

WHY AM I HERE?

I ONCE READ IN ANOTHER FELLOW'S STORY THAT THERE was nothing in his life to indicate he would end up an addict. I found this amusing—everything suggested I would become an addict. The garden in which my disease grew was fertilized with self-hatred, isolation, low self-esteem, anger at an alcoholic father, and the belief that the world owed me something—everything, really. So it was no great shock when I became an addict, too. What was shocking: I never wanted any of it, the drugs or the alcohol. I fought my use, abuse, and addiction every step of the way. I wasn't equipped to fight this battle, and I was trying to do it alone, in my head. I always promised myself I was never going to be like my dad. Yet, much like he did for thirteen years, I find myself sitting in a room, announcing: "Hi, my name is Don, and I am an addict and an alcoholic." I have never understood him better than I do today. He continues to teach me, even after his death.

I often wondered, *How did I get here? What am I doing here?* And of course, *Why am I here?* I knew I was not alone in pondering the grand

purpose of life, but I was only interested in the easiest answers. The real solutions to my problems required a fearless, honest evaluation of myself. Until recently, I never felt strong enough to do that. So at 40 years old, after twenty-five years of addiction, I have finally stopped, let in God, and listened for the answers.

Experience: How did I get here? My addiction did not start with the first time I got drunk or the first time I smoked pot or with any of my many other drug firsts. It all started long before I can remember—the first time I hated myself, the first time I believed it when someone told me I was nothing, and, most important, the moment I began to live in fear. I was born into a home where chaos churned just below the surface, poised to disturb the uneasy peace at any moment. Love and anger lived side by side. I knew even then that this was not the way others lived, but it was my life. I have the same wonderful memories as many others: a mother's love, family vacations, and festive holidays. But many of my memories are colored by silence and anger. I find it interesting that, in a family of seven children, silence occupies such a prominent place in my recollections. The silence, I know now, was based in fear—fear of drawing attention to myself, angering my father, or “causing” another argument. I believed the anger in my memories belonged to my father. I was wrong. The anger was mine, and I clung to it the way other children clung to a favorite blanket. If I was angry, I was strong, in control. I revealed that strength and control by creating trouble. I went out of my way to make the wrong decisions. I pushed limits in every aspect of my life without consequence—or so I thought.

At 6 years of age, I tried beer for the first time. To this day, I can still feel that memory, the sensations. The opened can against my lips, the taste of the beer mixed with that of the steel can, and the burn as I swallowed. I was hooked. I learned how to drink by watching my dad. He would do it for hours, sitting at a bar, in silence, one beer after another, staring off into space. I was an alcoholic and an addict before I ever started using. I began to drink in earnest at 15. Within a year, I was smoking pot daily, snorting cocaine and dropping acid on weekends. I could be someone else. I *was* someone else. I didn't have to think about my life, sexuality, insecurities, or sadness. I could party better than anyone. Bigger, better, faster, stronger—this I was great at.

My father, sober for six years, recognized my “greatness.” He sat me

down to talk. He focused on my drug use and the friends I was spending time with. I always wondered why he never mentioned my nights out drinking. Did he feel this was off limits, that I might throw his alcoholism back in his face? Maybe he was not ready to answer for the pain he had caused his son. I wish we had talked about it. In any case, I was offered an opportunity to change my life. I started therapy. It was good, while my honesty lasted. But I began to lie by omission. I was not ready to face my demons. Besides, I could stop on my own whenever I wanted—time after time, again and again, for the next twenty-five years.

When I was 22, my father died. I no longer had him riding me to do better, be better. I began to build a life of lies. With each lie I told, another piece of me disappeared. My soul suffered, my spirit was wounded, and God felt beyond reach. I prayed, *Why are you keeping me here? Please help me!* God answered, but I would not hear.

At age 31, my six-year relationship was coming to an end. The ornate, flawless facade I had maintained began to crack and fall away. It had become impossible for me to keep up with my own deception. As my partner began to see the real me, I withdrew. I was afraid of being found out, of being alone, of wanting out. I cheated often. I needed to get caught. I needed the hurt I was causing to end. It didn't. For the next decade, I destroyed many other relationships just by withdrawing.

"Functioning addict"—it's a nice label. Yes, I went to work every day. Yes, I advanced in my career. Yes, I had a nice apartment. And yes, I had lots of material things. These facts in no way indicated my ability to function. I did well in my business life for three reasons: validation, preservation, and desperation. I was good at what I did and needed everyone to tell me so. I had a lifestyle and image to maintain to feed my fragile ego and mask my low self-esteem. Above all, I needed to succeed to finance my growing drug habit. I was never surprised by what I could accomplish when my ability to acquire drugs was threatened.

With the stability that comes with having a life partner now gone from my personal life, I was free to create another, "new" me. This incarnation began July 4, 1996, on Fire Island. In a matter of days, I had begun using ecstasy, K, and crystal. I had a new group of friends, a share for the summer, and a great job in the music industry. I had arrived. It was everything I ever wanted and everything I thought I deserved. I now realize these relationships

were nothing more than a safe existence of approval and acceptance based on manufactured emotions fueling one long party. I became a daily user.

It was during this time that I had my first spiritual awakening. My understanding of this is so clear now, but at the time it was just an amazing moment I tried to hold on to and learn from. For the first time in my life, I was hearing God. He was there for me. All I needed to do was ask for help. I know now that the path I was walking had divided and it was time to choose a direction. The thrill of my new life and the drugs were calling out to me. I was powerless over the pull.

My journey has been difficult, but I will never say I chose wrong. Living with regrets and what-ifs was a futile existence for me. I prefer to wonder, *Would I be where I am today if I had not lived this life?* God gave me a lesson to carry on my journey: People move in and out of your life for a reason; take joy in having known them and learn what they were sent to teach you. Some will leave forever, but others will return to continue your lessons. In sobriety, many of those people have returned, and I continue to learn from them.

During the last six years of my using, I refined my drug abuse to include only crystal meth and alcohol. To me, this was managing. I moved to Florida, then back to New York City. I changed apartments more than a dozen times, always with the promise that “things are going to be different.” The result was always the same, me sitting alone in a room with a crystal pipe in my mouth.

Strength: What am I doing here? At 3 A.M. on November 8, 2005, the fourteenth day of a crystal binge, I sat alone in my bedroom, high as a kite, listening as the voices in my head battled for my soul. God spoke to me. I didn't hear any words; I felt them in my heart. I was at peace. I stood, walked from my bedroom to the bathroom and flushed 3 grams of crystal meth down the toilet. I went back to my room. The voices in my head were stunned: *Did you really just flush that? Did you?* I broke my pipe. There were no negotiations. No “one more hit and then I will stop.” It was over.

I cannot say sobriety has always been easy, but my worst day in sobriety is still better than my best day using. I am present for my life now. God answered the prayers of a lifetime.

I recently heard a sponsor say to his sponsee: “How can you not believe in something that you yourself have said you've prayed to?” Throughout my

life, I never lost faith in God—I just didn't know it. For years, I woke up every day wishing I was dead. Why not just end my life? There was always a reason not to: my mother, my family, my ego, chocolate ice cream. God gave me many other reasons along the way. It doesn't matter why I stayed, just that I did. In this, I have faith.

So God, why are you keeping me here? His answer was once again simple, to experience true joy. My definition of true joy has changed as I achieve a greater understanding of life and its purpose. True joy is not in the euphoria of the “pink cloud” but in the calmness and serenity of daily life, in my reactions to people and situations, and above all in the beautiful and honest relationships I am able to nurture with family, friends, and fellows. By understanding and letting go of anger, jealousy, and ego, I am open to accepting all that the universe has to offer. That acceptance began with asking for help. The help offered by the fellowship is powerful. I walked into a roomful of strangers and was received immediately and understood.

Never before had I experienced that. We might not always agree, but we understand without judgment. Every day there is a new lesson to be learned if I am open to it. I remind myself that from perceived failure often comes the greatest lesson. How does one live in the light if he has not known darkness? The Twelve Steps started me on a course to higher consciousness. The understanding and growth that came from working them, and doing my best to live by them, offers me a greater view of God's universe and my place in it. There is no greater direction for living life and becoming everything I strive to be than in the Eleventh Step and its prayer. “It is by self-forgetting that one finds...”

Hope: Why am I here? My hope is simple. When I am connected to my Higher Power, ideas, language, even the phrase “each other” don't make any sense to me. I believe each of us is the same and God can be found in all men and women. What we are on the outside is simply the vessel that takes us on the journey. Believing this, how can I not hope for everyone else what I hope for myself—true joy? —*Don S.*