

Grapevine Online Exclusive

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With Complete Abandon

After many relapses and false starts she heard something in a meeting that changed everything

I've been introducing myself as, "I'm Mary and I'm an alcoholic" for 27 years, yet I have just begun my fifth year of continuous sobriety. My journey has been amazing, and my life is more joyful and hopeful than ever before. This is my story.

Sometime in my early twenties, I recognized that I did not drink like other people. I drank to oblivion; the quicker, the better. In the 1970s, we had other substances that

enhanced the effects of the alcohol; much in the same way a chef might tell you that a certain wine will enhance his culinary creation.

As long as I could obliterate any sense of emotion, I was "cool." My drinking and use of other substances accelerated as I moved toward 30. My life was a series of failed relationships, alternating with periods of serious attempts at self-destruction in the most literal sense.

Like many of us, I focused almost entirely on the one area of my life where I was a total failure and never really took any satisfaction from the areas of my life where there was some measure of success. For example, despite my alcoholism, I was at that time still able to work effectively. I had an addiction to praise, and if I worked hard and did well, I was promoted and given great



raises. Yet, despite any seeming material success, I only knew that I was a total failure at relationships.

I could not be a good daughter to my parents, because I was too selfish and self-centered to really care what they might be going through. Even when my mother became terminally ill when I was 23, my attempts at caring for her were half-hearted at best.

It was my drama, not her death that mattered. I considered her death a blight on my social life and my drinking accelerated as I tried to obliterate my grief. I was so stoned throughout the funeral process that I barely remember it.

Obviously, I wasn't much of a sister either. If my siblings weren't interested in listening to the trials and tribulations of my life, I didn't really want to talk with them. I was incapable of friendship. My inability to form attachments led to such passive/aggressive behaviors that no one could sustain a relationship with me as I constantly moved from loving to hateful; depending on how much booze I had or didn't have. My relationships were predicated on one of two things – either you had something I wanted (usually booze or drugs) or you didn't. It was that simple.

I married for the third time at age 29 and quickly became pregnant. Having lost seven children in prior pregnancies, I was determined to become a mother. Being a mother was the one dream I'd held onto since I was four years old. I was going to treat my children differently than I had been treated. No one understood me. I had been abused – in every possible way.

I knew I would be a better parent because, after all, I had spent years analyzing how awful my parents had been to me. I would be loving, patient, and I would encourage my children to dream. I would understand their most complex feelings and I would love them as no one else ever could. How arrogant of me.

It never occurred to me that my Higher Power might have been protecting the seven children I lost. It never occurred to me that I might repeat any or all of the abuse to which I had been exposed as a child. All that mattered was what I wanted and what I wanted most in the whole world was a child to love.

Our son was born just after I turned 30. A week before he was born, my husband took me to a parking lot and gave me an ultimatum. I had not been able to stop drinking or using during the pregnancy and he was very fearful

that our child might be born with significant defects. If that were to happen, he told me, we would immediately give up the child for adoption and I would have to seek treatment.

I wanted to find a very large hole in the ground, crawl in there with the unborn child, and just cover myself and die. The next week, our son was born and to all who examined him at the hospital, he was perfect. I nursed him and loved him and felt more blessed to be alive than at any other time in my life. And then I went home with him.

The booze and the drugs were still there. I continued to use. When he was three months old, I had an accident while I was holding him. That was a tremendous moment of clarity. I had to get help. So I went to treatment and my older sister lovingly and willingly took care of my baby boy while I desperately sought help.

I struggled with early sobriety. The least bit of emotion sent me back to the drink. I held on, kept going to meetings after I was discharged from treatment, and eventually became sober and stayed sober for seven beautiful years.

My daughter was born while I was totally sober. Eight months after she was born, my husband left for good. I was still totally incapable of having a relationship with another human being. I was devastated, yet I stayed sober and I continued to go to meetings, frequently taking the children with me. I had to stay sober. I had to be a good mother. I didn't know it at the time, but I was dry, not sober. I wasn't working the Steps, and I definitely wasn't listening to the wisdom of a sponsor. I had no real connection with a Higher Power. I was too angry at God to have a relationship with Him! After all, I had been abused, I was a mess, and no one loved me except my children. For a time, that was enough. It wouldn't last for long.

By the time my son was 6 and my daughter was 2, the rage attacks were enough to scare them. At times, I lost control and hit them too hard, although I was usually able to stop short of actually beating them. All the anger and rage I felt toward myself, toward God and toward everyone who had not loved me the way I thought I should be loved was directed at those poor babies.

Alcoholics Anonymous had taught me that it was okay to ask for help, so I did. I learned better ways of dealing with my rage and anger. I sought outside help. For a time, things were really good. Then the bottom fell out.

Because of some issues at work, I started drinking. It was not really because of what happened, but because I was not living a program of recovery. I was not working with a sponsor, so there was no one I felt I could call for guidance. I was not living the Steps, so I had no Higher Power to trust to help me. I drank because I wanted to drink more than I wanted to stay sober. I drank because I held onto my old idea that obliterating feelings was more effective than living a life of useful purposefulness. I drank. And drank. And drank.

My choice to drink again in 1993 began a downward spiral from which I was afraid I would never recover. The progression of my disease was as profound as it is described in our literature. To be sure, I went back to AA frequently, but I couldn't and wouldn't do what was suggested. I surrendered custody of my children to my ex-husband in 1998, after attempting suicide four times in four months. I didn't care about my responsibilities as a parent. I didn't care about anyone but myself. I didn't care about anything except not feeling. I didn't care about anything except the drink.

By 2001, I was so out of control that I was arrested twice within a six-month period. A condition of one of my arrests was a one-year probation period. I was so afraid of going back to jail that I actually stayed sober for that year, from 2001-2002. From 2002-2006, I attended meetings, held service positions, had a home group, a sponsor, but I was stoned continuously on the marijuana maintenance program.

By 2006, I went back to the drink. From 2006-2008, I managed to give away my home of 20 years, almost every material possession I had and I was unable to work. I was institutionalized 19 times over 18 months. After many of those hospitalizations, I was released into my son's custody.

In March of 2008, my son had to call the police to have me forcibly removed from his home and I became homeless. I drank and used and slept on park benches and ate at soup kitchens and slept in shelters when I could. I used every dime that was left in my meager bank account to support my alcoholism and when the money ran out, I would call family and friends and beg. To their credit, most of them said "No."

Upon discharge from one of the hospitals, I was allowed to stay at my son's house for one day – and while I was there, I had my last drink. It was another suicide attempt. The hospital had given me anxiety medication and I took handfuls while drinking his tequila.

I cried and cried and wondered why no one loved me enough to do an

intervention. My moment of clarity had arrived. I heard a voice say, "I love you." I believe it was the voice of my Higher Power. The phone number of one of the local treatment centers came into my mind and I dialed it. I said I needed help, and they sent an ambulance. My son's last words as they loaded me into the ambulance were "Mom, go to a meeting." That was July 26, 2008.

I went to a meeting that night at the hospital. As they were reading "How It Works," I realized that they had put in a new sentence. Or at least, I had never heard it before: "We asked His protection and care with complete abandon." It struck me dumb. The only things I had ever wanted were to be protected and cared for. I knew somewhere deep within my soul that if I felt safe, I might be able to learn to love.

So I got my white chip, went back to my room, got on my knees and I asked. I surrendered and I asked to be protected and cared for. Over the coming months, I would begin to realize I always had been.

-- Mary

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