

Chapter from novel “Back From the Other Side” – The Speaker Meeting

I struggled in AA three more horrible weeks, and then I stopped going to meetings. White-knuckling it, it was like driving with the brakes on. My wife also said I was more fun stoned. I soon slipped back into drugs, and a new round of family meetings was convened to bail me out with rent money and utility bills; with the family now putting me on notice: “this is it, no more.”

I slip again, and now the wife prepares to leave me with our newborn. My wife leaves to visit her parents, actually preparing the way for her to move out there with our newborn son. She will return once more to LA but it’s as a final gather-up-her-stuff-in-order-to-leave effort. I am left in the LA shambles, and am told the truth by my brother-in-law:

“You only have three things ahead of you if you don’t stop: death, hospital or jail.”

I finally ‘got it.’ I went back to AA determined like an animal holding onto a piece of meat. Not “one day at a time,” but “five-minutes at a time.” Two meetings a day, three meetings a day, staying after meetings, coming early to meetings. I noticed that in general the guys who said things I could identify with – and with that identification learn something – all had heavy spiritual programs. One talked to me at length and would often say “this is where I get strength from,” and point to passages in the bible.

I bought a bible, but didn’t hardly open it. I became a champion at Ms Pac Man, a video game which allowed me something to do when my brain was too frazzled to read a book or watch TV. I was often playing against children at the video machine in convenience stores or other places. I often had the high score, and found it contributed to a very rare upbeat humor to have twelve year-olds whispering and pointing to me as “the guy to beat” for the high score in Ms. PacMan. It was something to do between meetings.

Two years before, I had spent my wedding day morning lying on a beach in Malibu around 8 a.m., shooting up the greater part of the \$500 worth of cocaine I had bought with cash wedding gifts. I would shoot one large dose after another of the high-quality cocaine into my vein, with my humming body lying on the beach blanket, my arm extended towards the surf. The trail from that beach blanket to now was strewn with two years of broken dreams and tortured promises, searing my conscience and frightening my memory.

I was now sitting at the kitchen table in my empty apartment, maybe three weeks sober from my last slip. I was so edgy I could neither carry on a conversation for very long nor watch a TV program. I literally could not stand to be in a drugstore for any reason. The advertisements for the U-100 Insulin syringes on the walls were too much for my mental state to handle. I was defeated and could go no further. I didn’t want to go further. I couldn’t take it any more. I had finally hit bottom. I opened this book that I had spent all my life cynically despising for its hayseed adherents and flipped it open to the red print. I started reading again the words of this Hebrew Messiah whose words they print in that different color.

“Come unto me all ye who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

That did it. I started to cry. I fell onto floor and proceeded to go deep into the headwaters of the grief. I suddenly saw myself: A terribly ugly, weak, evil creature. I saw there was not a single good thing in me. I was a lie and selfish and small and a failure and a coward. The worst part in

seeing through this spiritual eye was that there wasn't a single thing I could do to fundamentally change this creation that I had become. This is what I am. Those acidic juices that burn through the skin's surface to erupt in sores were in me by the bucketful, replenishing themselves through a dynamic, living fountainhead that was a mechanism, and therefore would not and could not dry up. Any change-for-the-better would simply become a dollop of egoism dropped into this pool of acid. This is who I was.

I yearned for release, and from deep within my solar plexus wrenched out something along the lines of "Jesus, help me. If you're alive, and I believe you are alive, I pray you are, help me, forgive me, change me. I can't do anything. I can't do anything..." And I cried all the more, and as I went into an unashamed delirium of weeping with my face in the carpet in my empty apartment, a light shown briefly at the end of my mind's long dark tunnel. I knew in some way I couldn't explain that I had believed in something real, and had found something real, inner and beyond, yet not of this world.

When I stood up I knew I had hope, and the feeling stayed with me while I blew my nose, wiped my eyes, farted, took a pee, thought of jerking off, turned the TV on and off, had something to eat and ultimately returned to reading the bible right up until the next AA meeting.

Almost all AA meetings involve the opportunity for individuals to speak as participants, but there are special "speaker meetings," where (special?) people with something (special?) to say would be asked to speak alone. A speaker meeting was coming that appeared to be a big deal to many of my new-found AA acquaintances. I noticed this speaker seemed to engender respect from these guys, and these guys didn't give respect easily. That much got my attention.

Well, I guess I'll get my ass over to the meeting and see what these bumpkins have to say. I got there and found, amongst the huge crowd, some faces I recognized. I discovered that the speaker is in everyday life a low-paid service worker. I had kind of expected that the speaker would be someone of prestige, that I could "look up to." A degreed individual, a published author, someone in a position with some title or honor. I mean, he has to have something important and significant to share, doesn't he? I mean, really... Who cares what he thinks if all he can do is sweep floors and not get drunk... Wasn't that obvious?

To be a worker of low rank, my readiness to shoot him down now took on a disappointed condescension as I pigeonholed him into a cheap suit who drank rotgut in the 50's. This was like watching grade school children put on a serious play. This guy probably never even did acid or smoked a joint. Probably never even heard of Bob Dylan not-to-mention any of the prominent post-Freudian theorists. God, what am I doing here?

As he began to speak, I mentally sneered him up and cynically ripped him down, finally condescending to listen. In spite of myself, I found myself reaching out internally to a point he was making, when suddenly... I was gone.

I was in the spirit. I was at that shoreline shooting coke exactly as I had done on my wedding day morning. My arm lay outstretched towards the water, which came up to about a foot from my hand with the syringe in it. The salt in the ocean has been replaced by cocaine, the spirit communicated. All I would ever have to do is lower my syringe into the ocean to draw up and I could have all the cocaine injections I wanted into eternity. The disposition of my soul, that inner dimension deeper than thought and ego, responded: "*No. I don't want it anymore.*"

I was suddenly back in that uncomfortable AA chair listening to this older soft-spoken man talking about trusting God apart from religion. Then it swept over me: THAT voice, that all-encompassing quiet voice I hadn't heard since I was six in that taxi cab on the way to Rio: "What was *that*?" The eternal spike came right through my head with nowhere to run.

After the talk, I shook his hand, expecting some voice from heaven to communicate with me personally somehow (*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased?*), but the speaker appeared to be unaware of the spiritual breakthrough I had had.

Afterwards, I found that when I went into certain meeting halls that had these old paintings depicting the hopeless alcoholic praying in some horrible room with "the light" shining down, I would get goosebumps. Something more than mere sobriety had begun.

Not that my madness was over, it was just that it was no longer chemically colored. I knew it was impossible to live as long as alcohol or chemicals were involved, and somehow my desire to be sober had been energized. For the first time, I *wanted* to be sober. This was something new and different, and it was interesting to tackle sobriety. I scratched and sniffed at what it was like to be good, and found the experience not entirely unpleasant.

The madness of the mirage, however, was going to take different forms to keep my soul in its dark possession. Religion, for example, was right around the corner. If you want to interact with the gods, most turn to religion as the only game in town. But sometimes, I found the game is rigged.