

The Power of Our Stories



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Humans have told stories since they learned to talk. For aeons, stories were the history, the law, the hope and the education of all societies.

So it is in AA.

By Chris G.

When I first came to AA, I had no story.

Oh, there were lots of stories I could tell: drunken episodes, all the problems the world had given me, all my troubles. But no story that was mine, no coherent line through my life. Nothing of a direction, no beginning, middle and ending, happy or otherwise. All I had was a confused mess of vignettes, smothered in anger, loneliness, and self-pity.

I didn't come to AA through any rehab or referral. When I got so bad that I couldn't stand it anymore, I just called the number in the phone book – phone book! does that date me, or what – and went to the first meeting they offered. So I went in with almost no expectations, just some vague knowledge from the newspapers that AA was the place to stop drinking.

Someone greeted me, offered a cup of coffee, said some nice things, and guided me to a seat, up near the front. When the meeting started, I was completely lost. Preamble, steps, traditions and

whatever else they read: I could parse none of it. A basket appeared in my lap; I think I put a dollar in it.

Then someone went to the front, said he was an alcoholic, and started talking.

My ears woke up before my brain did. Somewhere in the first few minutes of the guy's talk, my ears grabbed my brain, shook it hard, and said "Pay attention! Listen to this." I had no idea what he started with, but suddenly I was paying attention. This stranger was telling me about just what I was feeling like, inside. For the first time in my life, another drunk was getting through to me. I've no idea, now, what he said, at that first meeting, but as I think on it I do remember very vividly how I felt. Something inside me melted, or snapped, of both, and I started crying like a baby. He was funny, too, and I remember laughing through the tears, the whole room laughing, and it just seemed impossible but wonderful.

After he was done, my friendly greeter pushed me up front to get a shiny aluminium coin, and someone said the inevitable "suck on this, and when it melts you can have a drink". Corny, but it made me feel good. He sold me a Big Book on the way out, too – slick salesman.

When I got home, I proudly showed my wife the coin, told her about this amazing guy who told his story about getting out from under the bottle, and said to her, "you know, I think this might work." It did. Twice.

Fast forward a number of years, some of them black with drink; I was not a first time learner in spite of that hopeful start.

I was on business in the Midwest, and dropped in on a meeting in a small farm town, a one-shot visit. They hardly ever got visitors there, so they asked me to share a little of who I was, at introduction time. So I gave a little ten-minute spiel on how I got there that night – initial sobriety, the relapse, how I got back, current struggles, how I was working on my sobriety right then, how good it was ... and looked across the room to see a guy all puddled up and wiping his eyes.

Flashback! Suddenly I was back at my first ever meeting, melting inside. Only now I had a story to share.

I talked to that fellow a bit after the meeting; it was his second meeting. He said, "you were telling my story". He couldn't get over it. Somebody just like him, only sober, employed, successful – showing up out of the blue on a cold night in that tiny town in a fancy car – and he knew I'd been where he was then. We were miles apart by the usual social measures of education, dialect, occupation, dress, you name it, but that little story made us like brothers that night. He said I gave him more hope than he had had in years ... and what he gave me was priceless: the feeling of joy of helping another drunk, that most powerful of all medicines for our disease. The story, you see, was progressing.

Humans have told stories since they learned to talk. For aeons, stories were the history, the law, the hope and the education of all societies. They are so deep in our social consciousness, we

respond to them still with our full attention. They have the power to move us emotionally like no other medium. Certain themes have gone on for so long, that, for example, a hero's quest is instantly recognizable: we anticipate the challenge, the obstacles, the pitfalls, the betrayals, the struggles, and the final success. We come to want to be the hero, to act as the hero.

So it is in AA. A drunk can immediately empathize with the story of another drunk's struggles; no other message can get through to him so easily and quickly. And as the AA Success theme becomes familiar, the newer member can relate to the "hero", the more successfully sober storyteller, and he can imagine himself following in those footsteps, and it gives him hope and courage and energy to go on for one more day. The narrative gets in his mind, he wants to act it out, become a hero, become the sober one.

Powerful medicine, indeed. And true medicine, for as we change our behaviour ... emulating a hero, for example ... we now know that we are actually changing our brains, reprogramming the grey matter at the cellular level, down where our addiction lives, deep in our internal reward system.

So when you are new in AA, listen to the stories. Try to live up to the ones that especially strike you. And then when you have some success, tell your story to others. This is one of the many things you can do to help beat your addiction ... and not the smallest. And all those tears? That is catharsis. That is your brain changing, repairing itself.

My story keeps changing, and I keep telling it, knowing that it will resonate with someone, sometime. All our stories do. So as your story develops, start telling it, watch it grow, and keep telling it.

And, of course, listen to others' stories, too.

Chris was a somehow functioning drunk for 30-odd years. This allowed him to fit right in to the corporate sociopathy in positions of senior management at several companies. He regrets the damage done to society while gaining various accolades in the mindless race to shareholder happiness. He has been sober 11 years, and after coming out as an AA Atheist 7 years ago, is continuing to enjoy the expanded horizons of secular sobriety. The "land of 10,000 things" has mostly receded into the past, and he just wants to quietly enjoy retirement, helping out where he can.

Over the years Chris has written a total of nine articles posted on AA Agnostica. Seven of them have been book reviews. Here they are, with links to each and every one of them:

- [*We Are That We Are – Theism, Spiritualism, Naturalism and a Path to Spiritual Existentialism* \[Review\] \(August 21, 2019\)](#)

- [*Twelve Secular Steps – An Addiction Recovery Guide*](#) [Review] (November 25, 2018)
 - [*The Power of Our Stories*](#) (February 11, 2016)
 - [*My Brain Goes Fuzzy When They Talk About God*](#) (June 21, 2015)
 - [*Common Sense Recovery*](#) [Review] (September 21, 2014)
 - [*The Many Paths to Spirituality Pamphlet*](#) [Review] (August 13, 2014)
 - [*Don't Tell*](#) [Review] (May 14, 2014)
 - [*The Alternative 12 Steps – A Secular Guide to Recovery*](#) [Review] (January 29, 2014)
 - [*A History of Agnostic Groups in AA*](#) [Review] (December 4, 2013)
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