

Seamus 1

My name is Seamus O'Connor and I'm an alcoholic.

(Audience): Hi, Seamus.

I was stunned when I walked in and saw.... What is it? 146. I was expecting, maybe, 15 or 20 people, and...

Let me begin by assuring you that anything I say, I've stolen. (Laughter). I mean it. That's how we pass stuff on in this program, so, whatever I say will be an insight that has helped me to understand something about the AA program. And I'm now trying to pass it on in the spirit that it was delivered to me — free of charge.

One of the things I love about our program is that there is no authoritative interpretation of anything — we're a bunch of anarchists: each of us has our own interpretation of everything.

I'm throwing what I have picked up over the last 39 years into the conversational pot that is the AA community so that, hopefully, it may be of use to somebody listening. If it is not, don't get upset, just listen to somebody else and read the book yourself. Don't go quoting me to your sponsor you may get him or her upset and resentful — bad karma.

I had a lot of trouble getting into the program at first for I had approached it with a closed mind. I was convinced I knew more than I actually did. It was very hard to get anything — any new ideas — past what I thought I already knew. I've worked with people in recovery off and on over the last 30 years and I find that this may be the biggest single obstacle to recovery: thinking we understand alcoholism and how to recover from it. "Many of us have tried to hold on to our old ideas... etc."

For those of you who haven't heard my story, I'm going to qualify briefly and for the rest of you, I hope it doesn't bore you to tears. Some of you present have heard my story I hate to think how many times — you could probably occupy the time praying for me to finish.

Anyway, I was born in Northern Ireland to a Catholic family, second oldest of four kids, neither parent was alcoholic. Pretty normal family, hard-working, middle-class — mother a school principal, father a businessman.

I was one of those kids who never had a clue what he wanted to do in life and, I suppose, I was expecting to be led into something useful by the expectations of my family. The family thought it would be a good thing if I became a doctor because I was reasonably good in school. Why a doctor? They thought it would

be nice to have a doctor in the family. I'm always sympathetic to people who've been told: "... with those grades you could become a doctor, lawyer, whatever..." The part of the equation that is missing in this is, "Do you also have a great passion to heal people?" "Is justice a passion of yours?"

I more or less cruised through boarding school without pulling a mental muscle and passed what we called "A Levels". It was a very good school academically - I had many schoolmates who did way better than I at it. Surprise, surprise! Two future Nobel Prize winners were there in my time — in a not-very-large school in Northern Ireland, Nobel Prizes, of all things.

I didn't do nearly that well. In fact, my mother had badly wanted me to win a Nobel Prize too. (Laughter). She didn't care much what it was for - just so long as I would be on the cover of *Time* magazine, she thought that would be great too. She was an Americaphile, I guess; always took *National Geographic* and *Time* magazine. The important people were always on the cover of *Time*. She was a school teacher and, thank God for it, because she saw to it, that in spite of myself, I got a good education.

The summer before I was to go to university I spent time with my uncle who was a doctor. Remarks like, "Doesn't being around sick people all day get to you after a while?" And, "It's not exactly riveting, this being a G.P., is it?" These remarks didn't sit well with the good doctor – betrayed a lack of passion for healing. In a nice way he suggested I might rethink my career plans.

At that late date, what was I to do? I called off pre med plans and took a hard look at my choices. My parents made it clear that staying home unemployed or working in the family business was not an option. So, after some hard thinking I got what I thought was a bright idea; a creative solution – at least in the near term. I decided to apply to a seminary – to train for the priesthood.

A lot of guys were going to seminary that year from my class —it was a '50's thing in Ireland. They pretty much took you in those days if you had a pulse. I would go with these religious guys, take an undergrad. degree and then think of something before getting too far into the theology part of the place. It would give me seven years to think of something before the drop-dead date of ordination, and God knows what might turn up in that length of time.

When you're 17, seven years seems a bloomin' eternity. Something was bound to turn up and save me from myself. Right?

Well, actually, nothing ever did turn up. And I just kept returning at the end of each summer for yet another year. I moved eventually from undergraduate philosophy into divinity school — getting pretty good grades, not getting in trouble. Living you might say, one day at a time. Didn't need to make any decision

on any given day. (Procrastinating one-day-at-a-time was a skill I didn't need to learn in the AA program.)

Then one sunny June day I found myself walking up the aisle of the chapel with my classmates and when we walked back down again I had been ordained a priest. That sounds so trite, right? To me today it seems so dumb as to approach insanity or at least dissociation. But I was that sort of person then. Someone who just went along, never making tough decisions – going with the flow, I called it. I took my exams, and showed up for chapel. How were the seminary authorities to know what was going on — or not— in my head?

Long before ordination—second year philosophy, I think — you had to commit to a diocese where you were going to serve as a priest. Since it was all so unreal to me anyway, that was an easy decision — something like making a wish or letter to Santa. I'd always wanted to live in California: warm beaches, oranges growing alongside the road. Any place sunny and warm would be nice. I tried for San Francisco first but they weren't looking for anybody like me — I can't imagine why. But then I got lucky, I was delighted to discover that Sacramento needed priests so badly they take just about anybody, and it was close enough to San Francisco – Sacramento would do.

So, I had signed up for Sacramento one night in Dublin years before and now, about six years later, I was an ordained priest and, guess what ... they were expecting me to arrive out there in California that August and begin to preach the gospel, convert California pagans to Christ. Wow! Reality had set in! No more summers hitch-hiking in Europe. With a shock I realized I was suppose to have grown up. People were expecting me to come and save them. I got on a ship and came to America. Mighty Mouse...

In September, 1960 I showed up in Sacramento prepared to preach and deliver salvation – or something - to the good people of that diocese. I think part of my problem with being a priest was, besides not having a vocation, I didn't believe a lot of what the Church taught. I tended, therefore, to preach the things I agreed with and pretty much ignored the other stuff — sort of cafeteria style Catholicism.

When I was about 6 months in Sacramento, I had a moment of clarity that should have changed my life. Something profound dawned on me and I know many in the program have reported similar moments in their lives. I remember this one woman who talked in a meeting in San Francisco about her awakening. She said, "I was shopping in the K-mart in Daly City and suddenly came awake. I saw that I had two kids." And she went on "The last time I'd made a conscious decision I was a sophomore in McClatchy High School."

Well, I had one of those sorts of experiences, as I said, a moment of near clarity. I'd been a priest for a while, in California for several months and all the novelty had worn off. The ceremonial was now routine, the priestly vestments were ho-

hum. I still enjoyed some parts of it like preaching and teaching, but I had begun to wonder whether this was what I was cut out for. Never had any ambition to be a holy man of any sort and there were old people of forty and fifty calling me “Father” and asking my advice about their relationship with God. I wasn’t that sure if such an entity existed let alone how to contact Him.

But, in spite of how I describe myself, I was a pretty conscientious kid in many ways and had a horror of being dishonest, so I decided to be the hardest working priest in Sacramento -- worked my butt off. Many years later my wife and I went back and visited the parish where I’d been stationed during those years. It was the Pastor’s Golden Jubilee and he’d been made a Monsignor. He seated Diane and me at the top table with the dignitaries, and when the time came for the speeches he introduced me as the hardest working assistant pastor that St. Robert’s Parish had ever had.

And it was the truth. I taught high school, raised more money than they’d ever seen before, had more converts— to what they were converted I don’t know— visited the sick, knocked on every door in the parish at least once: I did all the good things young priests are supposed to do. Except that along the way I discovered alcohol.

I had not drunk liquor up until this; maybe a beer on a hot summer day in Germany, at the very most; I had never even tasted whiskey. Well, my second year in Sacramento I discovered Old Grandad 100 proof: what the pastor drank. “If you ever feel like a nightcap,” he’d said, “Help yourself.”

I had never experienced anything that worked as well as about this much whiskey – a triple shot of 100 proof. It worked better than ordination, better than prayer, better than anything! I had never felt as whole or as holy as I did with this much 100 proof Grandad. It was just... it was magical. It was like I had been suddenly healed from whatever discomfort or numbness that had clouded my life until that moment. How could I not recognize something so magical? I did not forget that feeling. I realized also that night that I had it in my power to feel this way a great deal of the time.

At 7 o’clock every evening I would allow myself a bit of the magic and then, pretty soon, it got to be 5 o’clock and then it was 3 in the afternoon. I would start feeling good then right after lunch or when I came in from teaching and I soon was killing a bottle before bed time. I didn’t have hangovers and I couldn’t see any reason why not to do this.

The only disadvantage, really, was the cost and getting rid of the empty bottles. That latter was a terrible problem in a rectory. You must understand that almost every rectory is run by an old housekeeper, often an old Irish woman, of about 70 something. She does the laundry and she’s into everything – your underwear and socks – nothing is private. You can’t hide anything from her except that I still

had my locked steamer trunk I'd brought from Ireland. (I was a couple of years sober before I got rid of all the empties in that. It was like a body in the closet. This enormous guilt that I couldn't get rid of in a fifth step or even confession. After a couple of years sober this still haunted me. Oh, God, there's that dead body still.)

So when I was 5 years in Sacramento the bishop called me in. I was at this point drinking a fifth of Granddad a day – this, a mere three years after I started drinking! I was sure I was in trouble but instead he said they were thinking of sending someone on for a doctorate in canon law. "We're wondering," he said, "if you would agree to go." Well, it was five years out of Sacramento in Washington, D.C. in the late sixties. What do you think? And as a friend of mine said if it had been ballet I would have said yes. I hope I didn't say, "Thank God!" out loud. I was to go back to Washington, D.C. for five years, be in graduate school. I absolutely couldn't wait. Five years. You'd never know what might turn up in five years. Sound familiar?

When I was there my drinking continued and turned into binges where I would disappear for days at a time. I would sober up always for about a month before finals and get through with decent enough grades. But it was getting worse and worse emotionally. I'd begun to have great bouts of depression when drinking and when sober I grew so anxious and fearful I could hardly speak to people.

I managed to finish up school in May of 1968 and called up this priest in Sacramento. I told him about a friend of mine who had this drinking thing that I didn't understand. He started discussing it and pretty soon I noticed he was saying, "How does it feel when you drink like that?" and realized I had bought right into it. I never ever managed to fool Father Joe in the many years later on when he was my sponsor. We were discussing my drinking before I knew it and he suggested that when I came home I should check out an AA meeting.

We agreed to meet on a Tuesday night in Sacramento. I drove all across the country with that in mind. Some nights I'd drink in a motel somewhere and call him again. I called him one night from Aurora, Nebraska and told him the day I was due to arrive – my e.t.a. so to speak. "Great," he said, and then added, "Don't drink that day until after the meeting." Cool!! I could go and drink after I found out how these alcoholics managed to control their drinking.

I met him in the parking lot and told him I was ready – for whatever. I was really terrified that AA would turn out to be some Protestant cult and maybe Joe was really a renegade priest. God forbid they'd harm my faith! As we're about to go in the door of the classroom where the meeting was in progress, I caught him by the arm, and in my most assertive voice, I told him he had to get one thing absolutely straight: "I'm not joining this outfit tonight," I said – looking him in the eye. And he looked back at me and in a very reassuring voice said, "Good! Don't sign anything tonight. Just sit there and listen."

I went to two meetings the next week and they didn't work. I was still drinking just as much and that, "Don't drink, no matter what" and "It's the first drink" thing didn't really kick in with me. I called Joe and asked if he had any better ideas. He wasn't a bit offended and assured me that there were people who needed more than the ordinary alcoholic did.

That sounded more like me, so I let him take me to this place in Sonoma – what they called in those days, a "fidget farm" – a place where someone could dry out without being bothered by reality. I spent about a month there, drying out and getting some notion of what the A.A. thing was about. It was a perfect place for me and I learned a great deal (though I still had two or three relapses and attempts at suicide in me). I got a bit of a feel for the program, even understood something about it, but I didn't really get the spiritual program nor how desperately I needed it.

I went back to school, got busy, forgot meetings, and neglected the fellowship completely. The steps were only thoughts that I'd given mental assent to but had made no attempt to work with a sponsor — let alone make the basis for living. I had too many research projects and important stuff to give time to some optional stuff like AA meeting. It will surprise no one here to learn that I drank again and for the most trivial reasons. I'd never tasted Beck's beer, for example. When I got back to Sacramento with my doctorate degree in canon law, I was promoted to *Officials* or Judicial Vicar. I hadn't turned 34 and was now the third ranked canonical official in the diocese. I was hot stuff – if only I could refrain from suicide attempts.

And, of course, nothing drastic had happened in the five years I was in school – they hadn't changed the celibacy laws nor decided we could disobey the bishop nor make up our own list of things to believe in. I was now destined to be back in the Sacramento diocese forever as a priest – no relief in sight. I started drinking again out of desperation and guilt and I attempted suicide really, really seriously this time - just barely missed pulling it off too.

I'd put a tube in the back window of the car in the middle of the night in the rectory garage. I was drunk and drugged out of my mind. I passed out on the front seat with the engine running but woke up an hour later - the car had stalled. (Laughter). Yeah. It had stalled early enough that all I suffered from was like a really awful headache and so groggy and hung-over that death would have been a relief.

That was my last night of drinking. I sat shivering in south Sacramento in a playing field behind the school, the Catholic school, at 4 o'clock in the morning, listening to the frogs. It was Feb. 22, 1971.

I called a Sacramento recovery house at first light and asked to come in. It was the kind of a low bottom recovery house I wouldn't have been caught dead in a year or so before – me a high official of the diocese. Now I was ready. I was willing to do anything. The place was run in those days by a man who I'd found really scary. His professional name had been Walter from Philadelphia. He had done hard time in Quentin and Folsom for some of his professional accomplishments. A scary dude. Always wore a suit and a tie with a large stickpin – his professional persona.

So that was the beginning of my sobriety. After being sober for a while, somebody asked me to speak at an AA meeting. I asked my sponsor, this priest who'd taken me to the first meeting and to the drying out joint. "What do I talk about?" And he said...

(I'm going to try not to say the "f" word because this is on church property. Okay. So, I'm trying to think of a substitute. Shag. (Laughs)...If you grew up where I grew up in the British Isles anywhere you used "f" every syllable - every other syllable. You know. So it's sometimes a little constricting, right, Barry? You put it in everywhere, right?)

Anyway, my sponsor's advice was, "Why don't you talk about how you shagged up the program?" And he added, "That's what you've become a real expert on. Tell them all the ways you found to mess up the program before you finally got it."

And that's what I still talk about when asked to speak: the problems I had listening to the new ideas people in the program were trying to get into my skull - past the wall of my old ideas. (Or, if you like, how I shagged up the program!).

I used to say that I got the first step right away. I understood the craving thing. I even read about it in the beginning of the *Big Book* and there really was nothing there I didn't know already. You took a drink when you were in the wagon and you're gone. Every time I had done this I was off the wagon big time. "Might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb," old Irish proverb – or was it something Catholic maybe?

Well, I thought because I'd got "the craving thing" that I'd got Step One. And then at almost every meeting some old fart would be pontificating about, "It's the first drink that does it." And I would say to myself, "Yes!! I know that." I would be sober for six months, seven months, 15 months and then I would take one and (snaps fingers) I'd be off again, stopping only with disaster. All I heard was that thing about it was the first drink that does it. I got that it fired up the craving. And that's what I thought powerlessness was and I'd pontificate at meetings about it and sometimes people would come up to me and tell me I really had the first step and I believed them..

And I thought that until one night at a meeting in a Sacramento Recovery House. I'd go back every Monday night for the AA meeting. We're all talking that night about the "insanity of alcoholism" – one of the favorite topics for which we all had great stories. We're all having a great time talking about how insane we were and all the insane stuff we'd pulled when we were drunk and drinking. "Oh, I remember doing this and that... I drove over the Grapevine in the winter and I woke up in Bakersfield - don't remember anything about the drive. And man, if that isn't insane." We had these wild tales ...topping each other's stories.

And I had a great story of my own that always got "oh's" and "ah's." I couldn't wait to tell it about how insane I was. It was a stupid story about getting my car stuck on the railroad tracks after midnight and having to get towed off before the *California Zephyr* came roaring through in the morning. Very exciting stuff, right? I had just got through talking about how insane that was when the kitchen chair that Walter was sitting on flew back suddenly and hit the wall. Then, he grabbed it and slammed it on the floor. His face was flushed and angry looking. He looked around at each of us and then roared, "Will somebody talk about the insanity of alcoholism and shut the f... up about how goofy you were when you were drunk!" With that, he went into his office and shut the door emphatically behind him.

We were stunned. What is wrong with Walter? Walter was having a problem, we decided. And it had us worried. Here we were having a perfectly sensible discussion of the insanity of alcoholism and then this.

A few days later I went by the recovery house and, in my most solicitous priestly voice inquired as to his health. "How are you feeling today, Walter?" He looked up from his chair and said, "You still don't get it, do you?"

Seeing what I'm sure was my puzzled expression, he said, "You still haven't a clue what we mean by "the insanity of alcoholism". He went on then, "Yeah." He said, "For about three years now we have listened to you sounding off about the goofy things you did when you were drinking."

I was getting good and annoyed by this time and I retorted something like, "So? What's wrong with that?" "Do you have your Big Book in your car?" He asked. I told him I did – for I always had it with me since I'd been sober this time. "Bring it in," he said.

I had read quite a lot of the book and had marked the passages I felt were important. I had finally understood that the answers were in the book and in my own stubborn way I had become fairly willing.

"So what do you think," he began. "You keep saying it's the first drink that does it. Is that what AA says?" "Yeah that's what they hammer away at in the meetings," I said.

“Are you saying that’s not true?” I asked.

“Let me tell you something, Aristotle’s grandmother knew that. If her old man had been on the wagon and she saw him talking himself into one little glass of ouzo, she knew he was off again on another drunk.” He looked up at me from his chair, “You can’t possibly believe that this craving phenomenon was not discovered until 1935. - that the human race – despite having had alcoholism for thousands of years - had not discovered that thing until 1935?”

I’m staring at him. How could this man – one of the pillars of AA – be denying this fundamental part of the AA wisdom? And then, to make matters worse, he added, “If you believe that, you should find a chapter of Moron’s Anonymous.” (Laughter).

“Open the book at page 35,” he said.

(I’ll give these numbers out because as I always say, there’s Protestants here. (Laughter). The reason I say this is out of great respect. One of the things I love about Protestants is they bring their own book to church and the minister better not be pulling their leg and making stuff up to support his point of view. They want to know chapter and verse and even what version or translation he’s using - - none of these new fangled Revised this or that. Whereas, the Catholics go to church and they hear the priest say something from the bible and shrug: “That’s probably close enough,” they figure. Who’d bother making shit like that up?” Episcopalians – God love’em - they’re almost as bad, not quite, but almost as bad as Catholics.)

For the Protestants, page 35, at the top of the page, they’re talking about why they wrote the book. Walter pointed this out to me. It says, “*So we shall describe some of the mental states that precede a relapse in drinking because this is the crux or the problem.*”

“Did you not think the crux of the problem was worth underlining?” he asked.

“And then you have something underlined farther down the page and again over here on page 34, but you haven’t underlined what the *AA Big Book* tells us is the very crux – the heart – of the problem. So, it is the mental state that precedes the first drink and not the first drink.”

And I said, “Well, I don’t get that. How can so many of these people at the meeting be repeating this about it’s the first drink?” And he says, “Maybe it’s because the rooms are full of very sick alcoholics who haven’t read the book. And this one here has heard this from that one there, who hasn’t read the book and he, in turn, has heard it from old Tom over there who never stopped to read the book before he started shooting off his mouth and becoming an authority.”

“Wow!”

“Turn to page, 24,” he said when he got his breath back. So I turned to page 24. And he says, “Do you notice anything strange on page 24?” And I say, “You mean the italics?” He says, “Why do you think they put in italics?” “Because it’s important?” I figured I’d get one right. “No,” he said. “It’s because they couldn’t afford to put it in neon.” (Laughter).

And page 24 talks about this mental lapse that we have when sober. It says,

“The fact is that most alcoholics for reasons yet obscure have lost the power of choice in drink. Our so called will power becomes practically nonexistent. We are unable, at certain times, to bring into our consciousness with sufficient force the memory of the suffering and humiliation of even a week or a month ago. We are without defense against the first drink.”

(Pause)

“Well, why do they say at the meeting, just put the plug in the jug?” I insisted. And he said, “That’s like telling an overweight person to just not eat so much. If we could arrange that we wouldn’t need the program. That’s not proposing the solution – that’s just stating the problem that has us licked.”

So the problem, I discovered, was more complicated than I thought it was. Up until that day – and for almost 3 years around the program - I thought I was fine until I took the first drink and that it was the chemical in the alcohol that caused the problem.

And then Walter goes on to point out the other examples. You are all familiar with story of the guy who has lost his business, been in asylums and all this sort of stuff. He’s been sober, they tell us, for a while and he’s had a sandwich and a glass of milk for lunch, then decides to get another sandwich and another glass of milk. (It’s page 36. Yeah, the Protestants!).

And you notice there are those darned italics. *“Suddenly, the thought crossed my mind that if I were to put an ounce of whiskey in my milk it wouldn’t hurt me on a full stomach.”*

Well, now there’s a pop psychology explanation for this behavior. Pop psychology is one of my favorite things to hate because pop psychology gives you the idea that if you are just savvy enough and vigilant enough you could forestall relapse. You know that if you can see the reason for relapse you’re not really doing something insane. Right! But, if you find someone trying to find cause and effect behind an insane act – just think about it. You’re trying to find a reason for an act of insanity – I mean that is really, really insane. So people say,

“Oh, well. He was resentful” - because it happens to mention he had had words with a guy that morning so he had a resentment. Well, that doesn't explain how he'd been locked up in the asylum all those other times or how he'd drunk himself out of the business. Okay, maybe on that last one he had a little resentment too but can you imagine the insanity of trying to discover excuses for all his previous relapses. But trying to explain alcoholic relapses by some facile little pop psychology explanation like that is about as lame as you can get.

And then the people who wrote the book do a real job on this sort of pop psych on page 41. As a psychotherapist I read this almost as a transcript of an interview with a man who's just relapsed after 11 months of sobriety (sober 11 months and he failed to enlarge his spiritual condition). He thought it wasn't a big deal any more, staying sober, that is.

If you just look at the top of page 41, for those of you who've got a book, you can almost hear the psychotherapist:

“Well, maybe you hadn't been out of town since you'd been sober.”

“I had been out of town before during this particular dry spell. There was nothing new about that, (Doctor).”

“Maybe you weren't feeling well physically?”

“Physically, I felt fine.” He's knocking down all these pop psychology explanations, right?

“Neither did I have any pressing problems or worries. My business came off well. I was pleased and I knew my partners would be pleased.”

The shrink has presented all the “excuses” available to pop-psychology and the guy batted them down one by one. Then he knocked one out of the ball park. Check out how that paragraph ends:

“It was the end of a perfect day, (Doctor) not a cloud on the horizon.” Except that there's italics on the horizon. (Laughter).

“I went to my hotel and leisurely dressed for dinner. As I crossed the threshold of the dining room, the thought came to mind that it would be nice to have a couple of cocktails with dinner. Nothing more.”

No agonizing Movie-of-the-Week tragedy or trauma, no struggle against the drink, no resentment, neither hurt nor betrayal nor disappointment— no back story whatsoever to “explain” the insanity. Hollywood always explains insanity. Go figure.

Relapse is just an insane act that caught this and other alcoholics unawares – and very often on a really good day. Often for the most trivial of reasons. One of my relapses was because I had never tasted bock beer. (Laughter). Can you imagine the trauma? See the headline: *Priest Never Had Bock Beer?*

I was thinking about this recently — I was out the other night and people were having green martinis and blue martinis in these elegant little glasses. I've never had a blue martini. Curiosity killed the cat, my mother used to always say. Maybe that's as good an explanation as any.

This is the sort of thinking that often leads to the first drink of a relapse — we “forget” or don't really think about the consequences. And our friends look at us in bewilderment, “How could you have forgotten?” (as on page 35). In fact, there is another important point I feel should be made here: where it says, *“The mental state that precedes the first drink is obviously the crux of the problem.”* A lot of pop psychology today makes that sound like it was the “emotional state” that precedes the first drink, but, you see, when this book was written, “mental” meant “thinking”. “Emotional” meant “emotional”. For example, in the fifth chapter passage read at many meetings: *“There are those too who suffer from grave emotional and mental disorders”* — those were the categories.

So, history tells us that Freud and Jung and Adler and all of these very smart people had tried their best to manage their patient's drinking by managing the his or her emotions — resolving the conflicts, and all that good stuff that worked for other people. They believed it was our emotional conflicts and pain that drove us to drink. They viewed us as emotional cowards, essentially, who fled into the bottle.

But these alcoholics, who wrote the book, knew something the doctors did not know and that was that they were just as likely to drink when things were going well, when they were comfortable emotionally. So they make it clear in the next paragraph on page 35, that they are talking about thinking and not about feelings. Right after the bit where it tells us about the crux of the problem, it goes on to say: *“What sort of thinking dominates the alcoholic who repeats time after time the desperate experiment of the first drink? Friends who have reasoned with him after a spree... etc., etc. Why does he...of what is he thinking?”*

It's our thinking that goes off. As any psychotherapist can tell you, when someone comes in and they have a thought disorder, they're in a lot more trouble usually than somebody that's got an emotional disorder. If you stop and think about it — pardon the expression.

When the illness is centered in the thinking and the thinking goes off, everything I was counting to defend me has gone over to the other side. This is why, I believe, alcoholism it is such a baffling condition: we *think* we're fine. You hear new people saying after a relapse caught them unawares, “I hadn't even wanted a drink” and you go, “Oh, God” and you think but don't say: “You'd be better off, maybe, if you had been wanting one maybe — at least you'd be in on it.” You see this lovely green martini or something, and... (laughs) and it will seem like a really great idea — but at least I was in on the scam the other day. Sanity had not left.

Walter told me something, much later. He said, after he got through pointing out all of the passages from the *Big Book*, and, of course, after pointing out the last paragraph on page 43, which most of us probably know by heart:

“Once more the alcoholic at certain times has no effective mental defense against the first drink.” (I thought it was against the second drink, you see.) (Laughter). And he *“...has no mental defense against the first drink. Except in a few rare cases, neither he nor any other human being can provide such a defense. The defense must come from a Higher Power.”*

Walter told me, “When I got through with all that,” he said, “I looked at you and all I could think was, you reminded me of one of those old soft drink machines where you put the money in and nothing happens. You feed the quarters into it and you’re waiting for the can to roll out and nothing happens.” He said, “That’s exactly the reaction I was getting from you... nothing.” And he went on, “You said something like...‘Yeah?’ or, ‘And your point is...?’”

He realized that my denial was so strong I could not let a new idea in that might challenge my old understanding. I was trapped in what they call, invincible ignorance. I just couldn’t let a new idea into my mind. For all the readings from the *Big Book*... nothing, zilch, zero. No coke can. I was a dead man.

And he decided to take one more shot at me, and he said,
“It was sort of like thumping the machine with your fist.”

He took me through my last relapse that had me land on the doorstep of his recovery house.

“You have not drunk or used anything for seven months, right?”

“Right!” I said.

“You got in your car and you drove up Freeport Blvd.” (in Sacramento).

And he said, “You went into Hollywood Bottle Shop. Was there any alcohol or drugs in you when you were driving up Freeport?” “No.” “Not for seven months...”

“You bought a bottle? You paid him? And you drove back down to the rectory?”

“Right.”

“Were there any drugs and alcohol in you when you were driving back?”

“No.”

“And then you went into your room and you poured some of the whiskey into a glass...” And he did this with his coffee cup —raised it to his lips.

“Even when it’s up here,” he said, “was there any alcohol or drugs in you?”

“No.”

And then he did this - swallowed some of his coffee —and he said, “Then you come in and you tell us at the meetings — for three goddamned years—that you were fine and sane until that drug entered your body.” (Laughter).

“It was the alcohol that brought on the insanity? You were perfectly sane until that stuff went down your throat?”

He said, "If you don't know that you were absolutely loony on your way up Freeport Blvd. and in the Bottle Shop and back down again, you are in more denial than you know and more than I can help you with."

And he took me back again to page 35: "*So we shall describe some of the mental states that precede the relapse into drinking because obviously...obviously, this is the crux of the problem.*"

It finally got into my mind, what he was saying, and it scared the hell out of me. I realized later that what Walter had done is what they suggested in pg. 92 – WORKING WITH OTHERS. It says, "*If you are satisfied that he is a real alcoholic, begin to dwell on the hopeless feature of the malady. Show him from your own experience how the queer mental condition surrounding that first drink prevents the normal functioning of the willpower.*" The mental state before.

It hit me like a two by four, in a stunned voice I asked, "Do you mean to say, Walter, that walking out of here I just might...get the thought and have no power to resist?"

And he showed me another passage,

"*Everything we knew about alcohol would be no avail in those strange mental blank spots.*" (Page 42). Strange mental blank spots. I did not want to believe that I would have "strange mental blank spots" when I was sober. Even after all the relapses I did not want to believe there was something wrong with my sober mind.

And I will end with this. Some of you probably know who Craig Ferguson is. He has the "Late Night with Craig Ferguson" show on TV. He's one of us. I heard him interviewed in San Francisco on the radio. The host asked him, "You had a problem with alcohol." And he said, "Oh, I did surely." And he went on, "I found out I was mentally ill. Alcoholics are mentally ill."

He paused a moment, then added, "Of course we're the aristocracy of the mentally ill, (laughter) but we better remember that we're truly mentally ill." And so the interviewer, who was Linda Hunt, you know the little woman who was in "The Year of Living Dangerously", (she's the host of the show, *City Arts and Lectures*, in San Francisco) asks, "Something worked for you, didn't it?"

"Och, aye, it did." .And he added sort of reluctantly, "Och, but ye see, by the nature of the thing I found, I canna tell you what it is. But I can tell you this: it's very close to the beginning of the phone book." (Laughs. Audience laughter.)

So, anyway, that's the sort of people we are ...we've been...the aristocracy of the mentally ill.

I'm probably not going to start anything else right now. Does anyone have any questions or comments that they'd like to throw at me —or whatever? Anything but rotten tomatoes.

Okay. Maybe questions will develop later.

One of the things I would like to touch on is this: I think it is easy to lose sight of the program for looking at the steps. We don't see the spiritual path for the concentrating on the steps, just as it's possible to not see the forest for the trees. We can become so focused on, "I'm doing step this, I'm doing step that. I'm doing step whatever." We're checking off the boxes and losing sight of where the path is leading. It's a spiritual path —a wonderfully effective spiritual path. And it is leading to a spiritual awakening. As have all spiritual paths from the beginning of time led our ancestors to spiritual awakenings. It would be quite arrogant of us as members of a 12-step program to think that somehow we had invented spiritual paths in 1935. Sometimes you might get the impression we had, when you listen to us talk.

For one example: There was this man born about 560 years B.C. E. and he came up with the conclusion that life's unhappiness is caused by craving, and clinging and clutching things and values of this world. And his answer to clinging, craving and clutching was that we needed to be rid of the "self". Yeah, the very same self we talk about in "relieve me of the bondage of self."

And, after the first few Noble Truths about the damage of Self, he laid out an eight-fold program of steps for relief from the bondage of self — so as to achieve a spiritual awakening. And the name for such an awakened person?

(Audience member answers.) "Buddha."

Buddha - that's exactly what the word means. So having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we are following in a great tradition of spiritual paths.

The spiritual path is one where we set out on a journey that will take some time and effort. That's hard for us because we're impatient people but it's going to take a certain time no matter how hard we push. I remember when I was first sober about three months, I was at a meeting and somebody was getting a five year chip. I don't know if any of you have ever experienced this. I suddenly became very depressed because I realized something awful: that I would have to wait five years to get a five year chip. There was no accelerated course. There were no double points you could get, like at Ralphs. You had to wait five whole years.

This is part of our immaturity as alcoholics. You find newcomers sometimes wanting to have the results of the path in Steps 2 and 3. And in Steps 2 and 3 and we haven't done shit yet, right? (Laughter).

We've just learned some Noble Truths: that we're powerless and that our life is all...shagged up. (Laughter). We've heard that other people have found a solution and we've decided we're going to take their solution. What have we done?

(Audience) "Nothing."

Nothing! But... we would love to have the effects of the path before we actually set out on it. This was one of my big problems in recovery, I wanted everything without doing the work for it. One of the things I would like us to do in the weeks coming up is to walk this as a path that starts with a desperate need for something — *"a lack of power, that is my dilemma."* I am power-less. How do I connect with the power? That's really what we're talking about and this is the spiritual path along which I meet and get caught up by the power and come to live in the power.

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