

THE ASSOCIATE MEMBER

AUGUST 10, 2004, IS MY SOBRIETY DATE. THAT WAS THE day I was remanded to prison for selling methamphetamine to businessmen friends, an eight ball at a time. This I did so I could get high for free. I had been on house arrest at my brother's apartment for a year and had been pressuring my lawyer about getting on with prison, because we were pleading and it was a certainty. As long as I was on house arrest, the clock wasn't ticking: House arrest doesn't count toward your sentence. In addition to insisting I wear a chunky black plastic ankle monitor, the authorities had the risible notion that I should also stay clean until sentencing. Now, this all occurred before the Supreme Court decision that made the sentencing guidelines advisory, so I was looking at a minimum bid of 135 months (i.e., eleven years and three months). The maximum was life. I figured there was plenty of time for me to stay clean after I got to jail. Fortunately, I had kind friends who brought me drugs and the occasional young man, neither of which set off the ankle monitor, though the mandatory urinalysis was not as forgiving of the former. After five dirties, the court saw things my way and sent me to prison. The clock started and I waited to be formally sentenced.

So it had finally happened. Back in 1991, one of the many, many reasons I'd gone to AA was that I was one of those familiar addicts (you know who you are) who was sure there were undercover cops everywhere waiting to arrest me because I'd been smoking crack and shooting cocaine almost every day for five years. I was also drinking a fifth of Popov vodka every night to take the edge off, but I wasn't worried about that because it was legal. So I called up my friend Ed, who had gotten sober months before and thought I might have a problem also, and he took me to Midnight down on Houston Street. I knew the place—not all that long before it had been an after-hours club with plush sofas and red velvet curtains called Page Six. It had now become an AA meeting. Irony.

When I managed to put together ninety days, my sponsor suggested I speak and I did so. The problem was that my brain was still so fried I was completely incoherent. Though not so incoherent that I didn't know it: I stopped, I think mid-sentence, somewhere before the ten-minute mark.

Someone from the floor shared that it was the worst qualification he'd ever heard. I wholeheartedly agreed.

It took me a couple of years, but I was finally able to put together some time, get a great boyfriend, and make some pretty good progress in my career. But there was a catch—and this is another familiar story, one I heard in a meeting just the other day: I was an “associate member” of AA. I attended meetings, did service, went out for fellowship, didn't drink, and that was about it. I was in a Twelve Step program except for the part about doing the Steps. I wasn't reading the literature, wasn't calling my sponsor, and wasn't being spiritual in the least. That went on for seven years. Who knows how long it might have lasted? Lacking a real foundation, I was bound to come undone sooner or later. What did finally occur was that I blew a career setback into a career tsunami, walked out on the boyfriend, stopped going to meetings, and started hooking up online. By June 2001, I was smoking meth; by November 2001, I was selling it; in October 2003, I was arrested.

You have to give them credit: The feds are trying to do the right thing when they can get away with it. While I was at the Metropolitan Detention Center out in Brooklyn awaiting my sentencing, there was this wonderful lesbian drug counselor who would come up once or twice a week for group. Then I was sentenced to eighty-seven months—my lawyer had found a tiny loophole in the law, and my very sympathetic judge was happy to push me through it—and I was transferred to the prison camp at Butner, North Carolina. If meetings were offered there, I don't remember. What I do remember is that at that point, I had been in prison and dry for a total of eighteen months, and I just couldn't take four and a half more years of it. I had been talking to a doctor who had been sent to prison because he'd been working at a clinic that had committed Medicaid fraud. He hadn't known anything about the fraud and neither had the other doctors who worked there, but they were all indicted and one had already committed suicide. My friend also attempted it soon after he arrived at Butner but chickened out (his words) and reported himself to the nurse. He told me he had overdosed on blood pressure medication, the same kind I took.

So one day after I got off the bus from work to go to lunch, I went to my locker and considered the new, full prescription for some time. I can't tell you why I didn't take it all; I had every intention of doing so, but I didn't, and I knew I wasn't going to. I had to figure out a way to make it

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through the next four and a half years. It turned out that way was to use what few tools I had learned from my time as an “associate member” of AA. The first thing I did was learn how to meditate from one of the Buddhist inmates. I was then transferred to Pennsylvania and started looking for new guys to show around. That’s spending time with the newcomer, by the way. In prison you learn pretty quickly that the inmates there on drug cases fall into two groups: the criminals who were in it for the money and the hapless ones who were in it for the free drugs. It was the hapless I usually tried to work with. I talked about Twelve Step programs to lots of guys over the last four years, and I don’t know if I helped any of them, but I do know that even though there were plenty of opportunities to drink and do drugs, I stayed sober the entire six years and three months.

I’ve been out of prison for almost seven months now and have remained sober. I am grateful to have a sponsor who has a sponsor, who is guiding me through the Steps. I am humbled that I have sponsees, and I’m enormously grateful to be able to go to at least one AA or CMA meeting every day. I am also humbled that there have been and continue to be sober fellows who have helped me and guided me all along the way. So with the help of my Higher Power, one day at a time, my primary purpose is to stay clean and help another addict. That’s service. That’s fulfillment. I’m glad to have turned in my “associate membership” for the real thing. —*Bill C.*