The Taping Pit

OCTOBER 8, 2018

The Grateful Dead played more than 2300 concerts between 1964 and 1995. They were known for their unique improvisational style, and also their unique way of bringing their music to their fans.

Most bands in the 1960s and 1970s recorded albums, and did a little bit of touring to support the sales of the album. The Grateful Dead did things the opposite way. They would do a little bit of recording, in order to support their ability to go out on the road and bring their music directly to their fans.

They loved playing their music in front of fans. They felt that what they were doing couldn't be properly expressed in the confines of a recording studio. They enjoyed looking into the audience and seeing (and hearing) their fans singing along with songs that had never been recorded on an album. (When your fans know the words to songs that haven't been recorded on an album, you have dedicated fans).

The Grateful Dead were the first band to allow their fans to tape their shows. That was revolutionary at the time. Their record company tried to stop the fans from recording, but the band said "once we play a concert, we are done with it-let the fans have it!" So many people wanted to tape their shows that the Grateful Dead set up a special section for tapers, called "The Taping Pit". The taping pit at a Grateful Dead show typically looked something like this:

Deadheads would tape the shows of the Grateful Dead, and then listen to those tapes. They also would make copies of those tapes, and trade them with their friends. Most Deadheads initially heard the Grateful Dead by listening to these homegrown concert tapes.

The members of The Grateful Dead were initially surprised when they saw people recording their concerts and following them from town to town. They were amazed at the response, and the dedication required to tape them and follow them around.

If you haven't figured it out by now, I was one of those people that followed the band from town to town. I loved the idea that every show was different (they never played the same setlist twice), and even when they did play the same song a few days apart, that song would be played differently.

I went to a lot of Grateful Dead shows, because there was always the possibility of magic when the house lights went down.

Like the Grateful Dead, I am trying to make magic. But instead of making musical magic, I am trying to make recovery magic. Like The Grateful Dead, I want to give it away to as many people as I can. I love what I do. I am ridiculously lucky to be able to write for people who love to read my writing.

So if you want to set up microphones in The Taping Pit and record this, go ahead. If you want to share it with other people, go ahead. If you want to copy it and use it or read it to someone else, go ahead. The record company may not like it, but what does the record company know?

Eight weeks into the life of this site, we have an email subscription list, Twitter followers, Facebook friends, and people are subscribing with an RSS feed. We will soon launch an Instagram page, because I think younger people will connect better that way.

Now it's time for the house lights to go down. Let the magic begin....

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

## Guest post: Zen Spot #155—Mindfulness, meditation and letting sleeping dogs lie

OCTOBER 9, 2018

### Hammurabi

Apologies can have an almost otherworldly power. To reach out, after having committed an error, recognizing that your behavior caused pain, can bring about a rare intimacy. Too, reaching out can result in Hammurabi chewing off an equal portion of whatever. The unpredictability is excruciating. Walk into an apology with your face or loins covered and your sincerity can be questioned. Arrive defenseless and the bleeding could be profuse and extended.

### Nine

Among the rationale for making amends during AA's ninth step, as far as I am concerned, is the humbling pain one must endure as forgiveness is requested. If done correctly and thoughtfully, with the desire to do whatever is necessary to make amends at the forefront, the executor's desire to never repeat the process can be a resource from which to pull the strength not to indulge when the opportunity presents itself.

That said, every person whose forgiveness I requested acted with an astonishing grace. My loins were sincerely exposed. None punted.

### Abscesses and my memory

I've written of blackouts. Weeks of blackouts. Time given away, and taken back spontaneously, years after, when a memory flashes back, bringing with it remorse that I thought was gone.

Flashbacks bring reflexive facial contortions. The taste of an abscess bubble bursting on my gums is less bitter. Sometimes my head shakes back and forth spontaneously and automatically even before the memory arrives.

### Abscesses and other people's memories

The problem with a fearless and thorough accounting of one's behavior is that many of the aggrieved don't remember the grievance and, when approached, offer only a quizzical look. That said, in my case, almost everybody possessed a memory deserving of an apology for which I had no corresponding flashback. No matter.

### The dogs

The latest boomerang to fly out of the dark and land at my feet concerned a client from twenty years ago. The indiscretion will go unnamed, but the compulsion to appropriately debit and credit the metaphysical balance sheet became overwhelming. An email was drafted. A phone call was pondered. Neither was executed.

I knew he wouldn't remember and I knew he would forgive me. Of these two facts, I am absolutely sure.

Forgiveness for the things I can't remember found at the heart of the things I can remember. As the boomerangs continue to land at my feet, with this man in particular, my certainty in his grace allows me to forgive myself.

*This has been a guest post by DharmaMechanic.*

## Who are you?

OCTOBER 10, 2018

***Who Are You?***

***Where Are You?***

***How Are You?***

Those words were printed on the inner liner notes of the Grateful Dead's 1971 album of the same name.

They added a mailing address, and asked their fans, known as DeadHeads, to write to them. The

Grateful Dead opened a line of communication with those three questions. No band had ever tried to

do that before. It was revolutionary.

Thousands of DeadHeads responded. The Grateful Dead took those names, and created a mailing list.

The band used that list for 50 years as a way of staying in touch with its fans.

Please allow me to ask you the same three questions:

*Who Are You?*

*Where Are You?*

*How Are You?*

And in addition, I have a few more questions for you:

Do you like what we are doing here at The Recovering Urchin?

What should I be writing about?

What can I do to help support your recovery?

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

# My 38th Street Bridge Blackout

OCTOBER 18, 2018

My friend Michael suggested that I write about a couple of my blackouts. He thought it would be helpful for some of the newcomers visiting this site. Here is one of them.

So let me set the scene.....it was 1979, I was going to school in West Philadelphia. I was 17 years old, and I was working in a bar call Doc Watson's. (Go back and read that again- I was 17, and working in a bar).

Doc Watson's was a dive bar. College students could get a cheap pitcher of beer and a pizza for about $5. From Thursday night through Sunday night, the place was always packed. I waited tables, delivered pizza and beer to my classmates, and made at least $100 in tips every night. One hundred dollars a night was a lot of money forty years ago.

My shift was from 4pm until 2 am, two to three nights a week. The hours from 4pm until 9pm were kind quiet, with the pizza-eaters. At about 9pm, the beer drinkers came in, and the bartenders filled pitchers of beer as fast as they could.

Doc Watsons was where I learned to drink hard. Up until then, I had a casual approach to my drinking. But at this bar, we had 15 minutes (from 2 am until 2:15 am) to clean up, and drink as much as we wanted for free. Since there was only 15 minutes between 2 am and 2:15, I spent less time on "cleaning up", and more time on "drinking as much as I wanted for free".

Over the course of several weeks, I learned how to drink at least a pitcher of beer in that 15 minute period. I learned to drink fast. That didn't seem to be a problem for me. I lived about 4 blocks from the bar. I would get drunk, and glide back to my dormitory with a buzz and a hundred dollars in my pocket.

One night I lost track of how much I had to drink. (Everything I am about to share with you has been told to me by other people). I probably had at least 1 1/2 pitchers of beer in 15 minutes. I walked out of the bar, and headed for the 38th Street Bridge, which was a pedestrian bridge along my route back to my dormitory.

The route that I was SUPPOSED to take was:

1) leave the bar, walk one block

2) turn left, cross the bridge, walk two blocks

3) turn right, go one block to my dorm

Two turns, four blocks. I had done this walk a hundred times. I still have the map imprinted in my brain.

But on this night in 1979, I made it to the bridge, and I got lost. I crossed over the bridge three or four times. A campus police officer approached me, and asked me if I was lost. I don't know what I said to the police officer, but if I had been honest, I would have

sung from Blind Faith's song and sung "I am wasted, and I can't find my way home".

Looking back at that evening, there are several things that seem remarkable to me now:

I was four blocks from my dorm, I had walked that route a hundred times, and I was so blindly drunk that I got lost.

A police officer escorted me back to my dorm, and delivered me to my roommate.

I did not freeze to death. I did not fall off the bridge and die. I did not get arrested.

I saw nothing wrong with what had happened. Neither did anyone else. Not my school, not my roommate, not my co-workers. But especially not me.

I repeated most of that evening many more times while I worked at that bar.

***Why do I write this for you?***

If you are a newcomer, you should know that blackouts happen to alcoholics. Blackouts are memory losses that happen when we have way too much to drink. Normal drinkers don't have blackouts, because normal drinkers don't drink that much.

I didn't know that. I didn't realize that I had blackouts until I went to rehab and someone explained to me what was happening.

I haven't had a blackout like that since I got sober.

If you get sober, you won't have any more blackouts either.

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

## Physical Pain And Spiritual Pain

OCTOBER 20, 2018

Sometimes I make a sound when I'm surprised, that sounds like "huh".

I passed a billboard on the Pennsylvania Turnpike recently. "152 Montgomery County residents died of drug overdoses last year.

I made a sound of "huh".

More Americans died of drug overdoses in 2015 than from car accidents. And a lot of Americans died in car accidents last year.

While I didn't know any of the 152 people who overdosed and died last year in Montgomery County, I know several people who have died as a result of overdoses in Chester County, and Philadelphia County.

Pharmacists. Professional people. Family people. People like you and me.

Opiates are a class of pain medication that includes morphine, codeine, oxycodone, hydrocodone, and others. Some are available by prescription, and some (like heroin) are available illegally. They are very effective, and very potent, relievers of physical pain.

If I remember my pharmacy school classes well (there is no guarantee of that…), opiates bind at the mu receptor in the central nervous system to create the effect of analgesia. In other words, they block pain by interacting at a cellular level. The effect is so pleasurable that some users want to re-create the experience over and over again.

Opiates can be very addictive.

I just finished reading an article about an epidemic of fentanyl use in Canada.

According to the article, fentanyl (an opiate 100x more potent than morphine) is widely available, and can be ordered online. It is being mass-produced overseas, and shipped directly to the homes of Canadian addicts.

In the United States, we have the same problem with oxycodone. American users purchase prescription opiates online (or on the street, or with a physician's prescription).

Some municipalities have taken to providing an opiate antidote, naloxone, to those who request it. The antidote is highly effective if it is administered quickly to someone who is experiencing an opiate overdose.

While I support this measure, it really only scratches the surface of the problem.

Providing naloxone to those who are overdosing will save some people from overdosing. But it won't decrease the supply of opiates, and it won't decrease the demand for them, either.

The "war on drugs" didn't decrease the demand for drugs, and it didn't decrease the supply of drugs, either. It just created a much larger prison system. We have way more people imprisoned in 2016 for drug offenses than we did in 1980, and more drug use too.

The supply of drugs isn't going to go away. In the article I read about Canada's

fentanyl problem, the authors described the economics of drug distribution. A user can purchase $10,000 worth of raw fentanyl powder, tablet filling supplies, and a tablet press, and sell the end product for as much as $2,000,000 worth of fentanyl tablets.

That is a 200x profit. As long as 200-fold profits are available, someone will be willing to sell drugs, regardless of the consequences.

The drug epidemic is a problem that doesn't have an easy answer. I wish it did. So what follows are not suggested solutions. They are some of my thoughts about the problem:

What if the problem isn't about drugs? The kinds of drugs we are dealing with existed 50 years ago. Some of the drugs are new, but they are really new variations of older drugs. What if the drug epidemic is a symptom of something else?

What if the problem is with us? What if we changed? Suppose the problem is that we seek temporary comfort from permanent problems?

What if the type of pain that we are trying to medicate isn't physical pain? What if the type of pain our society is trying to medicate is spiritual pain? What if opiates can't scratch the kind of itch that we have?

I don't like to ask these questions. I would much rather stick my head in the sand and hope that the problem goes away.

But no matter how much I stick my fingers in my ears and say "na na na na I can't hear you!", the reality is still there. Right in front of me on a billboard on the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

✦

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

## The Challenge of Being an Introvert in Alcoholics Anonymous

OCTOBER 21, 2018

Have you ever taken one of the "personality type" profiles at work? There is a popular one called the Myers-Briggs Indicator. You answer approximately 60 questions, and you receive feedback about four different indicators. One of them is whether or not you are an introvert or an extrovert.

I have taken this test four different times (it was popular for a while in my industry). Every time I took it, I received the same feedback: I am really organized about my time (that's good), and I am almost painfully introverted (not so good).

In my alcoholism, I never really liked to go to bars or clubs. There were drunk people there, and drunk people annoyed me. I didn't like hanging out with other people who were drinking. I preferred drinking by myself.

The good news is that I wasn't doing a lot of drinking and driving, because I was doing my drinking alone by myself. The bad news was that I was home alone, doing my drinking by myself. And almost no one knew.

I was lucky enough (blessed?) to get sober in 1990. One of the things that I was told was that I should go to an AA meeting every day, for at least 90 days. (My sponsor said "120 meetings wouldn't hurt!"). So I went to a lot of meetings. I still do.

The challenge for me has been that I am still the same introvert that I have always been. And my meetings are full of bright-eyed, bushy-tailed people who are on fire with the idea of interacting with other people.

In AA, we talk about Unity (through the Traditions), Recovery (through the Steps), and Fellowship. I struggle with the Fellowship part. I struggle when people invite me out for coffee. "Struggle" means I don't want to. I do not want to go out to a diner with people I don't know that well, and try to make small talk.

If you are an extrovert, you might be thinking "that sounds like a really good time!" For me, that sounds like torture. I get very anxious when I have to talk to several people at the same time. I am much more comfortable in intimate 1-1 conversations.

I do understand the importance of making connections with other people. I have been sober for 28 year, I've been married for 25 years, I have worked in my chosen field for 30+ years.

I understand how important my relationship with other people is. I know that I cannot do this alone. I need help (see my essay "I Need Help" for more about this....).

I do participate in the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous. But instead of having 100 close friends (I don't even know if that is possible), I have a handful of people that I consider very close friends. They are friends for life. They know everything about me, and I know everything about them.

If you are an introvert, and you are new to AA (or any other twelve step fellowship), please know that you can recover every bit as much as the extroverted people.

Find one or two people that you really trust, and get close to them. Sit next to them at meetings. Call them, and try to get to know them. Just as importantly, let them get to know you.

If you are like me, you also need help getting sober and staying sober. You may not wind up with hundreds of friends in recovery, but you might wind up with a few very close friends for life, as well as a wonderful life in sobriety.

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

# The Opioid Epidemic

OCTOBER 23, 2018

*I wrote this essay about the opioid epidemic in 2017. It is as true now as when I wrote it*

A month ago, my father texted me and asked "what is an opioid?" I don't usually pick up the phone when he texts me, but this time I did. He said that he was watching a documentary on the opioid epidemic, and the documentary never defined what an opioid is.

You probably know this, but just in case -- "opioid" and "opiate" are used interchangeably, and describe a class of drugs that were originally derived from opium, which is extracted from the poppy plant. Examples of drugs in this class include opium, morphine, codeine, heroin, fentanyl, carfentanil, hydrocodone and oxycodone.

Opioids are very potent pain relievers. Unfortunately, they are highly addictive, because they can also be enormously pleasurable when first taken.

The New York Times published an article recently on drug overdose deaths. Check it out at this link:

https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/06/05/upshot/opioid-epidemic-drug-overdose-deaths-are-rising-faster-than-ever.html?_r=0

The New York Times estimated that 59,000-65,000 Americans died of overdose deaths in 2016. In one chart, they compare that rate to the peak fatality rates for car accidents, shootings and deaths from HIV. All of those rates are lower than the current rate of

overdose deaths.

If an airliner with 180 people crashed today, killing everyone on board, within an hour every network would have special programming about it. You would know the name of the airline, the flight number, and details about all of the passengers.

An airliner full of Americans dies every day from drug overdoses, and no network is breaking into their regular programming about it.

There are a many reasons for the increase in overdose deaths in America. One is that prescription pain medication has become much more potent, and much more available. Several years ago, a new oral agent (oxycodone, marketed as Oxycontin), was approved for marketing. This drug has become widely available not only for prescription use, but also for abuse.

At the same time, the supply of heroin has increased and the cost has decreased. Heroin is now much more available, much more widely used, and less expensive than when I was growing up. Supposedly, the cost of a dose of heroin is now less than the cost of a bottle of beer. When I was in high school, the "gateway drugs" were marijuana and alcohol. Not now.

One other reason is that other very potent drugs (fentanyl and carfentanil) are being sold as heroin. Fentanyl is more potent than heroin, and carfentanil is said to be 1000-5000 times more potent than heroin.

If someone thinks that they are injecting heroin, but receives either fentanyl or carfentanil, they are going to die.

The opioid epidemic is not some far-away problem that only happens in a newspaper. It is a local problem that is killing people who live near me. Drug overdoses now look like this in my area:

Last week, two men died of heroin overdoses not too far from where I live. What made their overdoses even more remarkable was that they were house managers in a local halfway house. They were the ones in charge of oversight at their facility.

The same week, 8 addicts died of overdoses in another small town not too far from where I live.

A recent local high school graduate died of an opiate overdose a few weeks ago.

A Philadelphia Inquirer article noted that Philadelphia had 900 fatal overdoses in 2016. Bucks County had 185. The same article included an old estimate of 10 fatal overdoses a day in Pennsylvania- and then noted that that estimate might be low now.

10 people lose their lives every day in my state from a preventable problem. And either we have become used to it, or we don't know about it.

This is a complicated problem with no easy answers. It would be intellectually lazy to say "just cut off the supply". The supply is not just illegal drugs like heroin. It also includes prescription drugs that are diverted. The problem is not just at our borders -- it is also in our doctor's offices and our pharmacies and our own medicine cabinets.

I read that the United States consumes 80% of the world supply of opiates. We have 4% of the world population. There is something wrong with that.

Fortunately there is hope. Treatment exists. I know two young men who recently were in treatment for opioid addiction, and both are now in recovery. But every day that they remain in recovery, almost 200 Americans are going to die from drug overdoses.

And I don't know what to do about that.

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

## I Am Responsible

OCTOBER 24, 2018

I do a lot of driving. 40,000 miles a year or so. So I get to watch a lot of things on the road. One of the things that I see is a lot of trash. Our trash. I know it is our trash, because I see us throwing it out of our car windows.

Why does anyone think that it is ok to do that?

And it isn't just in cars, either. I walk my dog a lot, too. Not 40,000 miles a year, but a lot of miles. And the cigarette smokers on my street don't seem to mind leaving their cigarette butts on the street.

I don't care whether something is biodegradable or not. Here is my rule of thumb- if I won't throw it on my kitchen floor, I won't throw it on the street.

What's so difficult to understand about that?

I am reading a lot right now about the Bill of Rights. People are complaining about Their Rights. I don't hear people talking so much about their responsibilities.

So let me talk about my responsibilities.

**I am a husband.** I married my best friend. When we got married, my wife and I took a set of vows. Those vows included statements like "til death do us part", and "in sickness and in health". I learned that she meant those vows when she took them. She still means them.

So do I.

I read someplace that the sign of a really good marriage is when both partners feel like they got the better end of the deal. Trust me, I got the better end of the deal. If you know both of us, you know that to be true.

That means if she asks me to do something, I do it. We try to divide all of the chores and tasks. She takes care of food shopping and bills, so I take care of the cars and trash. It's mundane stuff, but we take care of it, so that we can take care of each other, and ourselves.

My hope is that we get to spend the rest of our lives together, hopefully in good health. It means forever. And it also means a lot of Golden Rule stuff at home.

**I am a father** of two beautiful young women. Very expensive, but very beautiful.

I made a couple of promises when they were born. Something along the lines of "God, if you just get us through this delivery safe and sound, I promise I will take care of this little urchin the best that I can, for as long as I can".

So my end of the bargain is that I think I am supposed to take care of these little urchins. That means I deal with iPhones dropped in the toilet, and iPhones dropped off of third story ledges. It means volleyball tuition and college tuition. It means that one bathroom looks like a cosmetics factory. It means 6000 diapers apiece, and all the Father-Daughter Dances I can attend.

It means that if either of them is so motivated to have a dog that they create a Powerpoint presentation entitled "Why We Should Have A Dog", then……

**I have a dog.** Although it would be more accurate to say that our dog has a family. That means hundreds of night-time walks in the snow and the cold, when I don't want to go outside. It means cleaning up dog poop, and licenses, and vaccinations, and all of the

responsibilities I would want someone else to take care of, if I was him. It means baths and brushing and toys and playtime and all of the stuff he needs us to do.

**I am a family member.** That means that I am supposed to participate in my family. I am supposed to show up, anytime, anywhere that I am asked. It means weddings, Bar/Bat Mitzvahs, Communions and Baptisms, Passovers and Christmas Eve's (it's complicated). It means birthday parties and wakes and funerals and all of the stuff that goes on with people that I love and care about.

It means that not only do I show up….it means that I try to show up with a smile.

And maybe even shave.

**I am an employee.** I have a job. A company pays me to work. That means that I am supposed to work. If possible, I am supposed to do such good work, that my company thinks that they got the better end of the deal.

I should show up every day. Every day. No "calling out sick".

I should remember how insanely lucky I am to have this gig, or any gig at all. I am insanely lucky that I get paid to do interesting, important work, with interesting and incredibly intelligent people. There are some days I can't believe that anyone pays me to do this. I need to act that way every day.

I work with other people. Really nice people, by the way. That means I am supposed to work well with them. I should try to treat them with dignity and respect, the same way that they treat me.

I should ask about their families, and their dogs and cats. I should ask about their vacations, and their holidays, and their traditions.

**I am a taxpayer.** You may not like what I have to say here.

I pay a lot of taxes. My wife and I make a lot of money, so we pay a lot of taxes. More than six figures a year. By the end of our working lives, we will pay millions of dollars in taxes.

And I would be glad to pay even more.

You know why I would be glad to pay more? Because I live in a time and a place where a poor kid from Philadelphia can receive a great education (both the kind you get in school, and the kind you get at the kitchen table), and grow up to be incredibly lucky. I am safe and well fed and educated and gainfully employed.

I use public roads, public water, public sewer, public electricity, public telephone systems, public gas works. I am the beneficiary of a lot of infrastructure that is freely, or inexpensively, available to me.

My children attend(ed) public schools. Great schools. The best schools in the nation. The real estate taxes that we pay to support those schools is a bargain. If you doubled my real estate taxes to pay for these schools, I would not complain. It's a bargain.

In a time and a place where it is fashionable to complain about high taxes, let me be provocative.

I'm willing to pay more.

**I am a citizen.** That means that I should participate. I vote, every time. I try to stay informed. When I know someone who is running for office, I support them. I read. I communicate with like-minded citizens.

The people in my community who hold elected office do so out of their love for their community. Some of the jobs are totally volunteer. I applaud them for that. Our lives are better for their service.

I have the opportunity to leave this country 5-10 times a year, for work and for pleasure. Every time I leave, I learn a little bit more how lucky I am to live here. I may complain a lot- but I am lucky to be here.

**I am a homeowner and a community member**. That means that I should take care of my home, and my community. My lawn should be mowed, my snow should be shoveled. My trash should go into the special trash cans that we are supposed to use. I apply for permits for the work that I am supposed to apply for.

When someone organizes something in our community, I try to participate. That means candy on Halloween, and putting up luminaries on Christmas Eve.

**I am a member of several service organizations.** That means that I should help. When someone reaches out for help, I do my best to do what is needed. That involves attending meetings, and taking notes, and making telephone calls, and serving meals, and donating money.

These are organizations that helped me, helped my profession and my community, and helped people I know. It is the least that I can do to repay the favor.

**I have a body.** That means that I should try to take care of it. That means eating right, and lots of exercise, and plenty of rest. I'm a vegetarian, and I exercise rigorously at least 4 times a week. No less than 6 hours of sleep a night, and a couple of times a week I need 8 hours of sleep. I don't apologize for that.

I need to take care of my body if I am going to be responsible for all of the other responsibilities I have.

We have an expression in our culture, "What's In It For Me?" In short, "WIIFM". I've used it.

As I grow older, I've started asking a different question: What Is Expected Of Me? Or "WIEOM".

It's the difference between the Bill of Rights and The Bill of Responsibilities.

It's the difference between selfishness and selflessness.

What is expected of me? A couple of quotes provide good answers. In Luke 12:48: "For unto whoever much is given, of him shall be much required." Much has been given to me, and I think it is time that much should be required of me. As someone I know used to say, "I am reporting for duty!"

I have a responsibility to provide for my family, my community, my country and my workplace. I am grateful for that responsibility. I know people who don't have those responsibilities, and they wish that they did.

What is expected of me?

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

## Staying Sober in Dark Times

OCTOBER 27, 2018

Have you ever found it more difficult to go to an AA meeting? Have you ever found it more difficult to go to the gym, or stick to a diet, or do anything else that you know is good for you?

So have I. In fact, I am going through one of those times right now.

I have an internal messaging machine that says “I don’t wanna”. It goes off any time I have to go to the dentist, or take my dog out for a walk when it is raining, or put on a suit and a tie.

Usually I don’t have that experience when it comes to going to AA meetings. I normally run to meetings. But right now, my energy is lower, I am kind of cranky, and I think “I don’t wanna go to a meeting”.

I should mention that I have this experience once in a while. Maybe it is the change of seasons, it is getting dark a little bit earlier in the evening, and there is less sunshine.

Whatever the reason, I feel an inner heaviness right now. Work seems more difficult, exercise seems more difficult, going to meetings seems more difficult.

It feels like gravity is 1.3x stronger right now than it normally is.

So what am I going to do about it?

I mentioned in the last section that I have this experience sometimes. Periodically I have an internal heaviness. What I do about it is that I ignore the messaging. I ignore the things that I tell myself, especially the negative stuff.

I put one foot in front of the other. Literally.

I map out my day, with a list of tasks that I am going to accomplish. Then I do those tasks.

I remember what I have heard so many times in meetings: “This too shall pass”. I know from experience that my inner darkness is a temporary things. It is just visiting, and it will get bored and go away.

Until then, I am going to a meeting tomorrow morning. I am going to exercise right after the meeting. Then I am going to take my dog to the park.

I will do the same thing the next day, too.

Rinse, lather, repeat.

Whether I want to or not.

Because I will be a lot happier if I do.

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

# Guest post: My ugly, unvarnished truth

OCTOBER 28, 2018

The Urchin and I had a discussion this week about the nature of the essays presented herein. It should be noted, before I present my topic, that The Urchin and I are very different people. I'm big, loud, a bit flaky and very creative. The Urchin is quiet, methodical, organized, accomplished and brilliant. Without providing more detail, suffice it to say that we couldn't be more different.

Having known The Urchin for twenty-four years, we've always had a curiosity about each other, looking at one another with the desire to have more of the best qualities of the other. Too, it is important to mention that The Urchin is the person who pulled me into the boat when I was drowning.

Over the course of the ensuing eighteen years (he didn't pull me into the boat until we'd known each of for six years, after he became aware of my alcoholism), I've attended thousands of AA meetings and come to have a very different perspective on the program than The Urchin, with an emphasis on how I view sharing at meetings.

I hear and see a lot of lying in meetings. With the benefit of thousands of hours sitting in churches and clubhouses, I can tell when people aren't being honest or are being lazy or haven't done the work necessary to recover—the white knucklers, the mimics, the legally required, the social butterflies, the narcissists, the arrogant chronics, the conversion therapists, the traffic cops, the bullies. I could go on forever.

I love the truth—and I know it when I hear it. The truth requires courage and it helps everybody. The truth connects people to themselves and to everybody else. The truth can be ugly. The truth sometimes involves the description of families lost, arrests, blackouts, promiscuity, car accidents, broken bones, careers damaged, hookers, hooking, bankruptcy and death.

I never pissed the bed. I never threw up and continued drinking. I never was arrested. My truth is the loss of a family. I am a blackout drinker who knows he broke laws but doesn't remember which laws. I connect with people who tell the truth about the effect of their alcoholism on the their families. I connect with blackout drinkers. When I hear people describe waking up in a pool of urine, I feel lucky and scared and grateful.

The quote above was shared in a meeting I attended in my first year. It's ugly—just like alcoholism. I never learned anything from someone parroting their gratitude for the program while ignoring the ugliness of the disease because, as far as I'm concerned, if

someone sharing in a meeting can't share something ugly followed by a message of hope and progress, they're stealing time from those who have hope and ugliness to share—and who can help a lot more people.

I will write more about my ugly truths.

*This has been a guest post by Michael D.*

## Guest post: Grace within

OCTOBER 29, 2018

My name is Michael. My last drink came on November 22, 1988. I am honored to be asked to contribute some thoughts about my experiences as a sober individual to this website.

I think I will pick a few themes and write down my impressions for a while. With a little luck, they may seem cogent and linear. If not, you will get a front row seat into what it is like to live inside my head 24 hours a day. Either way, a helmet is strongly suggested. (You are on your own for snacks.)

### Are You Done Yet?

Whether or not you drink is none of my business. I know that seems to fly in the face of recovery "common sense," but that is the truth. That is how I was raised in recovery.

My sponsors were unafraid of my drinking or my dying. That is not to say they did not care. They cared deeply. They spent countless hours with me explaining and re-explaining. But they also understood their role in my recovery. They could only point the way. They knew that my recovery was beyond their power and that I had to learn how to be responsible for it.

I know that word can be scary. I hated it. "Responsible" (Response - Able) simply means the ability to respond appropriately to a situation. You are not done drinking until you are done drinking. For some it happens all at once, for others it takes multiple tries. Most die. That is not a typo. MOST DIE. Most people get dead from alcoholism.

Why not me? I don't really know. I can tell you that I put my entire being into my recovery to the best of my ability. At the end of the 12 Step process, I had no more secrets and I had discussed myself entirely with another human being.

About one month after that the pain inside me, the one that was causing me to pray to die everyday and had been a constant travel companion for several years had gone away. I looked at my self in the mirror and what I saw in that moment was OK. I think I even said it to myself out loud.

I was dumbfounded. Something had changed in me and I didn't do it. If I could have done it, I would have done so long ago, just for the sheer embarrassment that my life was. That sucking void of pain was gone.

They say 10 - 12% of the population has trouble with drugs or alcohol. So conservatively, out of every 1000 people, 100 are addicted. Of those 100, 10-15 make to treatment. Of those 10-15, 5 have long term sobriety. Five people out of every 1000 recover. That is less the 1%, one-half of one percent to be precise.

If you are sober, you are a walking, talking miracle because most don't make it. If I were you, I would stay in the life boat…but your mileage may vary.

It's none of my business.

### Grace

If you asked me today if I believed in God, my knee-jerk answer would be "no." After another moment, my curiosity would kick in and the "clarifying questions" would start. My sponsors were — and are — cut from the same cloth: details matter, words means things, the Steps are about specifics and the more specific the information provided, the clearer an answer can be provided.

So my next question may be "What God are you talking about?" If you mean "God as a guy?" No. That is not to say I am an Atheist or Agnostic. So what do I believe in? *Grace.*

What is that you say?

Grace is the idea that the healing is already done and all we are waiting for is your awareness. Grace is the idea that there is a "Force" of some sort that is present and that can account for circumstances occurring that no reasonable explanation of science or medicine can cover.

Grace is the atmosphere that Recovery breathes when the miraculous happens. Grace means the field is tilted towards healing — which seems strange when you think of the vast numbers of alcoholics who get dead.

What if I told you that most don't recover because deep down they don't feel worthy of their own recovery? That belief takes more people out than anything else. Unlovable, unforgivable, unworthy, broken, not worth the effort...and many more negative beliefs. People wear these things like a lead coat that shields them from harm. I know. I'm a 40 Long.

Grace has the ability to find you in places you least expect it. That is its nature - its natural state. Grace is not something you receive, it is something you already are. Grace is not something you earn. Grace is not an unmerited gift or favor. It is something you already are.

Truth never hurts. Resistance to the truth can be painful - even deadly. You can deny it, you can try to hide from it, run away from it....but its presence is constant.

Wende F. would say, "You're God's Grace walking around on two legs...get used it." I don't know about the God part, but at least I have a word to loosely hang on the Higher Power

### Grace and Cause and Effect

I recently read *Zen Spot #36 - Mindfulness, Mediation, Autopilot and the Internal Gyroscope* on this website. If you have not, I highly recommend it. Why? Because it is description of the practical application Twelve Steps used in everyday life covered, in a five minute read.

What makes the essay all the more wonderful is that it is applied at a time when its use is most difficult -- when the person was ashamed and afraid. I know the writer has had a personal transformation through the Steps.

How? One sentence: "I chose to sit." In the face of an urge to run or avoid, he chose to sit and face the fear. It was not just heroic—for an alcoholic, it is miraculous! It brought tears to my eyes because I have had similar experiences happen in my life. This is how Grace has worked in my life. I did not know it at the time. I was too busy living in that moment of tension and indecision.

We think that we "work" the Twelve Steps, but that is not accurate. We surrender to the Twelve Steps and those principles slowly heal and transform us in ways we can see and ways we cannot. What we "think" is happening, and what is actually happening can be two very different things.

My sponsor would smile and say, “See, Mike! Just like a told you. God’s workin’ even when we don’t know He is. That’s what Grace is! The healing is already done—always has been done. All we are waiting for is your awareness.” The sitting was not the cause of the awareness, it was the effect.

### Your Answers Are Seeking You

Try not to limit where your sources of truth come from. Sometimes they will appear when you least expect it and have, seemingly, stopped looking.

I will give you an example. I personally think that the 12 and 12 of AA is some of Bill Wilson’s most inspired writing. In this context, during my first year I went to an AA meeting on the last day of the month, which meant it was a Tradition Meeting. There was a soft groan in the room when the group realized Tradition four was to be discussed. My thoughts were far more profane.

On the first page, Bill reeled me in, though: “*Children of Chaos, we have defiantly played with every brand of fire, only to emerge unharmed and, we think, wiser. These very deviations created a vast process of trial and error, which, under the Grace of God has brought us the very place we stand today…We saw that the group, like the individual must eventually conform to whatever principles would guarantee survival. We had discovered that there was perfect safety of trail and error.*” (12 and 12 pg. 146)

Seems contradictory to what I was writing about people getting dead, right?

That’s what I said. Isn’t drinking trial and error? Yes, but there is a major distinction.

As it says in the Big Book, AA is assuming the reader wants to stop - i.e., stay sober, stay in the lifeboat. The Big Book talks about the thought that we are like normal people (non-alcoholics) has to be smashed. (BB, pg.30) We had to concede to our innermost selves that we were alcoholic. THIS IS THE FIRST STEP IN RECOVERY.

Either you are done or you are not. From the stand point of recovery, if you stay in the lifeboat - all else will eventually, usually through pain, frustration and futility, lead us to surrender to the relief Step Work can provide.

Bill’s larger point is that it is practice not perfection. Errors are built in. We are human. We must test our skills and limits. The Steps allow us to grow spiritually and allow others to see that growth. In the lifeboat is one life, back in the water with the sharks is another. They are not even remotely similar. Not even close.

### Normie's vs Alcoholics

"Normal" drinkers are a different class, order, genus, species and family from Alcoholics. The most important difference is this: For normal drinkers, the decision to ingest alcohol is an act -- an act no more important than having fish or beef or which shirt to wear to work.

For alcoholics, drinking is a Consciousness - not an act. With that consciousness comes a unique set of beliefs, behaviors and rituals. The ingestion of alcohol is embedded in the very ether of that consciousness. We are creatures and servants to it. And if one is not actually drinking, there usually is some sort of fixation on the moment of its return into the system. There is no making one of the other. Not possible. Once you have the alcoholic consciousness, the only solution is total abstinence or death.

I am not the same man I was November 22, 1988. That man no longer exists. That man will always suffer. That man will always be afraid. That is the mystery of it for me. One day I was drinking, the next day I was not. I don't know why. Why that day? There was no shining light or voice of God, only the thought that I was going to have to go through life without medication. The trudge had begun.

### Respect Others and their Path

I can remember a night when I had attended a meeting in my sponsor's truck. I do not remember the details of the meeting other than the beautiful newcomer who sat directly in my sight line. My sponsor was sitting about ten people to my left. After the meeting, when we got to the truck, I jumped in the back. He stepped into the driver's seat, smoking his Lucky Strike No Filter, then he stepped back out, looked at me and said, "Not until she has completed all 12 Steps, Mike." With that the truck started and he drove away.

When we reached a coffee shop, I pressed him further on this "rule." (This was important - I was in lust!) After a few minutes of this, it was obvious that Steve had grown tired and I was not getting his point. Finally, much too loudly for my comfort, Steve said to me, "Mike, am I understanding you correctly? Are you trying to explain to me why your PENIS is more important than her sobriety?" Sponsorial Five-Finger-Death Punch applied to my ego, I understood.

People get dead from this disease.

## Meditation

I am a busy guy, mentally and physically. It is very difficult to sit and quiet my "mind." It is still difficult now. It was damn near impossible in early sobriety. I had so much energy running through me that to try and "sit" would cause great anxiety. I would fail miserably and feel like I was doing it wrong.

Fortunately, my sponsor asked me some very important questions: *When does your brain shut off? What brings you joy? What are you doing when "time flies?"* I wasn't sure what that had to do with my problem, but I told him - running, hitting golf balls, hockey, putting my earphones and playing the guitar, going for a long drive in the car, even cleaning the bathroom. *"That's meditation. Meditation is not a place to go to, it is a state where you can exist in this moment without your self-critic doing play-by-play. Find out what shuts your brain off and go there."*

## Stay In the Lifeboat

If you do not ingest alcohol, you cannot get drunk. Simple. Maybe too simple.

Drunks like to complicate things to the point of ridiculousness. Do not drink under any and all conditions. That's what I mean by "Stay In the Lifeboat." Sobriety brings with it an infinite number of ways to get help. Once we drink, those options begin to vanish. Not because they are unavailable, but because the shame of "failing" makes people run. Some don't make it back.

My sponsor used to call me a rock head. I was stubborn, obstinate and refused to concede points I did not agree with. Although I frustrated him, my sponsor respected that part of me. He once told me, "Mike, once God turns that same rock-headedness of yours toward sobriety, you could stay sober a really long time." He was right. No drinks or drugs under any and all conditions. We face what we face in the lifeboat. We fear what we fear in the lifeboat.

It will be 30 years in November. If I can do it, anyone can do it. I'm not that smart and not that brave and don't have that much heart. But, unlike the cowardly lion who turns and dives out the window, I have learned to stand and wait for the smoke and scary voice to pass. I cannot take credit for that. I was taught how to do that. I stood shaking, staring at the Wizard while my sponsor was talking about fear and the compulsion that would "make you set yourself on fire". Not that day. The Wizard could never produce on his threats. He was relying on me to carry that out on myself. It was never the same again after that day. Never had the same intensity because it had a name and a face

now. It was me. This gives you a little context now of why I found Zen Spot #36 so interesting. He didn't stand and face it, he sat. Strong spiritual work, anchored in the Steps and a faith in the process. The result was the same. The smoke vanished and there we were - In the lifeboat.

### Gratitude

In closing, I would like to thank my brothers and sisters in recovery for being the walking, talking miracles they are. People who shared their raw selves with me and, in doing so, gave me hope. Your not supposed to be here. The fact that you still are must mean that you are here for a reason. You may want to find out exactly what that is. Until then, I will be here in the lifeboat listening to this new song a heard about 57 times in a row. Suck the nectar out of life and share your new found loves with others. They will share theirs with you. Oh, and one more thing…Everything I just wrote down could be wrong.

Blessings!

*This has been a guest post by Michael M.*

## Guest post: A List Of Stupid Things That Mess Up Recovery

NOVEMBER 1, 2018

- Believing that addiction to one substance is the only problem
- Believing sobriety will fix everything
- Pursuing recovery with less energy than pursuing addiction
- Being selectively honest
- Feeling special and unique
- Not making amends
- Using the program to try and become perfect
- Confusing self-concern with selfishness
- Playing futile self-improvement games
- Not getting help for relationship troubles
- Believing that life should be easy

- Using the program to handle everything

*This has been a guest post by Ken D.*

## The Law of Averages

NOVEMBER 5, 2018

I wrote this essay for another site. I am posting it here, because it applies for people in recovery. My experience is that the average result in life isn't what I want. My experience is also that the average result in Alcoholics Anonymous is not what I want.

Think about that when you read this essay. Do you want the average? Or do you want something better than that?

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

The Law of Averages is a principle that states that a large randomly selected subgroup is likely to reflect the population as a whole. For example, if 10% of the entire population is left-handed, then it is likely that 10% of a randomly selected large group will also be left-handed.

But that law doesn't work with small sample sizes.

Like my family.

Sometimes I have a conversation that starts with "most people don't live the way we do". Allow me to explain.

Do an internet search on any of the following lifestyle behaviors- diet, exercise, smoking, drinking, saving/spending, TV watching, etc. Type in "the average American ____" for any of those behaviors.

The average American watches 35 hours of TV a week. Five hours of TV a day.

The average American marriage lasts 8 years. The American divorce rate is 40-50 percent. (Are all of the remaining marriages happy marriages? Probably not.) So the average marriage may not result in divorce- but it doesn't look very happy, either.

The average school loan debt just passed $30,000. The median American household (not individual- household) salary was just under $52,000. Meaning if two partners each have $30,000 in school loans, in a house with the median income....well, it's going

to take a long time to pay those school loans.

The average American savings rate is about 3%. But the median (the most frequent) savings rate is 0%. I just read online that 4/10 Americans have no emergency savings. None.

The average American male weighs 191 pounds, and his ideal body weight is 162 pounds.

18% of American adults smoke.

Only 3.2% of American adults are vegetarians.

Only 30% of Americans have a passport. Many of those with passports don't use them. So the average American is never going to see London, or Paris, or Rome.

So what's the point?

The point is that I live a different life than most people. Not better. Not worse.

But a lot different.

Have you ever seen the movie "The Matrix"? In that movie, Keanu Reeves does some time travel. He has an experience where he exists in a place, but he is separate from that place and the people who live there. He can see the other people who live in that place, but they can't see him.

My experience is like that sometimes.

At our house, we sit down for dinner, and we talk about life in the Matrix. We don't call it the Matrix, but that's what it is.

We have two TVs in our home. This year I watched part of the Super Bowl, and part of a basketball game during the Final Four. That two hours of TV makes me the super-user of the TVs in our home. I cannot remember the last time anyone else in my family turned on a TV.

Try explaining to someone that you've never seen Seinfeld. Or Cheers. Or Friends. Never binge-watched a show, because you haven't watched a show since the 1980s.

I have turned on a TV series since 1980.

We are all vegetarians at my house (except for my dog). Being a vegetarian isn't rare anymore, but it isn't that common. I recently ate at a restaurant that had no vegetarian main courses. The one "vegetarian" option had bacon in it. I'm not making that up. My daughter and I had to order a side salad as our main course.

As a result of our diet, we are all at our ideal body weight.

We avoid debt. Our hope is that our girls graduate college without any school loans. That's the plan, and we are sticking to it.

We travel. Some people tell us that we travel a lot. I've travelled to 41 countries, a total of 105 times. My girls have been to 14 different countries so far. It's what we do for fun, so it doesn't seem like a lot.

I have been to 5 continents, and I have a trip planned to the sixth (in New Zealand) in six weeks. I've been to AA meetings in 14 countries on 4 continents. I'll go to a meeting in New Zealand soon.

In the movie "The Incredibles", the family has an adventure, and at the end, Violet is speaking with a young man. He tells her that she looks different.

She replies "I feel different. Is different ok?"

The young man replies "Different is great!"

I hope he's right.

## The Importance of Home Groups

NOVEMBER 7, 2018

I have belonged to the same home group for 25+ years, ever since I moved to the county that I live in. I

think that one of the reasons that I have been sober as long as I have is that I have a home group.

My home group is a place where people know me. By "know me", I mean that they know my first and

my last name, my address, what I do for a living. Many of my home group members know my family.

We have attended weddings and funerals and other ceremonies together.

It is so important for me to have a place to go to where I feel comfortable being myself. Recovery can

be challenging sometimes, and I need a place to go to where I feel comfortable sharing my truth. My

home group is such a place.

My home group is also a place where newcomers thrive. We ask at every meeting for people who are

willing to be sponsors, and we regularly have 30-40 people who volunteer to do so.

I have a very strong home group. We do service commitments (prisons, hospitals, rehabs), and we

contribute to AA as a whole (GSO, Intergroup, our local Area and District). Many home group members

enjoy fellowship together (coffee, meals, sporting events and concerts). And we have a lot of recovery

in our group. One time we did a count of sobriety, and counted over 1000 years of sobriety in the room.

On most days, we have 2-3 people with 40+ years, twenty or so with 30+ years, and lots and lots of

people with 10 or 20 years sober. On most days, we have 100 or more people attending our meetings.

I need the help of sober people to stay sober. At the end of my active alcoholism, I tried the “I can do it

myself” method, and I failed several times. I failed so badly that I now know that the only way I can stay

sober is with the help of sober alcoholics.

I find those sober alcoholics at my home group. I sometimes share at my group that “I can’t share this

stuff in the deli line at the supermarket”. If I did share my stuff in the deli line, I think people would

probably leave that line!

When I come to my home group, I am with kindred spirits. They are people just like me-trying to stay

sober, and help someone else to achieve sobriety, one day at a time.

## Guest post: Grace, compassion and the stink of the soul -- part one

NOVEMBER 12, 2018

Last Sunday, I chaired a local AA meeting. Compassion and grace were chosen as the topics. Faced with seventy souls, some of whom were actually listening, I let loose my truth. Heads nodded, faces contorted, uncomfortable grunts plunked into the air like a chunk of cheese was being coughed up. Judgement of all kinds was exercised.

Among the truths and experiences described was the ability for active alcoholics being able to find each other at large gatherings. I am of the opinion that, in a group of 100 people, where only two substance abusers are in attendance, they will be attracted to each other like magnets. Somehow we know each other—hidden in plain sight, we seem to be able to sniff each other out.

In this context, during the meeting, I discussed the stench that an alcoholic's pores emit the day after a binge. Teeth can be brushed, a shower can be taken, extensive grooming can have taken place, but still the stench emanates from every pore and fills the room.

Given the fact that alcoholism is as much about a mind compromised by a disease as it is about the substance, it occurred to me spontaneously, during the meeting, that the attraction of alcoholics to one another is based on our ability to smell the stench of a toxic disease leaving the pores of a peer's soul.

How does this relate to grace and compassion? Read part two next week.

*This has been a guest post by Michael D.*

## This I Believe

NOVEMBER 23, 2018

In the 1950s, there was a radio show called "This I Believe". People wrote essays about things that they believed, and then had 5 minutes to read those essays on the radio. The show was very popular, and later became a series of best-selling books of the same name.

I recently started an online seminar on book-writing and book-promotion. One of the homework assignments was to write a manifesto. The seminar leader explained that our manifesto should describe what our world view is. In other words, what do we believe in? In that spirit, I'll add the following quote…. "a man who stands for nothing will fall for anything" (Malcolm X).

This is what I believe.

✦

**I believe in altruism.** I believe in the value of doing something for other people, without expecting or wanting anything in return.

I donate time and money whenever I can. I mostly try to do so in my local community, so that I know that it will help people close to me, even if I don't know who the recipients are. I like to say "you might be surprised who gets helped the most". It might be me.

I donate blood. This is a great way to help others, and expect nothing in return. My hope is that my 8 gallons (and counting) have helped dozens of people who need my blood more than I need it. I will never know who was helped, and that's ok.

I have a little booklet of sayings and quotes. One of them is "as I give to the world, so shall the world give to me". Call that karma if you want. I believe in it. And my life works a lot better when I practice it.

✦

**I believe there is enough to share.** I have been blessed in my life with too many things to list here. I live in an affluent area, my wife and my daughters and I have great gigs to go to every day. We live in a time and a place where we live like princes and princesses. We want for nothing important.

I believe that everyone deserves to have the same opportunity. Everyone. Not just the people with the same beliefs as me, or the same political persuasion, or those who root for the same football team. Everyone-no exceptions.

Why limit opportunity for others? Where is the win in that strategy?

✦

**I believe in the value of great public education.** The next generation of leaders, teachers, physicians, CEOs, and public servants are sitting in classrooms right now. Why wouldn't we want them to be their very best?

When my wife and I started the process of house-hunting in the early 1990s, our real estate agent (who was on the school board of a district nearby) suggested that we go house hunting in the district with the very best schools in the state. We objected at first. We explained that "we will never have children" (not a very accurate prediction, by the way). He explained to us that even if we never had children, that the value of our home would always stay strong, because the value of good schools drives the value of home prices. He was right. Even during the mortgage meltdown 10 years ago, the value of our house dipped a little bit, and only temporarily.

✦

**I believe in the value of financial literacy**.

Most workers no longer receive a pension. Because of that, most of us are now have to plan for, and save for, our golden years. Never before have so many of us been responsible for our own financial future. Never before have so many of us been so unprepared to deal with that responsibility.

I believe that everyone should know how to balance a checkbook, pay some bills, maintain a simple budget, and understand how to save and invest for the future.

✦

**I believe in the value of all people.** That includes people from every background, and all races, sex, religions, countries…..you name it, you're important. No exceptions. I've written about this before- I believe in what the plaque on the Statue of Liberty says. I'm also aware of more intolerance than any time in my lifetime. I can change that in my little corner of the world. I believe that.

✦

**I believe that I need your help.** I am not a "self-made man". I am where I am because of other people. I am not a lone wolf. I received a great education, and great role models helped me become who I am. I wouldn't be where I am without them.

I think it is important that I try to give back, in some small way, what I so freely received.

**I believe in the value of companionship.** As I have gotten older, I have learned the value of human interaction, especially those with whom I am closest. I need human interaction every day. Even though I am an introvert, I am not supposed to be alone. I am better off for having other people in my life. I do a crossword puzzle with my best friend every day. There is a reason for that, and it isn't about the puzzle.

✦

**I believe in the value of hard work, and the importance of discipline.** I know a lot of people who can't (or don't) work. I wouldn't trade places with any of them. Even the wealthy ones. I think work is about a lot more than money. Work provides me discipline, and structure, and keeps me mentally and physically active. It helps my self esteem. I'm grateful for the opportunity to work, and I hope that I'm able to continue working for many more years to come.

I am better off having work in my life. It provides structure and discipline for me in every area of my life, including my social life, diet, exercise, finance, and recreation. I value every part of my life more, because I am so busy.

At the same time, I am aware that a lot of people don't have a job to go to every day. There are lots of reasons for this (retirement, disability, unemployment, prison, welfare). Regardless of the cause, none of it looks appealing to me. I want to continue working for as long as I am physically and mentally able to do so.

✦

**I believe that miracles happen in the lives of people.** I've seen several of them occur. I've seen people with impossible diseases experience cures. I've seen people who were once hopeless and homeless experience transformations that allow them to be incredibly productive members of society. I've seen people who were once immobilized by illness, who now lead lives with more energy than I have.

Maybe "miracles" sounds too dramatic. But if not a miracle, what other word would you use?

✦

**I believe that I can make a difference with my writing and my storytelling.** I believe that my writing is pretty good. I regularly receive feedback from readers about how meaningful my essays have been to them. I believe that when I write well, that I can connect with people as well as anyone.

I believe in the power of stories. Stories convey meaning in a way that other written forms cannot. Stories are memorable because they involve people that we know. I remember stories, because I remember people in my life.

Last year, I published my first book and I held my first book event. I was lucky enough to have an event at a small theater in my hometown. Fifty of my friends, family and readers attended. It was a special evening. For several weeks, those who attended mentioned how much they enjoyed the event.

What made it really special was that we told stories, and now we have new stories to tell. That night was my first book event, but it won't be the last. I promise.

My writing moves people. I know that. I think I do it well. What I don't do well (yet) is building an audience. I believe that "building an audience" doesn't just happen for most authors. It takes work, and I haven't done much of that work yet.

But I will.

This I Believe.

## Where I Go For Hope

DECEMBER 3, 2018

A friend of mine asked me "where do you go for hope?" He was feeling hopeless at the time. I don't know why, but his question resonated with me.

This is where I go for hope.

**I go to AA meetings for hope.** This never fails me. I go because I hear other people sharing their experience, strength and hope. They give that hope away for free.

We regularly have 1000 years of sobriety in attendance at my home group. There are a few people with 40+ years of sobriety, and at least 20 people with 30+ years sober. That is incredibly hopeful for me. How could I not get hope from sitting in a room of people with that much sobriety?

**I go to my sponsor for hope.** My sponsor is a hopeful man. He always finds a way to find light in a situation. His attitude and outlook on life are contagious.

I know I need to call him when I don't want to call him. When I am feeling blue, I know it is time to pick up the phone and listen to his joy.

**I go to my family for hope.** My wife and daughters are hopeful people. They believe in positive things. They believe that their actions and their words can make a difference in the lives of other people. As I write this, the three of them are participating in the democratic process, and knocking on peoples doors. They believe that what they are doing will make a difference in the next elections.

**I go to work for hope.** You might be surprised that I included this. But I did. I work for a small healthcare company that is developing medicines for the treatment of rare diseases. There are some very smart people who work at this company.

Have you ever heard the expression "we aren't trying to cure cancer here"? The people that I work with are trying to cure cancer. They could be making more money doing something else, but they believe that they are contributing to the greater good by doing exactly what they are doing right now.

How could I not be inspired by that?

**I go to the gym for hope.** The gym that I go to is full of people who work hard every time they go there. They believe that their lives will be better if they work hard at their physical fitness. I was skeptical the first time I went, but that work ethic is infectious. I can't help but work hard when I am in a gym full of other people working hard.

**I go to my dog for hope.** My dog is the eternal optimist. He is full of unconditional love. He has a precious soul. One hour at the park is the highlight of his day, maybe his week.

Going to the park with him might be the highlight of my week, too.

Where do you go for hope?

With love,
The Recovering Urchin

# The Ant and the Grasshopper

DECEMBER 13, 2018

I wrote this essay for another site. I wrote about how some people approach life one way, and other people approach life a different way.

I think the lessons apply for those who are recovery. As you are reading this, instead of asking "how much money do I need in retirement?", maybe ask "how hard do I have to work at my recovery?"

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

I read a fable when I was young called The Ant and The Grasshopper. In the fable, the ants worked and saved every day, and the grasshoppers played and enjoyed their time in the sun. The grasshoppers teased the ants, because the grasshoppers were having a lot of fun in the sun.

The ants kept storing food, and the grasshoppers told the ants "don't worry-there is enough!"

Until winter came.

I am an ant. I work and I save, and I plan for winter.

But I watch the grasshoppers, and it looks like they are having fun.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should mention that I am having an affair with a lady who works for our local financial services firm. This firm was founded by some super-ants. She is a super-ant. She has worked for this company for about 15 years. So we save a lot.

But I struggle with "how much do we need to save, and how much is enough?" Some days I want to be a grasshopper and purchase a Porsche, and other days I want to be a super-ant and find pennies in the sofa and rush them to the bank.

How much is enough?

I have read that 50% of all Americans have saved nothing for retirement.

How much do we need for retirement? That is an ant question. There are a lot of ways to answer it, so I will share one way.

One calculation is to take your current annual spending, and multiply it by 20. That is an estimate the amount of savings that can last all of your retirement. That allows an approximate 3-4% withdrawal every year, forever, assuming that your investments gain 3-4% a year.

For example, if your annual spending is $100,000, then you need $100,000 x 20, or $2,000,000, saved for retirement. If you withdraw 4% of that a year, you withdraw $80,000. Hopefully Social Security fills in the rest.

But 50% of Americans have nothing saved.

What happens to the grasshoppers when winter comes?

A generation ago, companies provided pension plans to their employees. An employee who worked his/her entire life at a company could retire with a pension that provided for a reasonable retirement.

But about 25 years ago, companies started eliminating pensions (called defined benefit plans), and started moving towards employee-funded programs, like 401ks (called defined contribution plans). Defined contribution plans require employees to take charge of their own savings.

That approach works well for ants. It doesn't work well for grasshoppers. It also doesn't work well for people who don't make enough to save 10% or more of their annual income.

How much is enough?

I have met people who have lived in refugee camps. I know a couple of people who have been homeless, one of them for over a year. Some of my relatives lived through the Great Depression. Some friends have been in war zones.

These are people who did not have much. But they don't seem to struggle with the concept of "not enough" in their lives. But I do.

I was getting a haircut on Wednesday night, and the woman cutting my hair said "God will provide".

Really? What about for my friends who were homeless? What about for the people in refugee camps? None of them chose to be there, and some of them were really smart, really hard working people, who were caught up in circumstances.

What about "God helps those who help themselves".

Maybe. Let me think about it.

I drive 120 miles roundtrip every day for work. I don't recommend it, but I have a great gig, which happens to be in Princeton. So I drive.

There aren't many gas stations on my route. The middle 50 miles has no gas stations at all. So I have to be conscious of how much gas I have left.

How much is enough?

About twice a year, there is a “mother of all traffic jams” on my commute. A truck overturns, spilling its contents on the road. Or there is an accident with a fuel spill and a car fire.

Whatever the cause, a couple of times a year, my ride turns into an adventure. And “how much gas do I have” becomes an issue.

During one of these traffic jams, I spent 4 hours in the car. I saw several people who ran out of gas, pushing their cars to the side of the road.

So I make it a practice to always have at least 180 miles of gas in the car in the morning for my 120 mile commute.

Mrs. Urchin took my car out last night, and left it with 175 miles of gas.

So I stopped at the gas station this morning. Because I don’t want to run out of gas on the Pennsylvania Turnpike during the mother of all traffic jams.

With love,
The Recovering Urchin

# 2019

1 essay

# I Think My Spouse Has A Drinking Problem

APRIL 5, 2019

### Is my husband or wife an alcoholic?

### What Does Problem Drinking Look Like?

Problem drinking looks different for different people -- and is easy to deny. In the same setting, two people of similar stature, drinking the same type of alcohol, in the same amount, can have dramatically different experiences. One might doze off while the other goes off in an abusive rampage, despite virtually identical blood alcohol levels. Ironically, in the above example, both can be problem drinkers -- the former just as likely as the latter--with perhaps neither being alcoholics because, among other criterion, alcoholism is about patterns of choices and behaviors.

If the former dozes off three times a week and can't function at their job, a problem might exist. The latter might have anger issues that will arise whether they drink or not. Appearances can be deceiving. Perhaps just as importantly, **no pathologies exist as a precise measuring stick for alcoholism**.

So, what does alcoholism look like? It looks like a pile of jigsaw puzzle pieces that, when put together carefully, paint a picture of a problem that nobody wants to look at--spouses, family, friends, colleagues.

### Is there a checklist for alcoholism?

### Obvious signs of intoxication may be different for an alcoholic

There are unmistakable symptoms of intoxication: slurred speech, confusion, disorientation. But the chronic problem drinker who, over a course of several months or years, sustains behavior that results in negative effects on their lives when they are *not* drinking, is presented with one very large piece of the puzzle.

### Commons signs of a drinking problem

Other common indicators exist. Alcoholics can develop a resistance that requires greater quantities to achieve the same results. Many hide their drinking and their bottles. Some only drink at home, alone. Others keep their activities as far from home as possible. The homebodies stash their alcohol on high shelves in the garage, in the toilet, buried in planters and in heating ducts. Others hide it in their office desk

drawers. More than the behavior while drinking, the choice to hide the alcohol is a huge red flag and, despite likely vehement defiance when confronted with the choice to hide, the choice is a significant indicator. And, while the defiance may not be an outright lie-- be assured that lying is taking place. Lies of omission. Lies of commission. Lies told to oneself. Lies to to the ones we love.

### Ten potential indicators of alcoholism

Unfortunately, there is no checklist that will allow a user to unilaterally--and unequivocally--conclude a diagnosis of alcoholism. Perhaps more to the point is the fact that alcoholism cannot be diagnosed like other diseases. Symptoms can seem obvious but there is no blood test and there is little in the way of long term medical intervention except discontinuing the use of alcohol. An abridged list of things to look for follows.

- High tolerance
- Hiding alcohol
- Drinking to prepare for more drinking -- at parties, events and socially
- Injuries that can't be explained
- Physical problems: weight gain/loss, sleep disturbances, trouble eating without drinking alcohol and substituting alcohol for meals
- Lying about whereabouts, volume, driving, relationships
- Psychological struggles - depression, paranoia and others
- Gaslighting discussions with spouses to manipulate circumstances and avoid accountability
- Strained/abusive relationships with spouse, parents, children, friends, co-workers, bosses
- Legal problems related to poor decision-making while intoxicated

### Dealing with the issues of a high-functioning alcoholic

A chronic drinker may be able to hide the symptoms from even those closest to them--and, when discovered, have the uncanny ability to convince those with the concerns that the problem is theirs. I had been an active alcoholic, at times able to get drunk twice a day for over a decade, and my live-in girlfriend and colleagues had no idea. I was an expert in avoiding detection. Most alcoholics are.

### What's the difference between a problem drinker and an alcoholic?

Semantics, mostly--*if* the results of the drinking are compromising the life and health of the person. The question, however, can be hotly debated in online reference resources and by those involved. The answer will always be qualified by defining the motivation behind the person who is asking and the person who is answering. A case in point is binge drinking. Binge drinkers can go days--or weeks--without physically needing alcohol but, when they drink, they often blackout. Few people who blackout from drinking more than once or twice aren't problem drinkers.

The former title, for most people, often seems more palatable. In our culture, the ugliness and fear associated with the "A" word is sometimes enough to keep people from getting help so, if the patient or their circle needs to use a kinder term, do so. That said, if the results are the same, the name is just a name. Alcoholism does *not* require a physical reliance on the substance.

### How Long Does It Take To Become An Alcoholic?

Problem drinking may go on for years or decades. An alcoholic may drink excessively--and compulsively-- for 30 years without interruption. Despite this fact, different people have different risk profiles. Binge drinking, for example, is a rising problem among many young people who have only begun drinking.

Conversely, over that course of decades of non-binge drinking, we can develop a tolerance that results in the need to drink as much as 10 times more than normal drinkers, without showing as many signs of being drunk. A strong case can be made that the correlation between alcoholism and the length of one's drinking career can vary dramatically.

### What If My Spouse Has A Problem With Both Alcohol and Drugs?

Many people mix alcohol and drugs. The drugs may include both prescription drugs (like opiates) and illegal drugs. It should be noted, too, that other comorbid compulsive behaviors are common, like gambling, sex, food and more.

Drugs and alcohol present a particularly dangerous combination, for several reasons. Mixing alcohol and most mind-altering drugs can very easily result in deadly overdoses. Alcohol is a sedative, as are opiates and, when combined, can suppress breathing to point of death. In addition, if we choose to drive after taking a combination of alcohol and drugs, the risk to those sharing the road (and ourselves) is greatly increased.

### Protecting the spouses of all active alcoholics

Concerned spouses are encouraged to seek the help of a licensed therapist if there is a concern about dealing with a potential alcoholic for four reasons: 1) To identify healthy and safe ways to discuss concerns, 2) To identify appropriate ways to ensure the alcoholic's accountability with resolutions, 3) To maintain one's own ability to navigate the difficult circumstances that result from a spouse's alcoholism, 4) To receive guidance to other professionals whose services may be required if the situation continues to deteriorate--like attorneys, detectives, family counselors, women's shelters, etc.

### Treatment For Alcoholism

### What Is An Intervention?

### Taking the first step in treating your spouse's alcoholism

Alcoholism eventually affects everyone with whom the alcoholic comes into regular contact. And, while observations and experiences can differ based on the relationship with the alcoholic, the problem will eventually become undeniable. When those within the alcoholic's sphere of influence have a chance to compare notes, the ugly truth is usually identified and an intervention becomes the next appropriate step.

### Is professional support important for an intervention?

Intervention is a process undertaken to address the shape of the group's life when an alcoholic's problem is unambiguous. It is usually a formal process that includes a professional in addiction treatment and a number of persons affected by the behavior of the alcoholic. The inclusion of an independent certified professional is strongly advised.

### How do I prepare for my spouse's intervention?

The process begins when a family member--often a spouse or significant other--requests help from a rehabilitation center or the family physician. An intervention professional meets with the family member, and possibly also with other members of the family and friends, to coach them on the intervention process. Family and friends are taught not to accuse the alcoholic. Instead, they are coached to share how the alcoholic's alcoholism has affected them. For example, a wife may offer that "when you showed up drunk at our daughter's Father/Daughter dance, it embarrassed our

daughter and me". The technique is designed to prevent the alcoholic from denying whether or not something happened and, just as importantly, the alcoholic cannot deny the feelings being expressed.

### What happens during an intervention?

All of the family members and friends who wish to participate are gathered in a private room with the interventionist. Then, the alcoholic is brought to that room, often without warning, and confronted. The interventionist explains that the alcoholic's family and friends have gathered to explain the impact of the alcoholism on each of the participants. Then, one by one, each of the family and friends take a few minutes to share how they have been affected by the behavior of the alcoholic. The alcoholic is asked to listen to the feedback, without commenting, until the end of the intervention.

### Is an intervention a structured event?

Yes and no. Experienced interventionists always have a firm yet adaptable game plan that allows for adjustment based on the number of participants, their temperaments, the personality of the alcoholic and other factors unique to a given situation.

The interventionist often coaches the participants to describe consequences, if the alcoholic chooses to continue drinking. For example, in my situation, my boss was part of the process. He explained to me that I could participate in a formal, inpatient rehabilitation process and, at the completion of the process, my job would be waiting for me. If I chose not to participate, he told me that I would he would terminate my employment immediately. I accepted treatment.

Prior to most interventions, arrangements are made for inpatient rehabilitation, if the alcoholic chooses to receive help. In some cases, the alcoholic is taken directly to a rehabilitation facility. Unfortunately, many alcoholics refuse treatment. Some refuse to participate in the intervention, choosing to leave the intervention and continue their alcoholism.

The goal of an intervention, in almost all cases, is to get the alcoholic to accept the fact that a life-endangering problem exists, to offer a concrete solution (rehab) and to immediately move toward resolution of the problem (attending rehab).

## What is The Difference Between Rehab and Detox?

Family members seeking help for the alcoholic are often confronted with new language and jargon. Among the most commonly misunderstood are “detox” and “rehab”. Often, people use the two interchangeably despite each being very different.

*Detoxification (or “detox” for short):*

A *medical* process of weaning the alcoholic off of alcohol. This process usually involves a short hospital stay (2-3 days), where the alcoholic is observed closely, receives around-the-clock medical support, and medication (if needed), to alleviate the symptoms of withdrawal.

Alcoholics usually experience significant withdrawal symptoms when we stop drinking. The consequences of those withdrawal symptoms can be severe, including seizures, psychiatric symptoms, and in rare cases, a syndrome called Delirium Tremens, which may be fatal. Also, withdrawal symptoms produce an intense craving for alcohol in order to stop the withdrawal, which makes the alcoholic/addict much more susceptible to relapse.

*Rehabilitation (or “rehab” for short):*

Rehab takes place over a longer period of time. Usually 28 days. Medical support is often included (although not as intensive as in detox). Additionally, psychological/psychiatric support, counseling, and group therapy take place. Beyond the described supports a reorientation to a healthier, more organized everyday life is stressed. The patient makes their bed, arrives on time for scheduled events, maintains hygiene, is encouraged to build relationships and performs chores common to most healthy people.

In short, Detox focuses on the medical management of the patient. Rehab, on the other hand, focuses on why the patient became an alcoholic, in an attempt to prevent relapse.

## Does Every Alcoholic Need to Go to Rehab?

Every alcoholic should have a medical evaluation by a physician who understands alcoholism. Admittedly, this suggestion often isn’t possible until the alcoholic is literally inside the rehabilitation facility and, sometimes, the physician may find that alternative

medical tactics should be undertaken and/or replace rehab altogether. It should be noted, too, that most physicians, with an emphasis on family practitioners, receive almost no training on alcoholism in medical school.

### What Is the Difference Between Inpatient and Outpatient Rehab?

Inpatient rehabilitation is a process that occurs when the alcoholic remains at a specialized facility 24 hours/day. Stays as short as three days take place. Some last as long as three months.

Intensive support is necessary for many alcoholics. Very poor health is common, as is homeless, malnourishment, broken families and evaporated personal infrastructure. Full time treatment gives an alcoholic the time and the place to work on their recovery, and to receive all of the required support under one roof. Another advantage to inpatient rehabilitation is the safety and security provided, keeping unnecessary life stressors and the temptation of friends who are drinking and taking drugs at arm's length.

However, some people choose not to receive inpatient care due to lack of insurance, time or money and, instead, participate in outpatient rehabilitation. Outpatient rehab generally involves meeting with a counselor, and possibly a small group of other alcoholics, several evenings a week for several weeks. Some outpatient rehabilitation is called "intensive outpatient", and may meet as many as seven times per week.

The advantages of outpatient rehab include lesser cost and also the possibility that the alcoholic can continue living at home and working, if they still have a job.

### How Do I Find A Good Rehab?

Your family physician can help identify a good rehab. As described above, many physicians don't have substantial training in addiction, but almost all family physicians have a long list of patients experiencing alcoholism and have had to help each take the first step toward a healthier life -- beginning with rehab.

In addition, if you have health insurance, your insurance company has data on rehabs with good (and bad) results. Although I am not a big fan of insurance companies, they do have a vested interest in ensuring the best treatment possible. It is good for them if you receive treatment that works.

### Is Rehab Expensive?

Most facilities cost $500-$1,000 per day, with some charging significantly more. Sometimes treatment may be *required* for one month or more. That means treatment can cost $20,000-$30,000, or more.

Some insurance companies cover the cost of a rehab stay for the treatment of alcoholism. If you or a loved one is considering rehab, call your insurance company to see discuss costs. Even with health insurance, however, there may be significant out-of-pocket costs.

### Can AA Help A Problem Drinker? Can I Just Go To AA and Do This Myself?

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) can indeed help a problem drinker. AA is the only place that alcoholics can go where they can speak directly with other people who have had the same experiences--the good, the bad and the ugly. The people in AA do not lecture, they do not charge any money for their time, they do not set or enforce rules. They offer their time and their experience in the hope that doing so will help themselves stay sober. In this context, even alcoholics who choose to go their own way are not alone in their struggle. Almost every rehab program will encourage the alcoholic to embrace AA.

There are some limitations to the do-it-yourself approach, however.

No one in AA acts as a healthcare professional. Nobody directs another member's recovery. Nobody tracks a participant's progress. Everyone is free to come and go as they please and, for those alcoholics whose early sobriety requires structure, organization and accountability, the flexibility can offer another place to hide behavior. The problem with the DIY approach is that the person in charge of my recovery is me -- and I came into recovery with some serious medical and mental issues. I received professional help for those issues, and you may need professional help too.

Despite the success stories associated with AA, the grim reality is that the recovery rates for someone who walks into their first AA meeting are shockingly low. Most people don't recover from alcoholism. (For more detail, read later on "Alcoholic Data and Progress").

### What Happens After Rehab?

The importance of aftercare -- including AA meetings, group therapy, participation in support groups, family counseling, and medical checkups -- cannot be overstated. A lifetime commitment is often required.

### Alcoholic Data and Progress

Sadly, solid statistics on recovery do not exist because the necessary data is hard to compile, for several reasons:

- There is no central repository for this information. Rehabs don't have to report outcomes to a central authority.
- Twelve step programs (e.g. AA, NA) do collect estimates on the *number* of members that they have, but they do not track or record the progress that individual members make in their recovery.
- There is a lot of shame associated with alcoholism. As a result, individuals (and their physicians) are reluctant to record honest diagnoses on hospital admission and discharge notes.
- When people die of alcoholism, the cause of death is often described as something else: for example, as accidental injury, exposure, pneumonia, infection, or suicide.

With all of this in mind, there are at least two recent publications that discussed the mortality associated with alcoholism. You can read about those publications in my essay "This Is Our Plague".

Briefly, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) published a report estimating that 632,000 Americans die every year from tobacco, alcohol and drug addictions. The World Health Organization published a report that estimates that 3 million people die worldwide from alcohol abuse.

With love,
The Recovering Urchin

# 2025

2 essays

# Radical Honesty

NOVEMBER 12, 2025

I recently finished a book called “Dopamine Nation” (Anna Lembke). She is a physician therapist who treats people in recovery from several addictions (including alcohol, drugs, gambling, shopping, pornography). She writes about the neurotransmitter dopamine, and how it is involved in the pain/pleasure experience. She describes how dopamine is involved in the addiction process.

One of the later chapters in her book is titled “Radical Honesty”. She notes that addictions are often associated with dishonesty, and that a path to recovery should involve honesty. Even Radical Honesty.

In AA meetings, we often read a section from the book Alcoholics Anonymous called “How It Works”. In that reading, the word “honest” appears three times in the first 100 words. I think the AA founders understood how important honesty was, even in the 1930s.

I recognize that I was dishonest during my alcoholism and addiction. I have worked hard to own my dishonesty, and the consequences of that dishonesty, by working the 12 Steps.

I don’t claim to be radically honest. I think I am improving. I do have blind spots, and I am never certain that I am even being honest with myself. So sometimes I turn to other people and ask “how am I doing?”

✦

We have an expression in the rooms, “you are only as sick as your secrets”. Secrets are a way to be dishonest. So I aim for no secrets. The opposite of secrets is transparency. If I let you into my life, into all parts of my life, maybe you will see something about me that I don’t see about myself.

I aim for transparency in three areas: money, location and schedules. Mrs. Urchin and I share the following with each other:

Money: we share all of our financial information and transactions with each other.

Location: we share our locations with each other in real time.

Schedules: we share our schedules with each other.

✦

I hope this helps.

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin

## What's The Problem?

DECEMBER 6, 2025

In the book Alcoholics Anonymous, the second chapter is called "There Is A Solution". On page 25 of that chapter, there is a paragraph that opens with "There is a solution". But what is that the solution to? In other words, what is The Problem?

I go to a lot of AA meetings. And at many of those meetings, I hear a lot about not drinking. I hear that the problem is alcohol. But what if the problem isn't alcohol?

I realize that question is provocative to ask in an AA meeting. I ask that question because I quit drinking a number of times. Every time I started again. Every time I quit drinking, it seemed to me that my life got worse, not better. The whole "don't think, don't drink and go to meetings" was not working for me.

I have a number of addictions. A brief list includes alcohol, drugs, pornography, gambling, spending. Maybe food too. Maybe internet doom scrolling. I've attended meetings for four of those addictions. I gravitate towards anything that provides a dopamine hit and a minute of distraction.

When I first started attending AA meetings, I abstained from drinking and taking drugs for about 4 months. And my life got worse. I got worse. I didn't have my pain medicine anymore (alcohol and drugs) but I still had all of the pain.

After a meeting one night, I asked my sponsor what to do to recover from alcoholism, and he said "you need to work the Steps". And it changed my life. Now my life didn't get perfect. But it started to change. I started to change. And the obsession to drink and take drugs was lifted.

What working the Steps did for me was to help me understand The Problem. I learned that the problem wasn't alcohol. It wasn't drugs. It wasn't pornography or gambling or the internet.

It was my alcoholism. It was me.

I wasn't happy when I learned that. Far from it. I learned that I have a void. People call it "a hole in my soul". For me it is a sense of "Not Enough". I read in a Patrick Carnes book on sex addiction "Out of the Shadows" a phrase (and I'm paraphrasing here) that Carnes core message was "I am not enough, there isn't enough, the world is not a safe place, and my needs can only be met with sex". I related to that.

I had been trying to meet all of my needs with a combination of alcohol and drugs and sex and spending and porn and….whatever. Whatever I could pour into the hole in my soul to temporarily help me feel like I was enough. And none of it worked. And I became addicted to all of it.

I also learned that I couldn't just "stop drinking and go to meetings". That wasn't a solution for me, and I didn't know why. Now I do. I now understand that The Solution is a spiritual solution to a spiritual malady.

Part of my spiritual solution comes from connecting with all of you. By trying to be authentic, and transparent, and by trying to help others.

Thank you for letting me share!

With Love,
The Recovering Urchin