

## GROWING PAINS

*“Do you have a problem with drugs or don’t you?”*

I sat in the personnel director’s office thinking about what to say. Images from my years of drug using flashed through my mind. How funny everything seemed the first time I got stoned and how I loved that feeling. I had flashes of getting loaded with my buddies in the fog on the football field before swim practice, at parties, and lying in the college dorm room watching TV and sharing a joint before going to bed. How much fun we had and how quickly it turned sour.

My pot smoking in just over two years went from an occasional “Let’s have some fun and get loaded” thing to a daily need. It went from getting loaded once in a while when it was available, to splitting a joint nightly, to smoking out before meals and before classes, to skipping classes in order to get loaded morning, noon and night.

I spent all my money and all the money my parents gave to me voluntarily (or that I stole from them) on buying drugs. I pinched buds from my using buddies, then begged them to share theirs after my money had run out. I recalled an especially demoralizing image of standing outside their dorm room screaming at them to let me in and threatening to throw all of them over the second story balcony when they wouldn’t.

I had the memory of throwing away a free ride at college because I decided it was more important to work and have money to buy drugs than to get an education. I remembered how scared I was when I found out that I had

gotten my on-again, off-again girlfriend pregnant when I showed up at her apartment blitzed. I felt resentful when I was “forced” into being a father and husband at the age of twenty-two and how I expressed this anger by staying loaded all the time.

I remembered a flash of intense pain causing me to come to in the E.R. where an orderly was scrubbing the asphalt out of my knees after I’d had a drug and alcohol induced blackout going 90 mph on the freeway on my motorcycle. I recalled the embarrassment mixed with anger when two months later I returned home to find my belongings on the porch, the locks changed, and a note from my soon to be ex-wife that said: “Go home to your Mommy. She’ll take care of you.”

The next few years were a smoke and alcohol induced haze. I was existing — -not living—from day to day in depression, not going anywhere or accomplishing anything. I was doing nothing except sitting in my room getting high and feeling sorry for myself. I felt that life had screwed me. I felt that no one loved me or understood me. I was isolated and felt different from everyone else in the world, even my second wife. I didn’t care about anything or anyone, including myself. I didn’t care when my second wife left me after she found out I had started doing cocaine, or that I was about to lose my job. I hated my life, and myself, but was too scared to commit suicide because I knew I would screw it up just like everything else I did.

The final flash I had was of what was soon to become of my life. I had an image of myself filthy dirty, unshaven, wild hair, wearing rags and sitting on a street corner, mumbling to myself and begging for spare change to buy cheap wine. A strong yet gentle voice spoke to me in

my head: "This is your last chance," it said. "Take it now or this is how you're going to spend the rest of your life."

I broke down crying, and admitted in my heart what I had known in my head for a decade — that I am a drug addict.

For the first time ever I was honest about my drug usage when I told the personnel director, "Yes, I do have a problem with drugs." He smiled at me and said, "Good, let's get you admitted to the treatment center." I was fortunate that the hospital I worked for had its own chemical dependency treatment center. I was admitted that afternoon, but not before I went out to my car and snorted my last two lines of coke and smoked the last few hits of pot off my pipe.

While in treatment, I was introduced to twelve-step recovery meetings. We were required to attend a meeting every evening. I went to several types of meetings. I knew it was important for my recovery to abstain from all mind-altering chemicals including alcohol, and to go to these meetings, but I just didn't feel like I fit in. It had been years since I drank like the alcoholics did. I hadn't experimented with pills or harder drugs since college, and had never shot up. I had only used cocaine for the last nine months and I didn't love it. I hated how it affected and controlled me.

After 10 days of treatment my counselor came to me with a flyer. He said, "I think this meeting just might be for you." It was a flyer — for MSA, Marijuana Smokers Anonymous. Two nights later I attended my first MSA meeting.

As soon as the first person began to share, I could relate. I felt more comfortable than I had in any other twelve-step meeting. These people loved pot like I did! They smoked

it all day and night like I did! Their lives revolved around scoring and using pot like mine did! By the end of the meeting I knew I had found a home, a place where I fit in and belonged. It wasn't long before MSA became the prime focus of my recovery.

I also found my sponsor at that first meeting. When he shared his life story it was almost eerie. I felt that we could have been twins separated at birth. What had happened to him was almost identical to my life experiences. At the end of the meeting I asked him to be my sponsor. I found out later that it was he, with the help of a counselor at this treatment center, who had started this MSA meeting in April of 1986.

When I got out of treatment after three weeks, I soon discovered a couple of things. First, that just because I had gotten clean and sober did not mean that everything was going to happen the way I wanted it to. And second, that there were a whole lot of bottled-up emotions that I was going to have to start dealing with for the first time in my life.

One of the primary reasons I got sober was to get my wife back. Surely she could see that I'd changed and was now the husband and father she had always wanted me to be. It was a very painful shock when she told me that she was not going to give me another chance, that I had caused her too much pain over the years we had been together for her to risk being hurt again. My sponsor kept telling me that I had to do the First Step on her also. Not only was I powerless over drugs and alcohol, I had to admit I was powerless over her.

My wife's refusal to try again brought up strong feelings of hurt, guilt, anger, sadness, fear and resentment,

feelings and emotions I had never before had to deal with without anesthetizing myself with chemicals. But I had no choice. It was either learn to integrate my emotions in a healthy way or use again. My sponsor and the people in the MSA meetings taught me many tools to cope with the emotional roller coaster I was on. They told me to call them any time of the day or night so I could talk it out. They told me to go to meetings every day and share whatever I was feeling. They told me to come have coffee with them after the meetings so we could talk in depth and really get to know one another. They told me to work the Twelve Steps by writing how they related to my life. They told me to do the first three Steps and the Eleventh Step daily. They told me to write about my feelings in a journal. They told me to get into service and help someone else. I did everything they told me and while all of this helped immensely, the thing they told me to do that helped above all else was to pray.

At first I thought they were joking. Pray? No way. You've got to be putting me on! Praying had never done me any good before. I never got what I prayed for. My sponsor asked me what it was I had prayed for. Trying to be rigorously honest (which was another thing they taught me), I admitted that the things I usually prayed for were to get laid, to score some great dope for free or really cheap, or to be rich so I could buy all the pot I ever wanted. When I was angry, I prayed for some horrible cataclysm to befall all those persons who wronged me. My sponsor replied, "Maybe you're praying for the wrong things." What else was there to pray for?

The Second Step gave me the answer to that question. I learned to pray to be restored to sanity. I knew

that if I got too crazy I would use again. But by myself I couldn't control the thoughts and feelings that were pushing me over the edge. To this day my most powerful prayer is: "Help me God, I'm going crazy." Every time I sincerely say these words something happens to distract me, to get me out of myself long enough for the insanity to pass.

I believe that there are three things unique to the twelve-step programs that make it possible for chemically dependent people to live drug and alcohol free. First is the notion of one addict helping another through sponsorship, meetings, and service work. Second is the idea of having to stay sober only for today, one day at a time. Third is the most important concept, that of an individualized Higher Power as stated in the Third Step: "God as we understood God."

People say, "How can you believe that God still exists when you look at today's world full of war, brutality, poverty, and disease?" To which I reply: "I don't see God having much to do with any of those things." It is people, not God, who have caused the horrors of this world. God has given us humans the greatest gift of all — that of free choice. God will not make us do anything we don't want to do. It is up to us to choose good over evil, right over wrong. Unfortunately, too many people choose selfishness over love, and many more choose apathy over helping. I know I did for all my using years.

The God I believe in today is definitely not the same vengeful God I was taught about in my youth. In fact, it isn't even the same God I understood when I first got sober. As my understanding of myself and life has grown, so has my concept of my Higher Power. Today I believe in

a God who cares about me as an individual person, who will do anything to help me become the best person I can be, which has nothing to do with sex, drugs, or money. It does have to do with choosing to do God's will instead of my own selfish, self-destructive will.

It has only been the direct intervention of God working through the MA program, my family, and my sober friends in MA, that has allowed me to remain clean and sober through all that has happened to me in recovery. Life in recovery has not been easy. I've had to deal with divorce, separation, death, financial difficulties, low self-esteem, depression, loneliness, and helplessness. I've also had to deal with actual physical as well as emotional pain.

At the same time, God has given me many gifts in sobriety. I have an excellent relationship with my parents. My son chose to live with me six years ago. We're pretty close — as close as any "old man" can be to a teenager. I'm highly respected at work. After eight years of struggle I completed that Bachelor's degree I started a lifetime ago. I have a caring sponsor. I sponsor others. I have a lot of great friends in MA. I am proud to have seen MA grow from that one MSA meeting into the worldwide organization it is today. I was honored in being able to start two meetings that are still thriving today. I have grown right along with MA.

Best of all, I like and love myself, you, and life. Life in sobriety may not be easy, but it has certainly been well worth the struggle. Today I don't have to go through life alone. I have the support of God, my family, my sponsor, and everyone in MA. Together we can accomplish anything.