

Darkest Before the Dawn

by Kent S.¹

Introduction

My name is Kent S. and I am a recovering alcoholic and drug addict. I am sober today through the grace of God and the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous. I am also a husband (married thirty-four years), father of five children, and an active member of the LDS faith. I have been a member of the Utah State Bar for thirty years, which involved one year of suspension. I have been a member of Alcoholics Anonymous – one day at a time – for seventeen years.

Alcohol, cocaine and heroin were my drugs of choice. Today at twelve noon I will have been sober for twelve hours. Tonight, when the clock strikes twelve midnight, I will have been given another day of sobriety and my sobriety date will start over. One day at a time, that's how it works for me.

I am not an expert on sobriety. This is only one alcoholic/addict's story of experience, hope and strength. It is my story about what it (addiction) was like, how I got sober and what it is like today.

Alcoholic/Addict: Who, Me?

On February 12, 1986, my wife and nine-year-old son were waiting for me to arrive at a local Boys and Girls Club to watch my son play in a Junior Jazz League basketball game. Basketball defined much of who we were as a family. It was what we did together. I never made it to the game. While my son was playing basketball, I was down on my hands and knees in a rundown local motel room struggling through another drug binge. The sweat ran off my forehead onto the cigarette scarred carpet as my heart raced on at an alarming rate. My lungs struggled for air. I had a premonition that the next "hit" would be my last. I never did take that next hit.

How did I come to the point where my power of choice over alcohol and drugs had been taken away? When I graduated from high school I did not put down "alcoholic/addict" on my list of things that I most wanted to be. Not me. I was active LDS and even went to seminary. Not me. I loved my wife (and still do – very much) and I loved my kids. Not me. I coached little league sports and served as president of a local little league baseball program. Not me. I loved my job, loved being a lawyer and, for the most part, enjoyed the people at work and in the profession. I was just a regular guy experiencing the American dream. The dream turned into a nightmare.

But the alcoholic/addict was me. I was the one who lifted the drink to my mouth or took all the "hits" of cocaine and heroin. And for that I am responsible.

I am Responsible

I used to think that all the pressures of being a family man, lawyer and servant to the community and church gave me the excuse to go for "Miller Time." What was that opening line in the best selling book *The Road Less Traveled*? "Life is tough." And so it is. Here is my checklist of excuses. Everyone has their own.

- My family life growing up wasn't so hot.
- I got cut from the football team in high school.
- Law school was harder than I expected.
- I felt inadequate as a law student and as a lawyer – I could never "measure up."
- I spent too much money trying to impress family and friends and became saddled with debt.
- My law firm broke up over a campaign contribution scheme and one of my partners was disciplined and jailed.
- I felt guilty for the secret life I was living and needed to "relieve the pain."
- If you really knew how bad I was you would not have a thing to do with me.

I drank and drugged to avoid emotional pain; to feel like a big shot; to reward myself for doing all those service projects; to fill the empty hole inside that could never be filled; and just to run away and feel good. I drank and drugged because I didn't get the attention I demanded from others; because the client didn't express enough appreciation; because the judge did not sing my praises or because things didn't go the way I wanted them to go. In the end, I drank and drugged because I had no other choice. I was an alcoholic/addict who, somewhere along the way, had lost the power to avoid the self-destructive craving to drink and use drugs.²

Alcohol and drugs are equal opportunity employers. They are ready and willing to accept applications from men and women no matter what their social stature, education, balance sheet, race, nationality or religious affiliation. Lawyers are welcome to apply as well and it doesn't matter if you are a solo practitioner, or a lawyer in a medium or large firm. You can even be a professor of law or a judge. But here is the good news. Recovery from alcohol and drugs abuse is available to all who have a desire to apply for the job.³

The Jumping Off Point

Back to that motel floor. I was now at the point we alcoholics and addicts call the "jumping off point." I knew that I could not go

on living by doing what I was doing. At the same time I wrestled with the fear of not being able to cope with life without what I had come to think of as my two best friends – but which were actually my jailers – alcohol and drugs. All recovering alcoholics and addicts know the feeling. We call it “pitiful and incomprehensible demoralization.”

It was at this jumping off place that the vision of my family came clearly to mind. It was as clear as it would have been in my most sober of moments. It was at this place and time that I experienced a powerful and profound desire to live, a desire to stop drinking and using.

I rose to my feet, walked out of the room without saying a word and drove myself to a near-by hospital, parking my car on the lawn outside the front entrance (so I was later told). It was then and there that I surrendered and came to the realization that “I was powerless over alcohol and drugs and my life was unmanageable.”

I admitted myself to a treatment center on the spot. I could not trust myself any longer. Although responsible and accountable for my conduct, I had lost the power of choice when it came to alcohol and drugs. While in treatment I was told that I had a two percent chance of “making it.” Well, someone had to be in the two percent column, so why not me?

After “graduation” from treatment, my firm took me back into full

fellowship. My family, bishop and partners worked with my after-care counselors and me to construct a sobriety plan. Everything was set in place for an onward and upward journey into sobriety. I relapsed sixty days later and found myself back in the treatment center. I immediately started up just where I had ended in that run down motel with the same people doing the same thing. I was powerless and my life was unmanageable. I was scared for both me and my family. This was not the legacy I wanted to leave my five children, and I did not want to hurt my wife any more. More importantly, I was “sick and tired of being sick and tired.”

What Happened?

There were many people who supported my recovery. Prior to my relapse, everyone and everything worked just right except for one person. Me. After a second term in the treatment center, another aftercare plan was constructed. This one worked because, along with everyone and everything else, I “worked it.” I learned that if I wanted to keep on getting what I was getting, I could keep on doing what I was doing. How many times does one have to put his or her hand on a hot stove with the expectation of different results? That would be called “insanity.” That would describe an alcoholic and drug addict’s thinking in matters involving alcohol and drugs: We have lost our power of choice.

It was time for a change. I was caught up in the bondage of self-

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self-justifying, self-centered, self-pity, and self-delusion, all of which led to self-destruction. So I fired my ego. I resigned from being Master of the Universe and decided to listen to others. I took the plug out of my ears, put it in my mouth, turned my life and will over to the care of a loving God of my own understanding ("higher power") and became an active member of Alcoholics Anonymous. Early on in Alcoholics Anonymous, I learned two very important principles: (1) There is a God who has our best interests in mind and (2) He is not me.

In 1987, I was suspended for one year from the practice of law and spent a second year under probation for taking money from a client and my law firm. Gratefully, I was and remained clean and sober and I was able to make restitution to those whom I had harmed.

What had alcohol and drugs done for me? At this point I did not have a job, license, home or savings account, having lost them all. My family was scared, baffled and confused. I shamed the profession I had come to love. But I did have God, my family, friends, a burning desire to remain sober, and, according to the medical profession, a two percent chance of living.

Recovery Works if You Work it

How did I get and stay sober? I didn't. I got drunk. Together with the help and prayers of many, many others, I stayed sober. I am grateful for the attorney, a good friend and law school classmate, and his firm, who helped me work out a Consent Agreement with

the Bar. I am grateful to the attorney in charge of what we now call the Office of Professional Conduct for helping me through my period of suspension and probation. She was most instrumental in my rehabilitation.

Thanks also go to the then Bar President and the Bar Commission for taking a chance on a "recovering drunk." The Bar Commissioners and the Office of Professional Responsibility were committed to the protection of the public and the legal profession. They and many others were also committed to being a part of my recovery process. I am a living example of their care and concern.

During the term of my suspension, I remained clean and sober, much to the credit of a couple of attorneys who daily supervised and scrutinized my professional and personal actions. I was also provided research projects from a number of local attorneys. Under the care and supervision of these attorneys, I was able to make a living for my family and hold on to the hope that I could once again be a lawyer.

For several months and even years, I was pulled out of bed by friends in the morning to go run around Sugarhouse Park. I was driven to and from work by others. I took to work my brief case, a sack lunch and two dollars – never more. Some days I lived a minute at a time. I still look down at my desk and think back about the times I used to grab on to its edge and recite the Serenity Prayer⁴ in order to avoid calling a drug dealer and walking out the door and ending it all with one final binge.

What I did, instead, was pick up the "five hundred pound phone" to talk honestly and openly with my wife, sponsor and many of you, the lawyers and judges of the Utah Bar. The burning craves would then leave – for a time. They would return, but not as intense. Days turned into months and months turned into years – one day at a time – and the compulsion to drink and use dissipated. The power of choice was restored through the grace of God and fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous. This power of choice became the fuel that fed my burning desire to stay sober. I lived each day, one day at a time, and still do. I am like a man who has lost his legs and learned to walk again with a better pair. I no longer had to use alcohol and drugs as a means for coping with people, places and things.

Some of My Best Friends Are Attorneys

My debts were many. It was an attorney (and good friend) and my bishop, who worked out a payment plan through a local debt counseling service. That attorney is now a U.S. Bankruptcy Court Judge. What service! Many, many people were patient, kind and forgiving. They gave me the opportunity to make amends. Thanks to everyone for allowing me to develop the opportunity to be responsible and accountable. And thanks for giving me your



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love rather than your money. It took nine years to pay everything off. But I avoided bankruptcy and discovered a lot of good that existed in this world.

Another attorney and life-long friend pulled me out of my office once a week to play squash or just run up City Creek Canyon. Lunch, March Madness and walks up and down Main Street with so many fellow members of the Utah Bar — these small and welcome parcels of good will turned out to be one of the main ingredients in my recovery recipe.

We all have our favorite Christmas stories. Here is one of mine. During the year of my suspension, I had no money for gifts and no credit with which to get gifts. But I was sober and my family and I were happy. About two weeks prior to Christmas, I got a call from an attorney who was counsel for a local non-profit construction trade association. Some years prior I loaned money to that association so they could keep operating. I had forgotten all about it. That attorney did not forget and went to work to have the money paid back, just in time for Christmas. We are now partners.

What it is Like Today

Today, the compulsion to use alcohol and drugs is gone. My power of choice has been restored. I do not wrestle with the craves. I cannot identify the day or any event when this phenomenon occurred. It was more like a spiritual evolution. This evolution progressed over a period of many years. I just kept showing up at the places I was supposed to be, with the people I was supposed to be with, to do the things I was supposed to be doing. I now follow and play by the rules. That's how it works for me — one day at a time. Moreover, honesty is easier because the truth is easier to remember.

I remained clean and sober and fulfilled the conditions of my suspension. If there was ever a time that I could have left the law to pursue another profession, it was at that point. I did have opportunities to earn some serious money. But I never considered ever being anything other than an attorney, so an attorney I remained.

One of the small local firms specializing in construction law invited me to associate with them on an "of counsel" basis. I remained financially independent, but they provided me with a place to office and good people to be with. They also provided me with work. These people are now my partners of thirteen years.

An attorney, who is now a member of the state judiciary, asked me to get involved in the Utah State Bar's Litigation Section. That was just the medicine I needed. Another attorney, who is a former District Court judge, Bar President and member of the State Legislature, showed me through the strength of his example the benefits of Bar related service. And still another attorney, who is now a city mayor, along with the other members of the Litigation Section's Executive Committee, made me feel like I had something



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of importance to contribute and a place to belong.

One more example: An attorney, now a very active and senior member of our Bar, provided me with the opportunity to serve with the Alternative Dispute Resolution Committee of the Utah Bar, which he had chaired for many years. Much to his credit, ADR became my new found love. I am now an active member of the recently created ADR Section.

The Promise for Today and Tomorrow

I have lived to experience Paris and the French countryside with my wife. I have lived to watch my kids play in many basketball and baseball games. I have lived to go running with my daughter. I have lived to coach my grandson's baseball team and laugh with and hang out with a second grandson. And I have lived to see my only daughter, her husband and my oldest son take the Attorney's Oath upon becoming members of the Utah Bar. They work with and are supervised by the best of the best that we have in our Bar. What a gift to a father.

For those of you who may have lost the power of choice over alcohol and drugs, there is hope for you. There is a way up and out from your "pitiful, incomprehensible demoralization." You do not have to sacrifice yourself, your friends and your loved ones to the ravages of alcoholism and drug addiction. Release yourself from the bondage of self. Get help. Surrender your

alcoholic self and discover the self you really are. Risk it! All you have to lose is your misery, and that misery can be refunded at no charge upon the resumption of your old habits.

For those who have an alcoholic or addict in your life or firm, there is hope and there is peace in store for you. Get rid of any thought or feeling that you caused, can control or are responsible to cure his or her alcoholism or addiction. For that, they are responsible and should be held accountable for the damage they have inflicted on you and others. Let him or her know of your care and concern. But don't enable them to continue their self-destructive way of thinking and doing. This will take the best of who you are and will cause you to exercise a high level of moral strength and courage. It's worth the risk. He or she is worth the effort.

Conclusion

This is my story of experience, hope and gratitude as it pertains to alcohol and drug addiction as well as the recovery from its destruction. I can't wait for tomorrow because life gets better every day. I would like to conclude this story with the last words of Winston Churchill in his farewell address to Parliament:

That in which we persist in doing becomes easier to do. Not because the nature of the thing itself has changed, but the will to conquer is increased. Never give up. Never, never, never, never, never, give up [even when you are given a two percent chance].

Lawyers and Judges: keep giving your best and the best will come back to you as we "trudge down the road of happy destiny together."

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1. The full name of the author has been withheld in recognition of Tradition Eleven of Alcoholics Anonymous: "Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films." The statements and opinions of the author are his own and do not reflect those of the Utah State Bar, the *Utah Bar Journal*, or Alcoholics Anonymous. The author can be reached by contacting Lawyers Helping Lawyers through richuday@arcos.net or at (800)530-3743.

2. The responsible and legal use of alcoholic beverages is everyone's right. Alcoholism is defined to mean the obsessive and compulsive craving of alcohol to the point where one has lost the power of choice as to whether or not to drink. See "The Doctor's Opinion," *The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous* (4th ed.).

3. Tradition Three of Alcoholics Anonymous: "The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking."

4. The first three lines of the Serenity Prayer, attributed to Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr although he in turn may have attributed it to Friedrich Oetinger, are familiar to many:

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.*

These sentiments have deep roots, and a very similar prayer may date to the fourteenth century:

Almighty God, our heavenly father, give us serenity to accept what cannot be changed, courage to change what should be changed, and wisdom to know the one from the other. Amen

