

become a more comfortable extrovert. In college it was a season of recreational drinking and having fun with friends. The stories aren't too bad. And the season passed after I got married. Beer and wine became more of an occasional luxury after settling down in marriage.

Fast forward about 5-6 years and I'm early in my pastoral vocation. What had been an occasional luxury slowly became a daily staple as our income went up (being a poor, full-time student in seminary means it's either wine or rent and we luckily chose rent every time). Still it was harmless. After all, everybody enjoyed a glass of wine or two while they cooked dinner.

Then we became pregnant. It was both the best news ever and also the end of a life where we had the freedom and luxury to do what we wanted whenever we wanted. I remember being ashamed of quietly feeling resentful of this change. I wanted a baby, but I didn't want to lose the freedom to enjoy friends, go out, and be an otherwise carefree 20-something.

Life shrunk as we hunkered down to be the parents of a newborn. Eat, sleep, poop, and repeat. Those early days are torture when you're experiencing them. And yet you long to go back and enjoy just one more weary, sleep-deprived day when you're kids get older and stop being perfect newborn creatures. As our life centered at home, venturing out only to go to work at the church, I began to drink every night. It was "just my daily routine." I would work, parent, and then, when the house was quiet, I would turn the TV on and settle in with a glass of bourbon. One glass a night became two and soon became three many nights. A bottle became a handle and that got replenished once a week or so. Waking up with a light fog of a hangover was part of the daily routine. Drink water, go for a run, you can work that out by mid-morning. No big deal.

As my pastoral responsibilities grew, the drinking became more and more of a daily staple. It never got too out of hand. I have always been present for my kids. I've never blacked out or done anything overly stupid or dangerous. I have shown up to work every day and to lead worship every Sunday. There's never been a time when I have not been able to manage my life and my little daily vice.

About a year ago I became more and more aware of the fact that while I was not actively hurting anyone with my daily routine of relaxing with alcohol, I was not showing up as the very best version of myself. What began as a hobby developed into a daily routine. And I began to realize that my daily vice had become a daily escape – a place I could go to get away from the stress of daily ministry.

I hit my mid-30s and I began to feel the effects of how daily alcohol consumption can effect your sleep. Turns out that going to bed late and waking up a little hungover doesn't do a body good the closer you get to 40. My patience with my kids in the morning is also shorter when I'm trying to break through the morning fog of a late night watching TV and indulging. I needed a change. I needed to realign my relationship to alcohol so I could ensure that the relationships that mattered most in my life got the very best version of myself in return.

Why am I sharing such a personal testimony? As pastors, we do a lot of intense, interpersonal work. And I want to speak to those among us who serve in ministry and also struggle with vices that promise to relieve the stress. We know all too well how the temporary release of that stress can give way to shame. It's a vicious cycle too many of us live with day in and day out. My struggle was/is alcohol. I know some who struggle with eating. Others have deeper, more damaging vices like pornography or gambling or worse. On the outside we want to look like we have it all together. We all want you to think we're the faith leaders we long to be. But on the inside we all feel like fakes at some point. The outer veneer only covers in inner brokenness we all carry.

So how do we all live with this brokenness and break free of the silent struggle with daily shame and over-indulgence? Below are 3 things we could start with:

1. Lay people, befriend your pastor. Give them the gift of judgment-free space. It's hard to take off the mask of pastor. I can't promise your pastor will respond with utmost authenticity, at least not immediately, but just offering space for them to be real with no judgment is a tremendous gift.
2. Pastors, seek help early and often. We pastors tend to think we are somehow super human, as though brokenness in life only effect those we lead in ministry. I see a therapist on the 3rd Thursday of every month. It's a standing appointment I've re-established after too long without one. You need someone other than your spouse to process the junk that comes with the joy of ministry. Find that professional person now.
3. Churches, be honest about human struggle. Churches tend to either be overly judgmental and/or overly pious. Spoiler alert: Most folks already know we're full of shit with that stuff. Stop playing church with fancy words, pious sentiment, and the cheesy culture you're peddling and start BEING the church. Be a place where broken people can come and be shockingly real. And shock them by being real in return. Make love something more than just a platitude.

This self-imposed season of sobriety has turned out to be a gift of grace. I'm learning what it feels like to feel more free and real. The temporary enjoyment of alcohol every day only numbed me and helped me avoid dealing with stress. The stress is still there, but so are the joy of mornings with my kids feeling fully alert, the nights where rest actually goes undisturbed, and the new routine of lifting weights every morning at the gym that helps me process that stress in healthy ways instead of just numbing it.

Will I drink again? I'm sure I will. But probably not at the end of the month. The good news of it all is that through this gift of grace, that daily shame I used to feel is slowly being replaced with the one thing alcohol and other vices can never give you...joy.

Postscript

After going 60 days without a drink, and spending time in reflection and conversation with my therapist, I've determined a couple of things about the state of my relationship with alcohol. First, it's an issue of WHY. Before drinking, I need to ask myself why I'm choosing to do it. I've enjoyed a glass of wine with my wife while binge-watching TV shows. But knowing how to facilitate an experience vs. hoping to numb the pain of stress is the difference between a healthy relationship and not. And also knowing that nightly indulgences are the rarity, not the norm, is the path toward my best and healthiest self.

I encourage all faith leaders to do an honest assessment of the role of alcohol in your life, even if you don't like what you'll find. And find some good friends who will hold you accountable. Most of all, structure your life in such a way that you can avoid needing to blow off the steam of stress daily. This means eating well, sleeping more, and caring about your whole self. Use my story as one that encourages you to be honest and intentional about who you are as a servant of God.

From the online Blog of: Rev. Ben Gosden, Sr. Pastor, Historic Trinity UMC



Walk Into AA: I Did

by Caroline Jackovich

Panic and frustration.

This is what I felt when I pulled into the church parking lot to attend an open women-only Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting. Attending was an assignment for my class on addictions.

I did not want to be there. I had seen plenty of AA meetings on my favorite TV show, *Grey's Anatomy*. I prepared myself to walk past women outside who were smoking, something I had often seen AA members do. Then I would spend an hour listening to these women talk about their problems: how they almost drank and what control alcohol had over them. Inside the church, I saw no indication of where the meeting was. Frantically, I checked the website as a few members of the church passed by and saw my confused face. They pointed me in the right direction.

I stepped inside the room and there were 4 older women sitting at a table. There were no doughnuts or coffee, a stereotype of AA meetings. As I looked at the women, I thought, "Wow, these women don't look like alcoholics." This thought prompted me to think: "What *does* an alcoholic look like?" They were all extremely welcoming, and they asked why I was there.

I explained that I was in school and my assignment was to attend 2 meetings about addiction. They asked me about my classes and what I knew about the program of 12 Step Recovery. I admitted that I knew only what I had seen on TV and in the movies. They laughed and said the program isn't exactly as it seems, but they all agreed that the TV show "Mom" was the best representation of how the program actually works.

They told me I was welcome to participate fully in the meeting and that I could share if I felt led to share. They said their group was more free-form, and, therefore, they tended to break some of the rules. They all had become good friends. They go out to eat the last Tuesday of every month together, and they invited me to join them at any time.

I mentally sighed with relief. The women were reading from an AA-approved book that was full of different scenarios in which alcoholics had to deal with things in their lives and how they reacted. It reminded me of the book, *Chicken Soup for the Soul* with its stories, the good and the bad. After each story, the members shared how they might have dealt with each situation. They gave me the opportunity to speak each time, but I passed. I wasn't sure how to respond because I didn't know how to empathize or relate.

During the meeting a young woman came in who was visibly upset. After one of the readings, she took a turn to share, but admitted she had been drinking. I got the feeling she might be new to the program. One of the members thanked her for sharing, but reminded her that if you aren't sober, the AA Program asks that you only listen. She stayed for a few more moments, threw a small cash donation on the table and left before the meeting ended. She seemed like someone who needed to talk.

After the meeting, I asked the women why she couldn't share. If you aren't sober, they said, chances are you need to listen and take in the lessons that others with more life experience can offer.

I left the meeting feeling as though I had gained much insight into people in recovery. They are just normal human beings who have struggled with a life-threatening chronic illness. They are "working" the 12 Step Program of Alcoholics Anonymous and trying to remain strong in the face of their addiction that will always be part of them. They are proving to themselves and others that lifelong recovery is possible.

Caroline Jackovich is a member of the Interfaith Addiction and Recovery Coalition team of volunteers. She is a resident of Savannah, a member of Trinity United Methodist Church, and is working on her (third) college degree, Child and Family Development.

How to Stay Sober During a Pandemic

New York Times, April 11, 2020

In a Zoom meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous last week, a waifish figure with rheumy eyes assumed the center of the computer screen.

"I have several hours clean," the person said, grinning and lurching screen left. "I need help."

This was my first online experience of the fellowship that has been a cornerstone of my life since 2011. Like many A.A. members, I found I needed the meetings more than ever when the coronavirus quarantine cancelled the in-person ones.

But internet A.A. at first glance, was uncanny. I caught my breath to see someone so addled, probably still drunk or high, make this disclosure to a crowd in internet strangers who couldn't, not really, look one another in the eye. In my experience, A. A. is about bodies in space – hugs, pats on the backs, a tissue when you need it.

"I just need help," said the troubled person on my laptop.

At that, the small streaming videos of members across the top of the Zoom interface burst into applause. It's our habit in A. A. to heap praise on anyone courageous enough to make a start. Of course, the applause was silent, since we were all streaming the meeting, and we were all on mute.

But it was a relief to see the familiar ceremony, right here, in the corner of the internet now staked out for sober alcoholics – and anyone, in any plague bunker, with what we call a "desire to stop drinking."

A quarantine is indeed a trying time. Where "people who can drink normally" – A.A. lingo for non-alcoholics – are stocking up on liquor, A.A. members, and here are some 2.1 million of us, are hell-bent on keeping the meetings going.

Though at least one New York City meeting stayed open a few days after the lockdown, its chairs spaced six feet apart, my regular ones now convene on Zoom, the same videoconferencing software that many schools are using.

In the best of times, many A.A. members suffer from what traditionalists call "RID" for restlessness, irritability, and discontent," and we're now confessing to every manner of itch. Some want to drink. Some suddenly despise their roommates. Some are eating Lucky Charms out of the box and wondering whether, with a knack remembered from druggie days, they might snort the marshmallow dust.



In short, we have grown used to disclosing our intimate secrets into our laptop cameras, like a bunch of extremely earnest and fully dressed campgirls. It has been weird.

Eight and a half years ago, I attended my first in-person meeting, in the undercroft of a Unitarian church in Brooklyn. I overdressed. It's common to start to try to perfume away desperation; later, I learned no one is fooled. A.A. members, as their minds and lives clear up, are instructed to wear their sobriety 'like a loose garment,' and on Zoom, we're in a state-of-the-art loose.

Still, knowing I'm on the internet discussing the most shameful part of my life, and changing my profile hastily to delete my last name, makes me freshly nervous about how candid I can be in this setting.

But I keep going, and the online meetings are packed. In one Zoom that I attended last week, a woman with a fake tropical beach background surveyed the images of the 50-plus people who'd showed up. She talked about cultivating acceptance of the pandemic, not "future-tripping," and instead taking the "next right action."

"A.A. is like a freaking cockroach," she told the virtual assembly. "Like you can't kill us." There was a pause. "I mean 'cockroach' in a *good way*."

I was in New York City on Sept. 11, 2001, and had planned a bender almost before the Twin Towers hit the ground. Under my sink, I kept a giant shoe box – it once held knee-high boots – filled with benzos and opiates. I took a handful to steady me for a run to the wine shop.

While others were giving blood, I studiously adulterated mine with enough substances to cost me any trace of good judgement. What if someone mistook me for a functioning human with an idea about Al Qaeda or, worse, *asked me to help*?

Active alcoholics tend to find ordinary life events intolerable: an empty ice tray, a mediocre taco. If you know your solution (a drink), you tend to retro-engineer your problem (anything) to tee that solution up. It's a bad day, a good day, a Tuesday: drink!

When I was active, especially at the end, I tended to give myself no choice but to pour another tumbler of wine by imagining that alcohol was the only way to endure life on earth. So when something is truly intolerable, like a global pandemic, active alcoholics know just what to do.

Today, my 9/11- caliber anxiety sends me to Zoom. Meetings that used to gather once a week offline now meet twice a day. Most of the time, we listen to speakers tell their stories – how the drinking started, how bad it got, what happened to bring them to their knees, and what their lives are like now. Barring a few jokes about the tech, these presentations are fluent, wry, and moving, similar to the ones you'd hear in a traditional meeting.

Many people who speak in meetings say they're overwhelmed with relief to find these online gatherings, which are indeed coherent and powerful.

"Part of me wants to shut down, to make the world as small as my bed," said someone from a placeless quarantine, the other day. But in sobriety I can find I can be of service to my mother – actually call, ask about what interests *her*, make sure she's OK.

The quarantine in New York is only three weeks old, and I must have attended a dozen meetings, although I've shared only once. Was my diffidence because I missed the real-life meeting? The folding chairs, the musty smell, the corny "Easy Does It" placards, the hand holding, the reliably status-leveling quality of the basements where I got sober?

All the iconic A.A. machinery reminds me of my bottom – when things were so bad, and my humiliation so high, that I received what some call "the gift of desperation." The memory of that gift, of how bad it once was, and how, to my daily astonishment, good it is now, is what I get from the global network of rudimentary 3-D meetings, spaces known as 'the rooms.'

"I'm just having trouble, during this virus, with all the *change*," I said, when I shared.

On Zoom an icon appeared: another 'hand' was raised, and the chair of the meeting unmuted someone, who displaced me in the center screen.

"I heard that alcoholics fear two things: Change. And the way things are right now. The trick is accepting both."

Please visit our Facebook page:

https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=interfaith%20addiction%20and%20recovery%20coalition&epa=SEARCH_BOX

Our volunteer team of Interfaith Addiction and Recovery Coalition is composed of Savannah lay people who have been affected by addiction and have found recovery, as well as professionals in medicine, rehabilitation and therapy. Our Cabinet of advisors includes local faith leaders from the Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, Baha'i and Quaker traditions.

Photo credits: Blog, Covered In The Master's Dust, Alcoholics Anonymous International website, The New York Times.

Interfaith Addiction and Recovery Coalition | C/O 225 West President Street, Savannah, GA
31401

[Unsubscribe ardra.kh@gmail.com](mailto:ardra.kh@gmail.com)

[Update Profile](#) | [About Constant Contact](#)

Sent by ardra.kh@gmail.com in collaboration with



[Try email marketing for free today!](#)