

Early Recovery

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I recently heard from a newcomer of two months that he was discouraged by his lack of progress. He told the group that he felt no better than he did when he first came in.

Those of us who can't forget what it was like when we first got sober can readily identify with the young man's feelings that he wasn't progressing. I have vivid memories of being constantly depressed, sometimes even catatonic during my first

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year of sobriety, over twenty-four years ago. I was teaching at a Community College during that time. God only knows how I managed to read papers since my concentration was more scattered than someone suffering from severe Attention Deficit Disorder. I had mild to over-the-top, heart-pounding panic attacks and one late-spring day convinced my out-patient counselor to come into work on his day off because I was experiencing uncontrollable suicide tendencies. I was on nothing less than an extreme roller-coaster journey during those first two or three years.

The only hope I had was the promise of the old timers that it would get better. I, of course, wanted instant results. I couldn't figure out why a program that had so many promises hadn't delivered. It wasn't until at least two years in the

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program that I began to accept the comments of others that I was beginning to look better (I openly admit that my vanity was still in top form during those first couple of years in the program. But I figured if my recovery had to come through the back door of some visible sign accessible to others, I would settle for that).

The real "gut wrencher" for me occurred when I attended my first Adult Children of Alcoholics meeting during my early years in the AA program. It wasn't until that moment that I finally internalized the fact that I was an alcoholic. I still wasn't convinced by AA that I was an alcoholic, eventhough all the facts were staring me in the face—the number of nights that I had blacked out, woke up in a stranger's bed, couldn't find my car, ended up in jail, brought home STDs to my wife, was almost murdered, used up

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most of my sick-leave days, put my wife and childrens' lives in danger. The proofs of my reckless, alcoholic behavior were not enough to convince me that I was an alcoholic. In spite of the evidence, during most of my first two years in the AA program, I merely mouthed the expression, "My name is John and I'm an alcoholic," without attaching any real significance to the statement.

At my first ACOA meeting, however, I could actually feel my body temperature rising as I listened to the stories of those who had alcoholic parents. I realized, for the the first time in my life, that the ism of alcohol addiction was deeply embedded in my family—my father, uncles on both sides of my family, my maternal grandfather, my brothers. My initial sense of fatalism about my family had gone up a notch, and I finally realized that I was part of a

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genetically inherited obsession to drink, in spite of the fact that I always thought I was cut above my family background.

Nature's arbitrariness can be the great leveler, especially to those who have to be whipped into an epiphany by a reality test.

When I think of those early-recovery days, I am somewhat nostalgic about the edge and intensity they had. I hung around a group of marginal characters—a sex addict and musician who eventually committed suicide, a leather biker, a civil rights lawyer, a couple of atheists, and a guy who had just gotten out of Attica. It was this carnival of characters, however, who kept me sober.

I was instinctively attracted to friends in the program who refused to have normal

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lives because I had, for too long, denied my own authenticity by succumbing to the American dream—a beautiful, intelligent wife, a house, two kids, a chain-link fence, a mortgage, a career. Except for my intellectual life, most of the decisions I had made before I got sober were because I wanted to fit in. It wasn't until I owned up to who I am did I realize how much I had played the conformist game of falling for the illusion of everything I was not.

Only after some hard work and persistence in my recovery did I discover that my behaviors, my thinking process, my emotional states wouldn't automatically morph into some kind of instant success story just because I stopped drinking for a couple of months. Real, demonstrable changes in my perceptions and reactions took a very long time to develop, and I still have a lot of work to do.

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However, one thing I have noticed about myself over the last twenty-four years is that I am no longer prone to extended bouts of depression. Even when I experience genuine grief over realizing that I am getting getting older—the grand “descent” I call it—I know that I am experiencing the very essence of what it is to be alive: to know that I am grieving, to feel it, to be inside of it. It is the ultimate test of my existential participation in a very real life experience. That is truly what Isabel Allende refers to as “abundance,” even though I sometimes feel I am on the outer edges of that abundance.

I am gradually feeling the same way about my financial insecurity. I live inside of it, I talk to it, I feel it in the pit of my stomach, I play out mathematical scenarios in my head, I breathe through my fears of insolvency, I take my fears to AA meetings,

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I talk to friends about potential financial decisions I may have to make over the next couple of months. And then I realize that in doing so, I am actually dealing with it. Even when I take no action, I am actually living with and through my fears. I am truly alive and in the moment. I am inside the abundance of existence.

In a very real sense, all addicts and alcoholics are constantly in some kind of early recovery. Unless we have been blessed with perfect health, a totally secure job, a multi-generational family inheritance, children with no crises, a car that always starts, a pension that never runs out, a boss who is always sensitive to our needs, and a significant other who never gets on our nerves, then I suppose we can say we've arrived. But we all know that that's not going to happen in our life times.

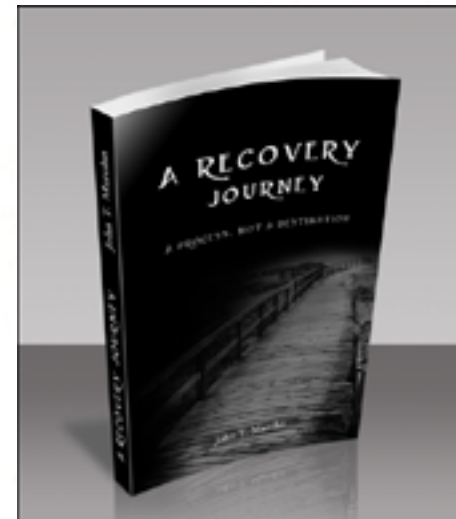
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There will always be some change that will kick us in the ass, and it will seem as if we have to start all over again. A mother has to go into a nursing home. A child gets a divorce. A wife leaves for a younger man. The hot-water tank bursts. You get your third speeding ticket. Your parole officer gets transferred. Your neurologist dies in a car crash. Your doctor tells you you have fourth-stage prostate cancer. Your husband begins to show signs of alzheimers—all crises that can take us back to ground zero.

There are no guarantees, no matter how well we think we're doing our recovery programs. On any day in the midst of our crises, we will feel as if we were walking into the rooms for the first time, battered, bruised, but ready to live through another crisis and to say with new fervor, "I am an alcoholic and my life is unmanageable."

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