

I haven't yet been a client in a rehab or 12-step treatment centre, but I've met many Alcoholics Anonymous members who have. Often their first exposure to the fellowship was by being taxied to an outside meeting, and they tell me that while in treatment they were encouraged – or even required – to take the first five steps, while aftercare often includes attendance at AA. I wonder how many are introduced to the remaining seven steps while in treatment, particularly the eleventh ('We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God – as we understood Him').

AA's basic text – the so-called *Big book* – says, 'We think it no concern of ours what religious bodies our members identify themselves with as individuals... Not all of us join religious bodies, but most of us favour such memberships'. That was published in 1939 and might not apply today in secular Britain. But my spiritual awakening did involve such membership.

My wife thought I would get up and walk out from my first AA meeting. A meeting usually starts with a recitation of the 12 steps, and six of them mention God or derivatives. I was a surly, cynical agnostic and my wife, sitting beside me, thought, 'This won't work'. But I was a week on from a suicide attempt that I'd survived by the skin of my teeth and in no state to engage in theological wrangling. I listened with laser-like attention to anything that would keep me alive.

My last binge had not been that spectacular; in fact I thought I deserved a pat on the back for arriving home before the pubs closed. But my wife took one look at me as I reeled through the front door and fled out of the back door with our daughter. As they drove off into the night I cursed them for being so unkind, and then turned the place upside down, wreaking my frustration and resentment on the furniture.

The next morning, as I surveyed the wreckage, I knew this could not go on. I'd never smashed the place up before and was appalled and horrified. It finally dawned on me that while I kept on drinking my life had just got more chaotic, but despite all my efforts I could not stop. I couldn't face another ten, 20 or 30 years

of that living hell so I decided to end it all. As an alcoholic, loneliness was a way of life. I felt despised and rejected, shunned like a leper, and I despised and rejected myself. But that morning I felt as though the cosmos itself had rejected me. I no longer belonged here. The pain of being alive was impossible to bear.

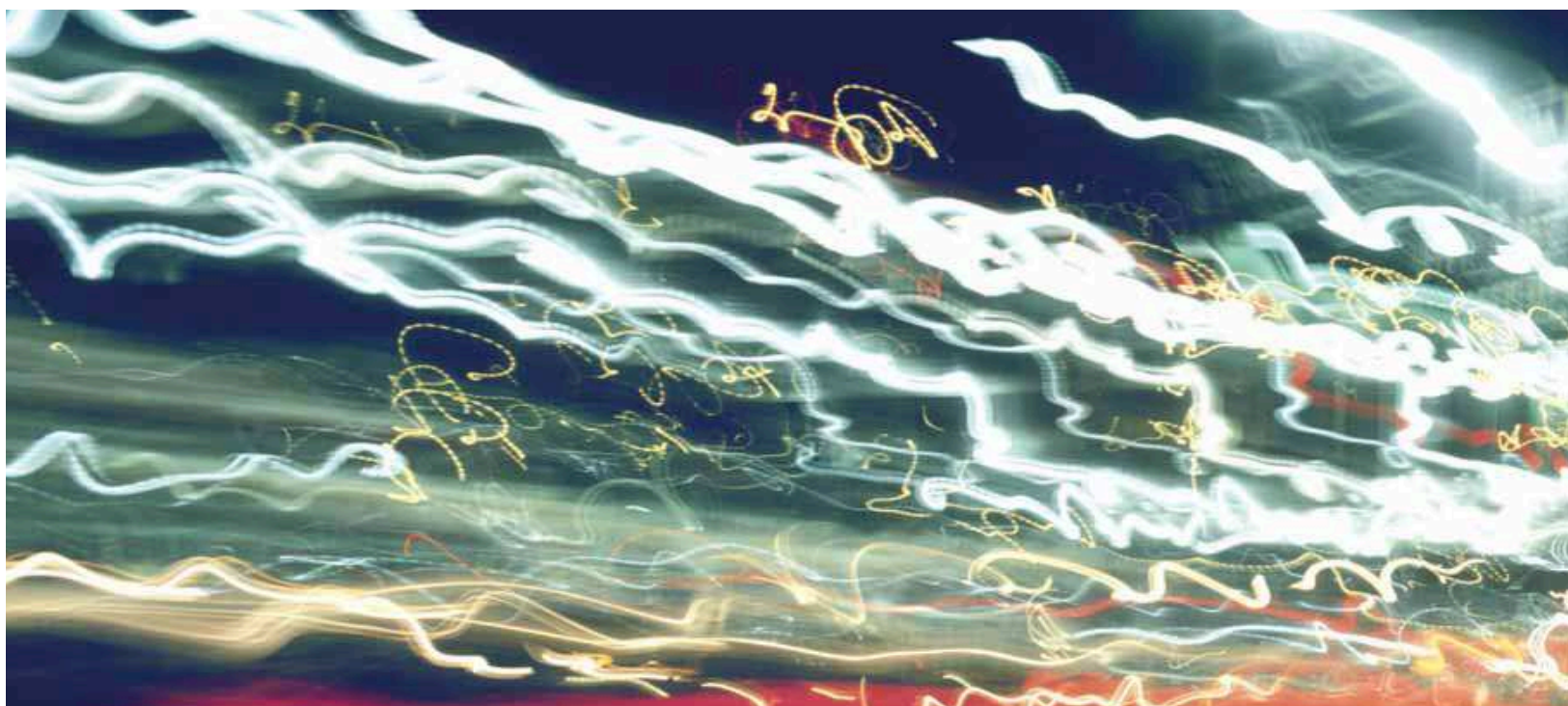
As I left the house, my wife and daughter arrived home. I muttered, 'They shoot mad dogs, don't they?' and pushed past them. I went to a chemist and tried to work out how many aspirins would do the job – 25, 50, 100? I bought 100 just to be sure, and a bottle of orange juice. I walked into nearby woods, left the path so I wouldn't be found, sat under a tree and gulped down the aspirins in handfuls. I then lay down and waited to die. I was saved by luck and ignorance. I thought I would swiftly lapse into unconsciousness and the oblivion I craved – I didn't know how long the tablets would take to work. I was aware of an insect scratching away next to my ear. I felt woozy but that passed, as did the ringing in my ears. I watched the sun passing through the branches. At one point I began to panic and struggled to get up. But I forced myself to stay there and told myself I had to go through with it.

Baffled that nothing seemed to be happening, I thought, 'You haven't killed yourself but you haven't done yourself any good, so you'd better get help.' A cynic might say, 'Well, why didn't you put your head on a railway line?' I don't know the answer to that – all I know is that I was confused, bewildered, and I wasn't thinking straight. Maybe the instinct for self-preservation had kicked in – I walked back into the town and gave myself up to the police. Two young PCs rushed me to A&E with the siren blaring and lights flashing. One of them said, 'Don't you be sick in our car' and, 'You're not going to like what they're going to do to you'. I found out what he meant when I was pumped out. I really did think then that I was going to die.

My wife refused to visit me, yet another disaster caused by my drunkenness. The kids persuaded her to come but she just sat at the end of the bed, quivering with rage, refusing to speak to me. Before I was discharged a psychiatrist told me, 'If you'd left it any longer before getting help, all they could have done was watch you die.'

# The inner light

**One man's problem drinking led him to Quakerism via AA. Both, he believes, are practical, non-hierarchical and can help in a quiet process of recovery**



I didn't plan to cut it that fine; I just wanted off the planet. The psychiatrist told me I would need to arrange psychiatric aftercare with my GP and suggested I attend AA. I'd turned my nose up at AA years before but now I was terrified that if I drank again I would die, and I just I knew I would drink again because that's what I always did. In AA I often hear members say they lacked the courage to commit suicide. It seems a perverse sort of courage that enables someone to die but not to live. I didn't want to die but lacked the courage to live. I've seen suicide described as a supremely selfish act. In my case morality didn't come into it; I just couldn't take any more. Depending which statistic you believe, around a third of male suicides are drink related.

When I got home I phoned AA and the surgery. My GP encouraged me to go to AA and arranged an appointment with the consultant psychiatrist at an NHS addiction treatment centre. That evening two AA members visited me and told me their stories. They invited me to an AA meeting, which I went to with my wife. She had put me on probation. She thought going to AA was just another one of my 'tricks', as I was always making solemn promises not to drink again.

At that first meeting I felt hope that this was no longer my unique problem, and that there was help if I was prepared to use it. A few days later I met David Marjot, the psychiatrist at St Bernard's hospital in west London. He listened to my story and said, 'Well, I confirm the diagnosis – you're a chronic alcoholic and from now on things can only get worse'. I thought, 'I've just tried to kill myself – how much worse can it get?' He went on, 'I've seen hundreds of men like you. You're in your mid-40s, still employed and married – it will all go if you carry on drinking, and with your pattern of binge drinking you're in danger of having an oesophageal haemorrhage and bleeding to death'. He offered me an inpatient bed but said there was a seven-week waiting list. He added, 'I'll keep a place for you but in the meantime keep going to AA'. That was in September 1984. I still have his letter of appointment. I hope I never have to use it.

In AA there's a saying I found immensely consoling: 'I'm not a bad person trying to get good – I'm a sick person trying to get well'. I always blamed myself for not being able to control my drinking – I didn't realise I was very sick. The illness theory is controversial but I find it a useful metaphor – if not scientifically exact it works for me as experiential verification. And it doesn't let me off the hook. I had to try to put right the damage and hurt that I'd caused others in my alcoholic descent. As soon as I felt well enough I went to the police station and thanked the two PCs who had rushed me to hospital. I wrote to the hospital and thanked them too. Those people saved my life. I've tried to be the husband to my wife that I'd denied her while in my alcoholic wilderness. I've made amends to our lovely kids.

The AA group that I began attending met at a Quaker meeting house. There was

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a poster on the notice board that said: 'A silent Quaker meeting for worship can be a quiet process of healing and a journey of discovery'. That spoke to my condition so I plucked up courage one Sunday and went to my first meeting for worship. I was not told what to believe but welcomed for who I was.

I was attracted by the similarities between Quakerism and AA. Both are practical, non-hierarchical, egalitarian and non-creedal – the AA programme makes useful suggestions about recovery while Quakers have our Advices and Queries. Both say the spiritual life is not a theory – we have to live it. I'm still an agnostic, though more open-minded than before. I thought the worst thing that happened to me was being an alcoholic – it turned out to be the best thing. If I hadn't found AA and the Quakers, I wouldn't have found myself. I drank for limitless expansion, but that thirst was never satisfied. Today it is, one day at a time.

*The writer is a Quaker elder, a member of Quaker Action on Alcohol and Drugs and a former Quaker prison chaplain. He now helps run AA meetings in prison.*

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*National Quaker Week runs from October 3-11 [www.quaker.org.uk](http://www.quaker.org.uk)*

*Quaker Action on Alcohol and Drugs [www.qaad.org.uk](http://www.qaad.org.uk)*

