

## FREEDOM TO BE ME

I swore I would never become an alcoholic like my father. But I started drinking alcohol at 16 years old and smoking pot at 17. I remember stealing drugs from the veterinarian I worked for, and taking those pills even though I had no idea what they would do. The pills had no noticeable effect.

But the alcohol and marijuana worked. I liked the effects, especially when I combined them. I felt more confident, more popular, and less worried about what other people thought of me. My inhibitions melted away and I felt I could be who I wanted to be, that I fit into the world and somehow belonged. Music sounded better and women were more attracted to me. I also started getting into trouble when I was high, but I figured it was just a matter of controlling how much I drank and used. This illusion that I could learn to control my addictions lasted over two and a half decades.

I graduated from high school in 1968 and grew up protesting the Vietnam War and avoiding the draft by staying in college. Smoking marijuana was applauded as a harmless recreational activity that brought people closer together, and a way to grow spiritually. High quality hashish was readily available at the university I attended, along with plain old pot, LSD, amphetamine diet pills, and lots of alcohol. I joined in with the philosophy that more is better: more sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll, especially more marijuana. Even then I remember friends commenting on the fact that I smoked way too much hash too early in the day.

In the early days, there were so many good times shared with friends smoking marijuana. No matter how bad things got in the later years, I do not regret the good times. But I realize now those times were good because I was with good people doing exciting things, not because we were high on marijuana.

To make a long story short, I became addicted to marijuana. During my mid-twenties, my girlfriend and I quit pot and all drugs all on our own, recognizing that it was a problem even then. After over one year of abstinence, what began as a casual sharing of a joint at a party, led to progressively worse marijuana and alcohol addiction spanning two decades.

In 1987 I even went so far as to check myself into residential treatment, because the woman I loved and planned to move in with told me I needed help with my drinking problem. The counselors there said that probably only one in ten of us would be clean and sober after one year, to me a very depressing statistic. So I walked out of that treatment facility after one week, determined I'd solve the problem myself. I smoked marijuana within hours, convinced that pot was part of the solution to life's problems. It was not until later that I began to notice the more pot I smoked, the more alcohol I drank. The relationship with that woman and her children fell apart within one year.

Looking back on my pot smoking life, I see myself as a recreational user in the beginning. Sure, there were long stretches when I smoked every night, but I did not get into the pattern of smoking every day all day until the late 1980s. What I see is a definite progression from a recreational user to a daily abuser. I was stoned all the time and could not get any higher by smoking more, and that

was smoking the high potency sensemilla sticky bud. Interestingly, I always smoked more to maintain that continual stoned feeling. I used to think that if I were ever stranded on a deserted island, the one thing I'd want would be marijuana seeds, so I could grow it and stay high on my drug of choice.

Marijuana became a multifaceted addiction for me. Over the years I grew it, dealt it, and eventually depended on marijuana for my sole source of income. I'm noticing in recovery that I sometimes miss the thrill of doing illegal activities, and am tempted to grow pot to make money and solve my financial difficulties. The illusion that I could grow pot and not smoke it is ridiculous, but it is amazingly persistent.

I knew deep inside that I was wasting my life. I was smoking pot, drinking alcohol, passing out, coming to with that terrible hangover, and smoking more pot for some relief. What a horrible, useless and demoralizing way to live. I called it "little deaths." It was daily dying instead of living each day. I thank God for protecting me through those dark and twisted years.

The last months of using found me stoned and drunk for weeks at a time...alone, too paranoid to leave the house...lonely for human companionship yet afraid of being with people...and contemplating suicide as a way out of a miserable existence. I felt hopeless, had no self-respect, was totally depressed, and blamed everyone and everything for my problems. I felt like a victim with no way out.

To this day, the pot addict I am sometimes engages me in euphoric recall, remembering the fun and companionship, blocking out memories of how bad it

really was. A friend in recovery says the letters “ism” in alcoholism stand for “incredibly short memory.” Whatever it is, the marijuana addict who lives in my head likes to tell me how a little pot never hurt anyone, that this time it will be different, and I will be able to just smoke pot every now and then and thoroughly enjoy it. The truth is that I am a marijuana addict, and I will never again be able to smoke pot like a non-addicted human being. If I pick up that first joint or pipe or bong, I am off and running and I don’t have any brakes to slow me down. Where that steep road leads no one knows, or what other drugs or nightmares await me as I careen down that mountain where one is too many and there is never enough. So I know I’m better off straight.

Life has changed on a profound level since recovery, and I am grateful beyond words. Recovery is the most important aspect of my life. It is the foundation for my life. I pray to God for the strength and courage to leave my addiction to marijuana in God’s care, because for me to take addiction back leads directly to personal disaster and hopeless insanity. I found out the hard way when I relapsed after almost 4 months of early recovery. I figured I would just get high on pot and alcohol for one or two days, and get right back into recovery by returning to meetings. That relapse lasted off and on for 4 months, and I hit my lowest bottom ever.

I pray I will never go back to using pot and alcohol again; I stay clean one day at a time. I do not want to risk feeling that shaky craving for a hit, struggling minute by minute to stay clean and sober, searching the house over and over for pot I may have hidden and need to find. Nor do I miss that remorse when I’m high, wanting sobriety,

but not feeling strong enough to go through the pain to get sobriety back.

MA taught me that, no matter how badly I feel, a hit of marijuana would only make it worse in the long run. My sponsor taught me to think past that first hit off the pipe. He taught me that it is the first hit that leads to that lonely man being so helpless he can only think of suicide to escape the pain and misery. That is where that toke leads every time, no matter how harmless it may seem.

Thank God for MA and the recovering marijuana addicts who attend and participate. I do not believe I could stay clean and sober by myself. I need to hear other recovering marijuana addicts share their experience, strength, and hope. I need to relate with other human beings who, like me, became hopelessly addicted to what most people say is a harmless, non-addictive herb. I need to hear how other hopeless dope fiends became dopeless hope fiends. I need to hear newcomers share how it is still bad out there for marijuana addicts who continue to smoke. I need Marijuana Anonymous to stay clean and sober, and I am not ashamed to admit it. I need to hear MA wisdom over and over again, because my disease is patient and tricky.

Knowing all this, and having lots more knowledge since entering recovery, at times I still find myself thinking it would be a good idea to get stoned. I still get powerful drinking and using dreams. Sometimes my thoughts turn to drugs I have not used for many years, like psilocybin mushrooms, peyote, LSD, speed, or downers. I still think about checking out on a chemical high of one type or another, even after almost two and half years of sobriety. Sometimes I fantasize about moving to Amsterdam and

buying one of those marijuana coffeehouses. This fantasy can even take the form of owning a pot house in Amsterdam, but also organizing MA meetings there. Go figure how likely that would be.

I can totally relate to the literature about the dangers of cross addiction, which is read at the beginning of my MA meetings. I also see where cross addiction can take the form of work, food, sex, money, sugar, caffeine, tobacco, gambling, and other over indulgences.

But now I know taking a drink or a drug will only make life worse, not better, so I don't. I believe God wants me clean and sober, and I lose my spiritual connection if I relapse on any drug, even one I have not used for two decades, or ever. I do not want to return to the spiritual dead zone I was in before entering recovery and working the Twelve Steps. I still laugh inside when I consider the logic of the simple statement sometimes heard at meetings, "work the Steps or die..." Death, I've heard, can be mental, spiritual, emotional, and/or physical.

As I look back on life thus far, I see where my pot smoking and drinking cost me, and those close to me, a great deal. I was awarded "most likely to succeed" in high school, graduated from an Ivy League university, and earned two masters degrees. To this day, I have not been able to find employment I truly enjoy or feel good about doing, and for the past ten years have been under-employed, illegally employed, or unemployed. I have no retirement fund or savings. The reality is that I have achieved little success in life thus far, and most of this lack of success I now see is attributable to smoking dope and drinking alcohol. I wasted so many years, and stopped growing emotionally

and spiritually when I decided I liked getting high more than accepting life on life's terms clean and sober.

I never married or had children. I was afraid of commitment and knew for certain that I would have been a terrible father and role model for children as a practicing addict and alcoholic.

All three of the serious and long-term relationships I have had with women I loved have suffered greatly from my using and drinking. Marijuana, as subtle and insidious as it was for this addict, contributed substantially to the premature deterioration of these relationships. My most recent relationship was with a good solid woman, non-addicted to any substance. We stayed together 4 years. I actually was able to drink and smoke pot all week and spend most weekends sober with her. These weekends, though hung over, were a tribute to the importance I attached to this relationship because of the self-control it took to stay straight. But, when she finally figured out that I was hopelessly addicted to pot and alcohol and gave me an ultimatum, I ended the relationship rather than seeking help to quit my drugs of choice. I realize this was a pattern with me. After conducting the Step Four inventory, it became clear that marijuana and other drugs were a higher priority than relationships throughout my drinking and using years.

My only long-standing career goal in life has been to write fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. The closest I've gotten to that was becoming a technical writer, which I have done professionally for over ten years. Most of my stoned-out creative writing dreams and plans have thus far stayed in my head or scattered around on barely decipherable notes on scraps of paper gathering dust in obscurity. I've heard a great truth for me: "Marijuana gave me wings

to fly, and took away the sky." I became a master at making wonderful plans and never carrying through with those plans.

Indeed, as I write this at 47 years old I see where my disease of addiction has cost me a great deal. Any genuine success in my life I credit to twelve-step recovery programs and trying to be of service to God, other people, and life on this planet. The good news is that I am in recovery and am slowly starting over. I'm regaining healthy goals and an entirely new way of living. My vision is to live and enjoy life with God as a partner, rather than endure and die alone.

My belief is I must be willing to do the simple daily tasks in recovery. I still go to a twelve-step recovery meeting a day; I attend MA meetings, meetings for recovering alcoholics, and meetings for nicotine addicts. I believe it is wise to spend as much time doing recovery as I did using drugs. I pray in the morning on my knees for God's help to stay clean and sober, and I say thank you at night. I feel very close to God even though I do not try to define who God is or how God operates in my life.

I am finally on the path I always wanted to be on. It is the path God intends for me, clean and sober. Even when I was drunk and stoned I wanted to be clean and sober, but didn't know how to do it, or why. With God at my side, and inside me, I am on the path with a heart. There is once again value and hope in my life, a new beginning.

In my pot smoking days I remember looking at birds and envying them, because they lived their lives drug-free, without the option to cloud their lives with drugs. I wanted what they have. Now I rejoice at having that option, to live sober and free of all mind and mood altering drugs. I trust that God loves me and wants me to be happy, joyous, and free. I believe that God is doing for me what God does for

the birds and other animals in their innocence, and what I could not do for myself.

I meet with my sponsor once a week and he is available to talk on the phone when I feel a need or desire to call and discuss something. I have been a temporary sponsor for several men, and I have shared my understanding of the Steps. I reach out to new people and welcome them at meetings. I have learned that when I am of service to other people I'm less likely to isolate and obsess on myself and my problems. Detaching from myself, my self-pity, and selfish desires is healthy, and being of service to God and other people helps me achieve that detachment. I was also taught to focus primarily on helping men who are early into recovery, because the sexual aspect of human relations can potentially get in the way with women who are just starting out in MA.

My approach to recovery is to seek help where help is available for the specific problems I face. I go to MA because I am a recovering marijuana addict. I go to other twelve-step meetings because I am a recovering alcoholic. If I am in a place where there are no MA meetings and I am thinking about smoking pot, I will try to find another kind of twelve-step meeting. I need twelve-step meetings to say clean and sober and in recovery. I have also gone to professional counselors for certain problems I felt were outside the scope of twelve-step groups, or could be helped more quickly with specific professional help.

The aspect of MA I am most grateful for, in addition to sobriety, is the concept of a Higher Power I now call God. I have no idea exactly who God is or how God works; that is none of my business. But I feel the presence of a loving, kind, compassionate God in my life that keeps me

clean and sober. This Higher Power has even helped me give up a powerful addiction to tobacco. I feel a close relationship to God, and no longer feel lost or hopelessly alone.

I do service work, including serving as secretary, treasurer, and member of working committees, and I go into our county jail carrying the recovery message. I try my best never to refuse a reasonable MA request. I believe I share life with God, and God is the senior partner. I am the junior partner, and if there is a difference of opinion, I try to let God's will win out. Indeed, being of service to God and our fellows is the focus of the Steps.

I wish I could say I am happy, joyous and free all the time. I am not. This is currently the most difficult part of the program for me, accepting life on life's terms. I often find myself angry, fearful, or depressed until I look to our program of recovery and living as expressed in the Twelve Steps. Then, with the help of the serenity prayer and the fellowship, I get back on track and at least try to be serene. The words "this too shall pass" have great meaning when I am feeling miserable. I no longer avail myself of the option to get stoned when I don't like the way I feel, playing the chemist mixing a cocktail of drugs into my body and mind. Also, being the impatient addict, I want recovery and I want it now. But other recovering stoners remind me to not quit five minutes before the miracle happens. Miracles happen among us on a daily basis, but we often do not notice them in ourselves.

For everyone new to sobriety from marijuana and other drugs, I'd like to share that my experience was that I thought about getting stoned almost every day early into recovery. It was an appealing idea to smoke pot, even though

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I knew all the pain it caused. I needed to reveal my thoughts by talking about my cravings at meetings, with my sponsor, and with God. I get through life clean and sober, one moment at a time. Maybe you'll be one of the lucky ones and your desire to get stoned will be lifted immediately like some people I know in recovery. If you're not, hang in there. My experience is that the temptations to use lessen in frequency, duration, and strength. The rewards of recovery are worth every bit of struggle I've put forth to live free of addiction.

In all honesty, I am so much more happy, joyous, and free than before I got on this path of recovery. I am grateful beyond words for the freedom to find out who I really am and what I am capable of doing without the drugs keeping me in a dazed fog. I am grateful to experience the freedom to be me, to feel my emotions, and to share life with God and our fellowship.