

Anonymous SJ

South Jersey Intergroup

April 2012

The Doctor Is In

A psychiatrist on how he treats alcoholics, and why medical students should attend AA meetings

When you walk into Dr. Mike's waiting room, one of the first things you notice is a display of pamphlets and other materials sitting on a large table. They focus on issues ranging from depression to aging to grief to alcoholism, including a large number of the pamphlets available at most AA meetings. The rest of the room is decorated tastefully and the overall vibe is warm. Dr. Mike himself has a comfortable, easy manner—something that must be a great comfort to his patients. In our 45-minute conversation no topic was off limits and he invited me to come back if I had more questions.

Dr. Mike has been a psychiatrist since 1984 and he's been involved in addiction treatment since the early 1990s. I asked him if that was sparked by any personal experiences and he admitted that he'd struggled with an addiction himself at the time and that was when he first attended 12-step meetings.

continued on page 2

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- 2** The Doctor Is In (Cont.)
- 3** The Fourth Step
- 4** Announcements and Things to Do
- 5** Experience, Strength and Hope
- 6** SJIG Contact Information
- 7** More Experience, Strength and Hope

I am Responsible: Reflections on the 48th Annual Southern NJ Area 45 Convention

There could not have been a more apropos theme for this year's convention, "I am Responsible." I laughed when I saw it on my registration. Last year, I had just counted my 75th day without a drink when my sponsor strongly suggested I attend the 47th Annual AA convention. One thing I did right in early sobriety was take direction, however unpleasant it seemed--and being in a room full of alcoholics seemed unpleasant, as well as overwhelming, intimidating, and downright scary. Coming off of twenty years of isolation and drinking, I was filled with doubt about being around that many people without a drink in my hand. I wasn't doing much laughing then. "The countdown has to be experienced," she ruminated. I had no idea what a countdown was, but I believed her.

I nervously wandered the convention last year, recognizing people from meetings, but being too self-conscious and shy to say hello. I attended the countdown alone. When the years began getting read, solitary people standing while everyone else applauded each year, month, and day of sobriety, the love and joy and unconditional support brought me to tears. I wanted what everyone in this room had--each other.

I registered early for the convention this year. I understood, after a year and 75 days of sobriety, what I didn't understand at last year's convention: that I am responsible for fitting in, for my own sobriety, for being a part of this fellowship.

continued on page 3

He's held positions at a number of treatment facilities in the South Jersey/Philadelphia area, including the Malvern Institute, Hampton Behavioral Health Center and Princeton House. During those years he also began his outpatient practice, and has been doing that full time since 2001. His says his current practice is 30 percent psychiatry and 70 percent addiction treatment (with some overlap, of course).

So does he mention AA right away when someone comes to him for help with their drinking?

"Every patient is a little different. They come in here and some are more willing and open. Some are dragged in by the hair by their parents, or a spouse has threatened them. And some of them I don't have to say very much, and they say right off the bat, "Don't give me any of that AA s****!"

He smiles. "Well that's an invitation. So I say, tell me more. I want to explore why they say that, what their experience was. And generally they've never been to a meeting." He says these people often have the wrong idea about AA—they think it's a cult, or a religion.

"I try to engage the patient because if I don't get them to come back to see me, I can't help them. When they've come to trust what I say, I will suggest that they try a meeting."

One of Dr. Mike's patients, who now has more than four years of sobriety, said he'd been in therapy for more than a year before Dr. Mike brought out a meeting list. He did it casually.

"(Dr. Mike said) I don't have any more of the pills (that cure alcoholism), but I do have this. A lot of people go to these things and say it really works. There will be people like yourself, and there are a lot of meetings in your town—look!" I took the meeting list and I asked him when he wanted to see me again. "You try a few of these meetings and then call me," said Dr. Mike. 35 minutes later his patient was at his first AA meeting, and hasn't had a drink since.

There are four medications that are FDA-approved to treat alcoholism and three others that are used "off label" (that means they are not officially approved as a treatment for alcoholism, but have been found to be effective unofficially). Dr. Mike stresses that these are tools, not cures. He prescribes them, but says he strongly urges all patients being treated for addiction to attend 12-step meetings.

"Medicine can assist, but by itself medication doesn't get somebody into recovery. I do tell people that every life preserver eventually gets water logged."

Dr. Mike calls it a "challenge" to find psychiatrists or therapists who are familiar with 12-step programs, because it's not part of their medical training.

"The average doctor might get a couple of lectures on the affects of alcohol on the liver and how it affects the brain. They might learn a little bit about detox and recognizing the symptoms of intoxication and withdrawal. Invariably, at some point, when they do a rotation in the ER, they'll come across a person who is in terrible shape. Maybe it's a street person shaking with DTs, or someone who is belligerent, or someone who was in a bar fight and is all bruised and cut. This becomes their perception of what an alcoholic is. They don't know anything about what a recovering person is."

Dr. Mike says pick a spot in South Jersey and on any given night of the week there's two dozen meetings of all types. Many doctors don't know this, and he thinks medical students who will be involved in treating alcoholics should have to attend an AA meeting. His theory: how can you recommend something you've never experienced?

"I think AA is a terrific primary source of treatment, not just a support group."

--Patty H., Newsletter Chair

The Fourth Step: “Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.”

When I first heard about this step, I was afraid. I didn't want to think about all of the mistakes I'd made during my drinking days, much less WRITE THEM DOWN. What if someone saw my list?! But my sponsor was strangely cheerful about this step. You'll be surprised, she said.

She also told me I'd see patterns in my behavior. I wondered. So much of I'd done was a blur. But as I worked on writing things down (grudgingly, at least at first), I did notice that I had a certain way of dealing with relationships that was strangely similar EACH TIME. So yes, I had patterns. It was a little upsetting but also strangely comforting—I was beginning to understand myself. And I began to realize how much I really wanted to change that behavior.

In the Twelve and Twelve, it's explained this way: *“We thought “conditions” drove us to drink, and when we tried to correct these conditions and found that we couldn't to our entire satisfaction, our drinking went out of hand and we became alcoholics. It never occurred to us that we needed to **change ourselves** to meet conditions, whatever they were.”*

Once I got that, the words just flowed as I completed my inventory. I WAS surprised. I felt a weight lift from my shoulders—it was almost as if I was transferring bad feelings and regrets from my heart and mind to the page, leaving me lighter and happier. By the time I did my Fifth Step with my sponsor, I was ready to let go of some of my fears and resentments. (Of course I, like most first timers, thought I was the worst person on the planet and that the things I'd done and felt were unique. Imagine my shock when my sponsor's reaction was a shrug and, “been there, done that”. It is awfully hard for us alcoholics to let go of the idea that we're special!)

Continued on Page 4

I Am Responsible (Continued)

Different than fear, I crave the safety of the fellowship. Despite my cloudy head and fear the previous year, I remembered with absolute clarity how much I felt a part of this fellowship, rather than apart from the world when I left the convention that Saturday night.

This year, the convention felt like a homecoming. When I first found my way into the rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous, I drove a half an hour to meetings. I imagined that some casual gossiping neighbor was stationed at every door in my small town just waiting to tell everyone that I am an alcoholic. After a few weeks, the long drives, practicality, and the sheer ridiculousness of that kind of self-centered thinking brought me to meetings in my area.

This year, I saw the woman who, at my first AA meeting, told her story and it sounded like my story. My eyes welled up with tears. She had no idea that she saved my life. I reintroduced myself to people whose names I never quite learned. I thanked them for being so critical to my early sobriety. I met up with people from my home group. I introduced myself to people with whom I would be working AA jobs in the next few months.

I attended all the speakers, not just the Saturday night speaker. I laughed, cried, identified, prayed, felt so much gratitude. It is an extraordinary experience we get in Southern New Jersey to have so many amazing meetings and people right here, and then have this beautiful convention with speakers from around the country sharing their wisdom, experience, strength and hope. I felt humbled, grateful, and part of something amazing.

At the countdown this year, I held hands with the women who have become my closest friends in the rooms and in my life. As the years were read, I thought, "Here we are. A room full of drunks trying to do the next right thing. From the guy with 24 hours to the man with fifty years, we are all responsible." I teared up and smiled. What else can you do but laugh and cry?

--Angie Y.

THE FOURTH STEP (CONT.)

I encourage you to be fearless when doing your inventory—fearless but also fair to yourself. One of the things I've learned is that the inventory isn't supposed to be just a list of all the crappy things you've done and examples of what a terrible person you are. Don't beat yourself up too much. It's a tool. My current sponsor says that Step Four is about finding out who are you NOT. I love that idea.

Of course we're never done taking our inventories and working out our resentments. Spiritual progress, remember, not perfection. There is a short prayer I use when I pray about those I feel I've wronged or have resentment toward: "Bless them, change me."

-- *Anonymous*

Fellowship Announcements and Things to Do

Saturday April 21 - The Saturday Early Riser Group is celebrating its 5th Anniversary.
Transfiguration Church, 445 W. White Horse Pike, Collingswood, N.J. (In the gym)
7:00AM. Refreshments & snacks. 2 Speakers. Everyone is welcome.

Sunday, April 29 - Tansboro Sunday Morning Spiritual Step Anniversary. Winslow Twp. Annex Bldg. Speakers at 10:00 AM. Food to follow.

May 11 - 13 - 35th Annual Couples in Recovery Escape Weekend. St. Mary of Providence Center, 227 Isabella Rd., Elverson, PA 19520. \$260.00/couple includes room & 5 meals.
www.stmaryofprov-pa.org For more info call Wayne: [856-845-8279](tel:856-845-8279).

Sunday, May 13 - Oaklyn Step By Step Group 21st Anniversary. 6:00 PM - Food 8:00 PM - 2 Great Speakers: Sonny & Clyde. St. Mark's Lutheran Church, 1 E. Haddon Ave. at WHP.

Friday, May 18 - Marlton Group (POP) Anniversary. 11:00 AM. Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, Rt. 70 & Cooper St. 1/4 mile east of Rt. 73. 2 Speakers.

Sunday, May 20 - Area 45 Spring Assembly - Registration, 8:30 am; New GSR/DCM Orientation, 9:00 am; Assembly, 10:00 am; Lunch, 12:30 pm; Workshop, 12:45 pm; Committee Meeting, 1:30 pm - approx 3:00 pm. Elmer Grange Hall, 164 Woodstown-Daretown Rd., Pilesgrove, NJ, 08098. All are welcome.

**June 1- 3 - Matt Talbot Retreat. Serenity Weekend for Recovering Alcoholic Men. Marianist Family Retreat Center, 417 Yale Ave., Cape May Point, NJ. <http://www.capemaymarianists.org/>
Cost: \$150.00. Contact: Joe [609-313-2999](tel:609-313-2999) or Jim [856-842-3060](tel:856-842-3060)**

Saturday, June 16 - Founder's Day Picnic, Subaru Pavilion, Park Ave at Cooper River Park. 1:00 PM - 5:00 PM. Free. Speaker at 2:00 PM.

June 29, 30 - July 1 - 1st Annual Liberty Bell Roundup. The Woodstock of AA. Ramada Philadelphia Airport, 76 Industrial Hwy. Essington, PA 19029. \$35.00 Registration. Liberty Bell Roundup

**Saturday, July 14 - Fishing Trip aboard the Duke O' Fluke sponsored by SJIG Social Committee. 1:00 - 5:00 PM. \$25.00 p/p includes rod, tackle, bait, and mate's tip. Higbee Ave. at the bay, Somers Point, NJ. Contact - Mike Lore: [856-779-1830](tel:856-779-1830). mikelore@voicenet.com .
Directions: www.dukeofluke.com**

Sunday, July 29 - Annual Family Picnic. Parvin State Park , Pavilion A & B - Cost: \$10.00 (softball, kids games, fellowship, swimming, fishing, boating, and family camping. more info : www.matttalbotgroup19.org.

Editorial Policy

Anonymous SJ is a monthly newsletter published by and for members of South Jersey Intergroup (although we welcome readers from other areas!). Opinions expressed herein are NOT to be attributed to A.A. as a whole, nor does publication of information imply any endorsement by either A.A. or South Jersey Intergroup. Quotations and artwork from A.A. literature are printed with permission from A. A. World Services, Inc., and/or The A. A. Grapevine, Inc.

Contributions from readers are encouraged—you can write about your experience, strength and hope in general, or you can focus on one of the steps or traditions. You can also write about something that touched you at a meeting, something that bothered you at a meeting, or some service commitment you especially enjoy. Submissions are edited for space and clarity ONLY. Contact information is required and anonymity is respected.

Due to space limitations, we are unable to publish flyers for events in this newsletter. However, we are happy to include your gathering in the general list of fellowship announcements.

Send your submissions to:
newsletter@asj.org

Please keep a copy for your records as submissions cannot be returned.

Experience, Strength and Hope

My Friend Bill

An AA reflects upon his friendship with an oldtimer he met at a meeting overseas (reprinted with permission from the March 2012 online edition of Grapevine Magazine).

Ten years ago I was living in Amsterdam working for a very large American firm. It was a great job that kept me constantly busy. Even so, I managed to attend several meetings a week. Amsterdam is one of the great tourist destinations in the world, with the population of the city frequently matched by foreign visitors. Obviously we had many tourists at each meeting, and we always set aside the first few minutes of each meeting for visitors to introduce themselves and briefly share. That is how I met Bill M.

Bill was an 81-year-old widower who had been sober for 26 years. He was also the oldest employee of a national pizza company. He worked 11 months out of the year in Grand Rapids, MI delivering pizzas to save up enough money to spend each August in Amsterdam. He has worked out a house-swapping deal with a Dutch AA member that gave him free lodging while in-country.

Bill would share a very folksy simple message at every meeting, never talking for more than a few minutes. At the end of each share he would always close by saying, "Today was better than yesterday." Once I made the mistake of saying, "And tomorrow will be even better," to Bill. "Don't say that," he shot back, "We have no idea what tomorrow will bring."

One day I asked Bill to go to dinner with me after the meeting, and our friendship began. For that month every night I was in town Bill and I would walk or go for coffee or dinner after the meeting. We would talk about anything and everything, but almost always ending up talking about God. Bill had the kind of quiet, sure-footed faith that can only come from the kind of suffering that only alcoholics can know. Sure enough, as I learned Bill's story it was one full of suicide attempts, stays in mental institutions, a failed marriage, and finally release and peace through a relationship with his Higher Power. He was simply a great man, full of love, kindness, peace and serenity.

As August ended and Bill had to head back to Grand Rapids, we made a promise to keep in touch over the internet, and made the kind of, "If God wills it," plan to meet up again the following August.

Of course, it was not to be, as my firm shut down its overseas operations and I had to return stateside. But Bill and I did keep in contact over the internet and he helped me through this difficult time.

Continued on Page 7

CONTACT INFORMATION FOR SOUTH JERSEY INTERGROUP:

South Jersey Intergroup Association, Inc.
PO Box 2514
Cherry Hill, NJ 08034
Office/Literature Sales: 1-856-486-4446
info@asj.org
Website: www.asj.org
24 Hour Hotline: 1-856-486-4444
Toll Free Hotline: 1-866-920-1212

SJIG holds its monthly meetings on the third Wednesday of the month at 8pm at the following location:
St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church (St. Bart's)
1989 Route 70 East
Cherry Hill, NJ

If you would like the SJIG Road Show to visit your group (perhaps to celebrate an anniversary), email your request to literature@asj.org. You can also call the SJIG office at 1-856-486-4446

**Reminder: The SJIG Unity Committee is
sponsoring a Memorial Day Alcathon on Monday,
May 28th, 2012**

**6:00 AM ~ 6:00 PM
46 AUBURN RD. WOODSTOWN NJ. 08098**

**HOSTED BY THE WOODSTOWN GROUP
WOODSTOWN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

(1 BLOCK WEST OF RT.45S, 5 BLOCKS NORTH OF RT.40W)

UNITY CHAIR * KATHY JO S.* 609-790-3740 unity@asj.org

UNITY CO-CHAIR * BILLY A. * 703-980-6515 unity@asj.org

Experience, Strength and Hope (Cont.)

Then one day I got an email from Bill. He told me that he had been diagnosed sometime before with terminal prostate cancer. He had been offered treatment, but had refused saying, "I'll be damned if I am going to spend whatever time I have left being cut up and radiated." "Then what are you going to do," asked his doctor? "I'm going to Amsterdam", Bill said.

That was to be the trip when I met him. He knew he was dying, but never said a word.

The purpose of Bill's email to me was to say that he had just been told he was at end stage and had only a very short time left. He wanted to tell me he loved me and to say goodbye. I wrote Bill and asked why he hadn't told me when we were together. "People treat you differently when they know you are dying," he explained. "I just can't stand that."

Bill sent me emails fairly regularly after that, telling me how beautiful the dying process was. In one he described being on a broad highway, walking with his Higher Power. He said it was the most wonderful time of his life.

He ended every email with, "Today was better than yesterday."

I soon got an email from his son. It contained only a copy of Bill's obituary. Over the next few years I thought of Bill often. I would remember our walks along the canals of Amsterdam—two Americans in a foreign land talking about the cosmos and God, good coffee, warm women, and a wonderful Fellowship to which we both belonged.

Shortly thereafter, I left the firm and started thinking that I needed to find a new vocation. Corporate life was just too dulling. One of my wildest thoughts was to become a hospice nurse, caring for the dying. And so I quit work and embarked on two years of school, without pay, to become a nurse. I constantly doubted my plan, wondering how I could possibly have thought this made any sense. One day I was deep in fear. I had had no income for some time and it would still be over a year before I could complete nursing school. I would have wracked up over \$20,000 in debt for a job that paid about one-third of what I had made previously.

Was I nuts to pursue such a silly plan? I had some time to kill before my evening class that night, so I went to the library. I remember asking myself what advice Bill M. would give me. What would he say?

What I would have given to speak to him one more time about this direction my life had taken. I got on the internet and did a search on careers in nursing, thinking that maybe I could find something that would reassure me that this was a plan that could work. I got a hit on hospice nursing, and decided to follow that. I remember that I was in a horrible mood, convinced that I had screwed up my life beyond any possible redemption. I saw a link for a book called, "Crossing the Creek—A Hospice Nurse Reflects on Death and Dying."

For no particular reason, I clicked on it. There were several links at the bottom of the page that lead to reviews of the book. One review was entitled, "A Dying Person Review." I clicked on it. It was very succinct. It said, "Thank you for your fine book. It is a wonderful, accurate description of what I am experiencing. You are doing the Lord's work. Today was better than yesterday."

I couldn't believe my eyes! Tears started running down my cheeks. I remember looking up and seeing several other students looking at me wondering what the hell was wrong with me. I had found my answer.

I wrote to the author and told him this story. He confirmed to me that the writer was, in fact, my friend Bill. He sent me a free autographed copy of the book. And so, in the library at a community college, on a cloudy autumn day, my friend Bill reached out and talked to me, to reassure me of my career choice, several years after his death.

Oh, and by the way, today was better than yesterday.

—John M.