

About AA

Alcoholics Anonymous and the Legal Profession

The legal profession—as is true of every profession—is well represented among the members in most A. A. meetings. All members of A. A. (each in his own way) carry the A. A. message to still-suffering alcoholics. The lawyer who is an A. A. member can also—while protecting his personal anonymity—gently steer an alcoholic colleague or client to Alcoholics Anonymous. The nonalcoholic judge or lawyer—when well-informed about alcoholism and the A. A. program of recovery—can better identify the problem and counsel clients whose legal problems may well have their roots in alcoholism.

In this issue, we present two articles by members of the legal profession who are also recovered alcoholics in the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous. In the first, a judge relates his experience (as all A. A.'s do to remain sober), with the additional slant of the legal professional. The second article gives a sober attorney's view of how the message of recovery from the bondage of alcoholism can be carried by his colleagues.

A Judge's Story

When requested to write an article "aimed at the legal profession," I failed to ask if the intent was to inform the legal profession, as such, about the illness of alcoholism and Alcoholics Anonymous, or if the intent was to inform the individual professional who might be afflicted with the illness and who thinks he or she is or was beyond help of any kind, as I was convinced and utterly miserable for years until I became an active member of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Since I practiced law and was on the bench for a total of 47 years, and to date have been sober and active for over 34 years (thank God) in A. A., I will probably write one paragraph objectively and lapse into subjectivity in the next. In any event, I hope that what I say will, in some way, let the individual lawyer and/or judge who might have the problem, or have a client who does, know that help is readily, effectively, and happily given by members of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Both the legal and medical profession have a unique position from which to help the alcoholic patient or client. The doctor sees the physical and mental deterioration as the result of alcoholism; the lawyer sees domestic destruction affecting spouse and children, and often threats of criminal prosecution. Both doctor and lawyer hold a personal and privileged relationship that allows them to advise without "preaching" when the same advice from others would fall on resentful ears. The advice from nonalcoholics in the professions could steer the patient or client (through a member) to Alcoholics Anonymous.

Each conscientious lawyer should have the number and name of a consenting A. A. member at hand and, when recognizing the problem is alcohol and with the consent of the client, put the two in touch. This act can many times save months and years of miserable living for both client and family, if not a life.

The former stigma of "habitual drunkenness" (now politely referred to as alcoholism) has almost disappeared thanks to the American Medical Association, a sound public information

policy of the A. A. General Service Office, and the National Council on Alcoholism. Many state legislatures and courts have practically abolished the old offense of "public drunkenness," unless in connection with or in perpetration of a statutory criminal offense. Likewise "habitual drunkenness" by that definition in nearly all states has been eliminated as a ground for divorce.

In recognition by our courts that alcoholism is a treatable illness and that jail is both expensive and ineffective as a solution for the alcoholic, especially the repeater or "revolving-door drunk," more and more courts are referring alcoholics to A. A. and treatment centers.

From the days of the powdered wig and black robe of the English barrister to the dark suit, white shirt, and conservative tie of today's lawyer, he or she attempts to create the image of dignity, self-assurance, intellect, integrity, and financial success—at the same time knowing that active alcoholism is the antithesis of all of these traits. Thus the constant and, if not overcome, the fatal denial of the affliction.

It might be helpful to my colleagues in the legal profession for me to share a few personal experiences as to "what it was like and what it is like now." I was to try a rather important case before an appellate court for a client who "accidentally" employed me. I say accidentally since he was a newcomer to my town and hadn't learned of my "affliction." As so often happens to the alcoholic I took that "one drink" the night before the case was to be heard (we always drink at the most inappropriate times) and as usual was drunk when I came to, and the next day in court.

One of the appellate judges noticed my condition and announced a postponement for some reason I'm sure he invented on the spot. Some months later, after coming into A. A., I attempted to make amends by apologizing and thanking the justice. To my surprise he stated, "Son, I know just how you felt since I've been there myself; I've been sober in A. A. for seven years."

My law practice went from zero when I was drinking to substantial success soon after coming into A.A. One of the lawyers whom I sponsored into the program became a Chief Justice of the State Supreme Court. He died several years ago, never having taken another drink. I suppose you might call this boasting with humility, but really all I did was introduce him to A.A.; God—through the program—did the rest.

If this article should help just one alcoholic, either directly or indirectly, then I have in a small way met my responsibility to the Fellowship that saved my spiritual, mental, and physical life.

A Lawyer's Viewpoint

The disease concept of alcoholism is now fully established in principle in the U.S. and Canada, and A.A. members, including many lawyers who are in A.A., have been instrumental in spreading the message that alcoholism is a disease. However, the viewpoint has yet to be fully accepted by all segments of society. There are many who still view alcoholism as a moral question.

It has become apparent that many lawyers who get into trouble with the disciplinary bodies of the bar at state and local levels are alcoholics — that their troubles are probably the result of their disease. Such problems include jeopardizing a client's case by failing to appear in court or misuse of client's funds.

Today, in most states and often at the city or county level, lawyers in A.A. have been instrumental in forming committees of their local bar associations to address the problem of the alcoholic lawyer or judge. In many cases, such a "Committee on Alcoholism" will work closely with the disciplinary procedure so that the lawyer in trouble will know that there are peers who are willing to help him. The help offered is not for the purpose of getting him out of his difficulties with the authorities, but to help him with his drinking problem. Sometimes, however, the lawyer who stops drinking while the disciplinary process is grinding away may be treated differently from the lawyer who has not recognized his underlying problem.

A characteristic of lawyers is that they are in the business of telling other people what to do. The person who has authority over other human beings often has a hard time listening to the advice of ordinary people. As in all professions, many alcoholic lawyers are able to function despite their drinking and may even think that it is the alcohol which enables them to function.

Given such attitudes, the lawyer is most likely to listen, if he will listen at all, to his peers. For this reason, the local bar association's Committee on Alcoholism may be able to reach the alcoholic attorney when no one else can. In large cities it may be difficult to spot the person with the problem. In smaller communities, the A.A. lawyer will have less difficulty discerning which colleague is an alcoholic. There are instances where a couple of A.A. lawyers have marched into the office of the active alcoholic and confronted him. They have told him their own stories and offered to take him to a meeting.

In some communities, the alcoholic lawyer is first taken to a special interest meeting, a group made up solely of other lawyers or professionals. Such groups exist on the theory that the arrogant drunk will listen better in a roomful of peers. But in all instances, it is made clear to the alcoholic, in time, that he must join the mainstream of A.A.

One useful function of a Committee on Alcoholism may be to sponsor forums on the subject of alcoholism and the legal profession. Such consciousness-raising in the professional community can spread the message that alcoholism is a disease and that there is treatment available. The simple statement that there are lawyers who are alcoholics can be new information for many members of the bar.

Local committees have also sponsored "hot lines," advertising a number in the law journal that the troubled lawyer can call if he wants help, assuring confidentiality.

Most committees report that the leaders of local bar associations will cooperate in such efforts. They may not really believe the disease concept, but given the medical authority behind this position, they are not likely to argue the point.

In working in this area, the lawyer who is a member of A.A. must remember that he wears two hats — one as an A.A. member and another as a lawyer trying to reach his colleagues. In certain instances he may need to break his anonymity, in other situations it may not be appropriate to do so. Any lawyer conversant with the Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous will know the difference.

For More Information . . .

The pamphlets "If You Are a Professional, A.A. Wants to Work With You" and "How A.A. Members Cooperate With Other Community Efforts to Help Alcoholics" contain useful information for the professional.

"Information on Alcoholics Anonymous" is a single-page fact sheet explaining what A.A. can and cannot do. It is a useful information paper that is often used by A.A.'s on Public Information and Cooperation with the Professional Community committees when dealing with court programs and with alcoholics sent to A.A. through the courts.

The flyer "A.A. at a Glance" is available at no charge, and also comes in a P.I. easel-design display container which can be used in doctor's waiting rooms, social service offices, and other professionals' offices. Container and 100 copies of flyer for \$1.50.

All of the above, plus other literature describing the A.A. recovery program, available from: General Service Office, Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163.

For information and contacts for lawyers in Alcoholics Anonymous contact: International Lawyers in A.A., c/o Secretary, I.L.L.A.A., 111 Pearl St., Room 202, Hartford, CT 06103. Canadian liaison: P.O. Box 2138, Sarnia, Ontario, Canada N7T 7L1.