

We never mentioned our little escapade again, at least not to each other. We both stayed clean and sober, so I guess no real damage was done. But I became more honest with myself that night and that was a step in the right direction.

An Angel

About twenty-eight years ago, my first sponsor quoted from one of Timothy's epistles about being nice to everyone you meet because you never know when you might meet an angel.

Sometime later, I was driving by myself up to Upper Peninsula Michigan and needed to stop and fill up and use the bathroom. It was a small, old-fashioned station in the middle of nowhere. You could see down the road in both directions for miles.

I started to fill the tank, then went to use the bathroom. An elderly man sat on a bench next to the front door, well kept but apparently ancient. There was a special presence around him that reminded me of Timothy's epistle. He smiled pleasantly. I greeted him and smiled back. I was only in the station for a couple of minutes, in my usual hurry. When I came out he was gone. I walked out towards the road and there was no one or no vehicle to be seen in either direction. Impossible, I thought but he simply vanished.

While driving away I had the strongest feeling I had just seen an angel. I was so glad I smiled and said hello.

Another Miracle

Over a year sober, still living at Larry's loft apartment on the second floor with slanted ceilings and nice-sized room, my sponsor Stan P. in the other room didn't set up too many demands in winter. That's what winters are all about. Not bad for early sobriety.

I proudly drove my new AMC small station wagon west on Palatine Road coming to the stoplight at Rowling Road. On one corner was my grade school, a church on the opposite side, and the other corners held nice middle-class homes. At the green light I drove on. From the right came a full-size station wagon, one of those old battleaxes weighing about as much as a tank, a woman at the steering wheel. I realized she wasn't going to stop. I wasn't wearing my seat belt. The collision was inevitable; I was going to die, as fast as she was driving. I let go of the steering wheel and raised my hands towards heaven. Here I come was my last thought before the impact.

She hit me from the side at full force. I hit the ceiling before my body was catapulted to the back seat. I bounced to the floor behind the front seat, facedown on my Big Book and Bible. I lay there a few seconds trying to determine if

anything was broken or cut, felt nothing wrong, except the shock. I turned over. The doors were jammed shut. I kicked at one with both legs. Finally it gave way, and I pushed myself up and out of the car. A witness looked at me like I was a ghost. I walked over to the other car. The woman, who had been wearing her seatbelt, sat there with a cut on her forehead, bleeding not too badly. She said she was all right and so sorry – she just had missed the light. I put my hand on her arm and said it was OK.

Patrol cars and emergency vehicles appeared, and we were separated. The rest is pretty much a blank for me. My new car was totaled. I stood there, looking at it with my books in my hand. A person stood next to me. I turned and saw my sponsor, Stan P. He worked on Northwest Highway and rarely came down Palatine Road to go to his office, but that morning he decided to come this way. We hugged. I'm sure I shed a few tears. We both knew it was a miracle I was not only alive but standing there without a scratch or even a bruise.

He asked me to walk with him. The police were done, and the tow truck was loading my destroyed vehicle. Stan led me to the sanctuary of the church on the corner. We approached the altar and knelt to pray. He asked me to give my life back to God, that God had performed a miracle on my behalf, giving me back my life. I was to return it, for God's protection and care. No problem. I was at the 12:15 meeting at the club.

Whiskey Bay

Sue and I were escaping from Chicago, her kids, our other responsibilities, life, and anything else we could get away from. Michigan Upper Peninsula was our destination, a small fishing community and a smaller fishermen's getaway. Nice, comfortable little cabins, sixteen-foot metal boats with outboard motor, the town not too far away by car – a perfect retreat awaited on a rather large inlet called Whiskey Bay. It sat on the Lake Michigan side, with calmer waters and fishing holes that always produced enough catch for dinner.

Second morning on the bay, using my favorite orange colored tackle with three hooks, I trolled along, not too far from a jetty where a number of fishermen were trying their luck. I hooked something. Sue stopped the boat. I was sure I'd snagged a sunken branch, piece of garbage – something really heavy. I reeled it in. That line started going out, and it wasn't but a minute, and the boat was moving too. Oh boy, the fight was on! The fellows from the jetty watched while the boat turned around. After who knows how long, the monster surfaced and ran under the boat. Memories of Jaws captured my mind. That was for sure a six-foot Musky, maybe more.

"There is no way you are going to bring that fish in this boat," Sue ordered.

I reached for the net and pulled up as hard as I could. I couldn't pass this opportunity up. No way! The fish's head was in the net, the line taunt. It chewed through the net, reached up to the line above the leader, and bit through the thirty pound test like a piece of spaghetti. I watched it swim away near the surface dragging my favorite tackle. The men along the jetty witnessed my failure. I took over the motor from Sue, who was grateful my catch had escaped. We headed full speed back to shore.

At the cabins, I jumped in the car and headed for town. I would buy a gaff, go back to the place, and try to get my prized fish back – and my favorite tackle. I reached the bait shop in record time. Approaching the counter I asked for a gaff. The owner reached behind him on the wall.

"Did you hear about that guy from Chicago who lost the big Musky out by the jetty?" The rumor had beaten me to town. Unbelievable. By the time I got back to the spot, five or six other boats with two or three guys in each were hunting for my fish and my favorite orange fish triple hook tackle. That's the way it is in a small town.

Sue and I left the next morning. I'm still telling this fishing story.

Libertyville

Our text teaches us resentment is [can be? "Resentment is the number one offender."] our biggest problem with recovery – feeling negative emotions over and over again as if freshly caused. Anger, fear, jealousy, suspicion – founded or unfounded – are never dealt with, and never healed.

Some of us were in the mood to venture out, hearing of a meeting in a suburb, a town called Libertyville. I had played high school football against their teams, and baseball, too. We traveled northwest and found the large old two-story house, home of the AA club, where we'd heard of a good noon meeting.

The group was average-sized, I guess. I don't remember the topic, but one lady went on and on about her divorce, how mad she was about it, and how negatively it had influenced her life and sobriety. We all listened patiently, but I picked up a decided undercurrent from the regular members as the tirade continued.

After the meeting we vacated the former living room cum meeting room for the nice afternoon in early spring. As we smoked and drank coffee, the lady who had shared sat near us. Between puffs, I asked her when her divorce

became final, guessing that it still might be in the final stages of completion.

“Ten years ago.”

I tried to hide my astonishment. This was what they meant about reliving a situation, the anger being as if it had happened the day before. This was the worse case of resentment I had ever seen. And she was still in the program!

It was quiet in the car during the drive back. I think we were all amazed and very grateful not to be in that condition. A new meaning to the word resentment formed in my psyche that day in my psyche. I continue to be watchful, making sure any form of resentment I might experience is dealt with immediately.

Carmen S

January, that month of turning points again, I was greeter for our Friday night meeting. I walked this rather tall fellow, a nice smile and calm demeanor. I introduced myself; he said his name was Carmen. He had learned about our meeting at church, and this was the first time he'd been to an AA meeting. After the meeting we agreed to meet at a church service.

Afterwards, we went to a restaurant. Carmen had a number of questions. He'd arranged a treatment program through his work and wondered if he needed to go through the thirty-day program. He mentioned he was currently driving on seven DUI's – a personal record as far

as I know. We wondered whether or not he was an alcoholic. I didn't laugh. I don't doubt I had a serious look of disbelief on my face, though. I explained driving on seven under the influence charges was not normal behavior, that it most likely was the behavior of a person suffering from alcoholism. Carmen agreed to go into treatment.

Throughout the conversation, he professed his newfound faith in his personal savior Jesus Christ. He said he'd stay sober long enough to make it to the hospital. Over the years I have respected Carmen's personal relationship with his Higher Power – and even been envious.

I became Carmen's sponsor, and some years later we celebrated later his obtaining an unrestricted driving license from the state of Illinois.

Carmen was quite angry with me when I moved to Texas, but we kept in contact over the years, and he truly helped keep me sober and sane. God has used him mightily in my life a number of times. I always see Carmen when I visit Chicago, and we bring each other up to date. He was best man at my wedding in Blanco, Texas, and put me up for a few days after Katrina. When I was living in Sioux City, I drove over to see him receive his twenty-five year medallion. What a special occasion that was!

One of the best memories is when we were studying Proverbs, and there was a line something like "a man with half a mind can understand the word of the Lord." We paused. Carmen and I had less than half a mind, it

seemed, because neither separately nor together could we begin to fathom “the word of the Lord.” We laughed. We had no idea how much less than half – we could be dealing with only five percent, much less than fifty. We decided it was all Grace, not just some Grace but all Grace. Carmen says to this day, “God is good all the time.”

Maybe during my 26th or 27th year, Carmen and I emailed each other about our years in the program, how easy it had been for both of us to stay sober through all of life’s challenges. The thought of taking a drink was never an option for either one of us. I’ve hesitated saying that in meetings, or even on a one-to-one with someone I’m helping. The fact remains, for us it has been easy from day one. Both of us accepted Amazing Grace as a mystery.

We remain friends and communicate not as often as in past days but still has warmly as always. Hopefully, I’ll be seeing Carmen in a couple of weeks, as I’m planning a trip up north.

A Christian Lady

For months, Carmen and I were together constantly. It was anyone’s guess who was the sponsor and who was sponsored. Any given day, one of us was in the dump complaining to the other how wrongly we were being treated by people and life – both going through job problems or lack of them, girlfriend problems or

lack of them – what a mess. But we were faithful to our meetings and going to church on Wednesday night and Sunday mornings. One of these occasions, a lady so together it was scary invited us to a luncheon after. Being always concerned about our next meal – not that either of us were in that much trouble – we accepted her invitation.

Carmen drove, leaving my car in the church parking lot. She lived in a well-to-do neighborhood, and we hesitated, walking into the palatial home. Our hostess greeted us warmly and escorted us through the living room and formal dining area to a massive covered patio and backyard where the barbecue was well underway. We knew very few of the people attending, but mingled while drinking a soft drink, smiling continuously. In the food line we loaded our plates like it was our last supper. Sitting in lawn chairs, Carmen and I ate every bit of the food on our plates and approached the tables once again for deserts. Marvelous!

My friend wandered off, talking with a very attractive young lady, and our hostess sat down in the lawn chair Carmen had vacated. We were drinking coffee, and I thanked her again for the invitation and complemented her on her estate and exclaimed the wonderful food and fellowship. She thanked me – knowing how perfect everything was and that's the way she planned it. She didn't say that. She didn't have to I just knew that's what she meant. But the next exchange did surprise me.

"I respect Carmen and you so much. Really, I'm jealous of both of you."

"Jealous?" I waved my hand toward the unbelievable surroundings, thinking of her perfection in dress, makeup, grooming – total control of her life.

"Yes, jealous. I know I have everything anyone could ever want. It's always been that way with me, and probably always will be. I'm jealous because I'll never need God the way Carmen and you do everyday just to stay sober. I know what you're going through. I envy your struggles with daily life and I'll never be as close to God as you because I don't have those needs."

Talk about humbled! I had no idea how being her felt, not a clue. I grew up not knowing we were not wealthy, that my parents struggled to keep our little family afloat. My name growing up was "Skip," and I'd pretty much been skipping through life, with much more guessing than knowing. This lady had it all, and envying me was unimaginable. But she was right. I would need God every day the rest of my life, where she could continue needing nothing and having everything she desired without the struggle of keeping sober and dealing with life on life's terms.

I thanked her, gathered up Carmen, and left the party. I shared with Carmen what she had said. We sat quietly the remainder of the trip, extremely grateful from our full stomachs and the knowledge that we were truly blessed.

Will the Sickest Person Please Stand Up?

Those early years – and some of the later ones, too – were spent in such turmoil! Not knowing what to do, trying to do what you thought was God’s will, not even knowing who or what God is or was... Trying to carry the message while not carrying the alcoholic, confusing lust with love, or the other way around... People say our emotional maturity stops when we take our first drink, and in my case, this was true. An adult in a thirty-one year old body, with the emotional maturity of a fifteen year old, I disregarded my sponsor’s warnings and got involved with a married woman going through desperate times and just getting sober.

These times are made up of foggy memories, not knowing at the time I was a flaming Al-anon without a program. When drinking, I just didn’t care. But once I stopped, I wanted to be in control, and everyone’s behavior was a reflection of me, especially that of those I cared for. The woman and I ended up living together and actually trying to start a halfway house with another friend in the program. My significant other had a problem with depression, an issue beyond my control and understanding. Of

course, I was smoking and eating sugar whenever I wanted, my two socially accepted drugs. I used them to medicate my feelings.

One night she was once again lying in bed, totally depressed, unwilling and unable to get up. I stood at the end of our queen-sized bed screaming, "What's wrong with you? We have the program, we have the bible, church, meetings and all you can do is lie here feeling depressed?"

Will the sickest person please stand up? Standing at the foot of the bed, I was definitely the sicker of the two in the room. In my sick mind, her depression was a reflection of me. The truth of the matter was it had nothing to do with me. I selfishly wanted this woman I loved to be up and doing what I wanted her to do. Little did I know I was as powerless over her behavior as I was over alcohol.

Sober over two years, I went to my first Al-anon meeting. It was Monday night – I remember that – and in the large group there were three other newcomers. A couple of old-timers took us aside and met with us. Though I had two years of twelve-step program under my belt I was the sickest of us four newcomers.

I began another journey that was even more of a struggle for me than getting sober. My Al-anon lapses have been severe over the years. At one time I was so emotionally messed up I had rashes on my inner thighs all from emotions – a reaction to a relationship. My drinking had dulled these feelings so the need to control wasn't important. It was a hard lesson, learning I had

both sides of the disease of alcoholism, that taking the drink away from me left a flaming Al-anon ready to try and control anyone I thought I loved.

Lady In Black

I had a Catholic infant baptism and remember going to Catholic school for a short time – or maybe it was catechism classes – but when we moved to the suburbs, Mom won out. We were brought up and confirmed in the Methodist church. It worked well for us, because our grandparents in Lehigh, Iowa, were extremely connected to the Methodist church in town. Kathy was brought up Lutheran. Drinking outranked any religion for me, so when we bought our house and she wanted to attend a nearby Lutheran Church, I agreed. Maybe it would help our deteriorating marriage.

Pastor Weber, a great fellow, would eventually play a major role in my recovery. We became fairly close, and I volunteered to be an usher and helped Kathy teach a Sunday school class. On more than one occasion, after the late service Pastor Weber and I finished the communion wine behind the altar. Spiritually I have no idea of the ramifications of such an act, but it made the rest of my Sunday afternoon rather nice.

A couple of minutes into each second service, a lady would strut down the center aisle to the

front pew. Always dressed in black dress, black shoes, and black hat with a lacy veil over her face, she wore glasses, never smiled, and had a pronounced nose. Pastor Weber nodded his head each time, acknowledging her dramatic entry. I don't remember ever trying to speak with her – the look on her face kept me at bay. I did marvel at her appearance each week wondering what dark mysteries lurked behind the veil – and eyes. Her misery radiated.

Hitting my bottom a year later, I returned to church only a couple of times to help usher. I forgot about the lady in black. Later I joined a non-denominational church. A fellow I sponsored and I were searching for different meetings, and I heard of a different type group called Emotions Anonymous. We decided to give it a try.

We found the meeting at a church – Episcopalian I think – and sat down on uncomfortable folding chairs. Members greeted us warmly – mostly women – and we waited for the meeting to begin. The few rows of chairs faced a card table with a notebook. No one moved forward to take charge. I looked at my watch. A couple minutes late already. My friend and I exchanged glances.

In she walked, the lady in black, and yes, dressed in the same outfit – or one just like the ones she wore to church. I don't think she had the hat on. She began the meeting, never apologizing for being tardy. The rest of the group showed no reaction. She ruled with a stern face

and left little doubt to newcomers like us she was the master of the roost.

Not surprisingly – to me at least – the meeting topic was depression. Two things impressed me that night. I wasn't emotionally ready for Emotions Anonymous and probably never would be, and I was extremely grateful I didn't know the darkness internalized by our chairperson. Scared. Was I scared! Who knows how we get to where we get – DNA, upbringing, experiences, demons, who knows? We talked for a couple of minutes before leaving, and she recognized me from church. Talk about an attitude of gratitude – I was so grateful after leaving that meeting.

Over twenty years later, James – another fellow I was helping through the steps – came to my trailer one morning bearing a gift. It was an EA International meditation book called Today. I read it nearly every morning with my other readings and have enjoyed it – and benefited from it –these last five years. I was a friend with three members of an EA group on the coast before Katrina. I'm sure I would have fit in nicely, but my other meetings and the fact I was learning to live with my mode of speaking and post-cancer lifestyle influenced my not becoming involved. I appreciate the help this program has given to so many others and am always grateful for James' giving me their mediation book.

Sponsors

Attempting to explain the concept of sponsorship to a newcomer is difficult. Expecting them to pick their sponsor is foolhardy. Ed T – the fellow who read me the first paragraph of “How It Works” – appointed himself my first sponsor. Anne, subject of a couple of two poems in this work, said she called the entire list of women temporary sponsors listed on the board at the 24th Avenue Clubhouse, and none of them returned her call. The problem remains unsolved and is just another example of how truly it is what Carmen and I have said all along – it’s all Grace.

Ed T didn’t last long – he went back out about the same time Pat Chambers did. He didn’t die, though, and made it back a couple of years later. A fellow with seven years, down on his luck some, moved into Larry’s house in the other end of the loft rooms. His name was Stan P. Undoubtedly, Stan help save my life. I asked him to become my sponsor. He was a Step guru and a Big Book thumper, an Episcopalian, and wore this humongous cross around his neck. He also smoked non-filter Pall Malls and drank coffee like he had drunk booze, just my kind of guy.

An accountant, Stan had his own business. Definitely a lady’s man, this obsession continued

to be his biggest dilemma in the program. It ended up being mine, too. We worked through the steps non-stop and ended up being extremely close.

The other major influence on my recovery in those early days was Pastor Anton Weber, the Lutheran pastor of the church I attended with my first wife. He told me later he role-played me at a Pastor's counseling retreat, and no one could figure out what my problem was. It was so simple – but like all alcoholics, if my lips were moving I was lying, and that's why they couldn't come up with a diagnosis.

The real Fifth Step, the one that had all the really bad deeds that I wouldn't share with a fellow AA'er, I shared with Pastor Weber. Keith and I were working on a job I was trying to complete in Des Plaines when I said I needed to go do my Fifth Step or I was going to get drunk – most of us choose the second remedy. I called Pastor Weber, and he showed up at my little room downstairs at Larry's house. He listened to the short but intensive list and asked when I was going to get to the really bad stuff. The relief mentioned in the Big Book flowed over me. That Sunday night standing in his full robes, he watched as I kneeled at the altar. We did the Seventh Step prayer, and as God's agent he absolved me of past sins listed on the Fifth Step. Truly I was healed of the demons that had haunted me. Pastor Weber was my sponsor, too, although he wasn't in the program. A few months later, the divorce was finalized, the business bankrupt. Without a job, I sat in front

of Pastor Weber complaining about the whole situation. He calmly explained I was completely free to do whatever I believed God's will for my life to be. Stay sober was first on the list, and the rest was up in the air. That was the last time I saw him, as he was promoted into higher levels of the Lutheran clergy.

Stan's parents lived in Sault Saint Marie, Michigan, and he moved up there to live in their cabin at Birch Point on the shores of Lake Superior. I was devastated. John H became my third sponsor, but I was co-dependent on Stan. After he'd gotten into a relationship with a gal from Canada and moved into town, I went up and visited him and stayed in the cabin at Birch Point, feeling safe, and not wanting to return to the Chicago area. "Home" was still my loft apartment, "work" meant doing fix-it-up type jobs, "dinner" meant eating a number of meals at Mom's with my sister, Karen, and her son, Eddie – just meandering through life.

I came up with the "best idea I ever had" – a mail-order tomahawk or wife beaters club! I'd use stones from the oldest mountains in the northern hemisphere, along Lake Superior; feathers from Gull Island where we canoed to; and made by the Native Americans living in the fishing reservation next door. Millions would be sold. I'd become rich. Stan told me to go back to Chicago and get a real job.

That was the last time I saw him. He got married and moved to Canada. Actually his wife-to-be was one of the nicest women I'd ever met, and I was as sad as I was jealous driving by

myself back to Chicago. John H continued to be my sponsor, but Carmen and I talked about everything daily and more or less sponsored each other through the turmoil of our lives.

A couple of years later, I did the same thing to Carmen that Stan did to me. I moved to Texas. Blackie Cox, sober over twenty years and an alcoholic counselor in his own business, became my first Texas sponsor. Blackie said, "Ed, you are trying to be so spiritual that you are no earthly good." OUCH. But oh how true.

Blackie died of cancer.

Next was an Al-anon sponsor, Dave B. How he put up with me, I'll never know. Dave was an extremely successful executive, but had major blind spots when it came to getting into relationships with practicing alcoholics. Me too. And he listened to my sob tales over and over again. He taught me the importance of self-forgiveness, physically taking care of my body so I'm dealing with life with a full deck, and being patience with myself.

Jerry Pinson was my AA sponsor during these years. I'd gotten a job in the mental health marketing field and been promoted to Director of Business and Human Resources, a job for which I was totally unqualified. I'd meet Jerry at the Winner's Club two or three times a week, and after the meeting "go to the dump" telling him all the things going on at work.

He listened intently, prefacing his response with, "I'm sure glad it's you and not me," and laughing. His advise was the always the same, "Just hang in there, don't drink and go to

meetings. Remember progress not perfection.” Jerry died of cancer too.

During these days I met a fellow from Rockford, Illinois, named Tom M. He asked me to be his sponsor, and like with Carmen, we became co-sponsors with nearly daily contact and Sunday morning breakfasts at Taco Cabaña before the Sunday meeting at the Winner’s Club, then a movie. Our friendship continues all these years later, as Tom is coming up on twenty-two years of sobriety.

Others have affected my growth and sobriety over the years, and I used those I sponsored as sounding boards and listening posts. The process is the same sharing with those in Al-anon, CoDA, and AA. Somewhere Proverbs suggests a wise man has many counselors. Even guys I really didn’t like, but respected their programs and listened to, acted as my sponsors without the official title.

Stories of some guys I sponsored are included in this work. And believe me when I say, they helped me more than I ever helped them.