

A Sober View after 20 Years of Abusing Drugs

by Todd Smoke

My name is Todd and I am an alcoholic. I say that not as much for you as I do for me because I have accepted the fact that I am an alcoholic. I have to remind myself of that all the time. I am an alcoholic before I am a father to my children. I am an alcoholic before I am a son to my father, before I am any sort of employee to an employer. That is a fact. Some people say it is labeling me. Aren't you better than that now? Haven't you grown out of that now? As far as I am concerned, it doesn't matter. What I am doing today has kept me sober for the first time since I was 14 years old. I don't think I should change it. I don't think I should mess that up today.

I will be mentioning Alcoholics Anonymous, but I am in no way a representative of Alcoholics Anonymous. Alcoholics Anonymous is not the only way to stay sober. I am not here to push AA, but I cannot tell my story without mentioning it or the ***Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous***. One thing I want to touch on a couple times today is that you parents often think your children's addiction is your fault. Chances are, it's not your fault. Now, doesn't that make you feel better? It's not your fault. I know it doesn't take much of the pain away, does it? My father struggled with that for years. What did I do wrong? What could I have done better? I have to constantly, to this day, remind him: It is not your fault. It is nothing you did. Yesterday something came up that I had noticed about someone else's kids saying, "I had to live up to your standards. I thought you were perfect." I did have a little of that. Looking at my parents being ministers; I put them on a pedestal but still once again, my problem was not their fault. It was my perception of the church, religion and my parents. That was nothing that they impressed on me. They never said: "Be like me." They never said, "We want a perfect son." All the time they said, "We want a normal son." I got that a lot, "Just be normal." I could see the fact that I was not acting normally. There was nothing that they did that pushed me into drugs and alcohol. I started drinking and using when I was fourteen years old and my use was caused by nothing they did. I didn't drink and use drugs because of pain. I wasn't hiding from anything. I wasn't running from anything. I drank and used alcohol because it sounded like fun. That's my excuse. It wasn't a big pressure. I looked for the people who were drinking and using because I wanted to have fun. It comes back to the problem of alcoholics. We are selfish and self-centered. We think about us. I think about **me** before I think about anybody else. That is where that fun thing comes in. I'm not thinking about what I am doing to anybody else. I'm thinking about what I can get for me, the most of it and as fast as possible, what's going to make me feel good or make me feel different, not necessarily good all the time, just different. Eventually, I drank to take away the feelings, but that is not why I started.

I started by smoking pot and drinking beer. No problem. I was just partying, having fun. My parents knew pretty much right away about my use when they found a big bag of pot in my room. It wasn't like I was hiding it real well from them. So they didn't go through all of this denial. They saw it right away. Now, the depths I went to that took them a while to understand. They were tough on me. They did set boundaries from the get go. They set the parameters. "You cannot use and stay in this house. If you do, you will be confined to this house." They stuck to that. But I still drank and continued to use because that is what I wanted to do. They would put me on restriction after school. "You can't go anywhere." I said, "Fine." As soon as they went to bed, I was out the door. I went through most of my high school years like that. There was always a way to get away with it. I think someone yesterday mentioned passive/aggressive use. That is how I was. I would say anything to get them off my back. "Yes, sir." "Okay. I'll do that." "I'll do that. Okay." "I'll do that." And then bam, out the back door. Now my sister was a little different. They would tell her what to do and she would swear at them, curse and say, "No, I'm not." And then she would do her thing. I found the path of least resistance – just tell them what they wanted to hear. I would do anything to get my way, because

I'm thinking of **me** again. It was to the point where I wouldn't even listen to what my dad was saying. The whole time I was thinking: "What does he want me to tell him? What is the answer he is looking for?" I was playing that whole game; trying to run the show.

I started having minor problems with the law. I was still able to work and keep a job. I did real well in school through all of this. I wasn't at school much, but I pulled off good grades. When I got out of high school, I decided to take some time off for **me**. I decided to take a summer off to surf, skate, and do all the things that kids like to do because I am young and I can do that now. The fact was I took that time off to drink and use. I became really heavily involved in the early underground punk rock scene in Hollywood at the time. This was back in the late seventies, early eighties when it was still underground. I became real involved in that lifestyle: sex, drugs, rock'n roll, hair, dress and all the stuff. That sub-culture just gave me more opportunities to use. I was still able to work. I found an interest in the medical field and began working, which helped me support my habit.

I got my first shocker when when I was about 21 or 22. I woke up in an ambulance after a heroin overdose. But you can't scare an alcoholic sober. It did scare me enough to slow down. With some help from my father, I was able to get through a trade school to get some training, so I could do some more medical work. But I was continuing to use and drink during this whole period. It was working for me. I couldn't stop at that time. Right around that time my dad had me see a counselor because he knew I had a problem of drinking. The counselor talked to us for about ten minutes and said, "He's not done. It's working for him. Leave him alone." I'm sure my dad didn't like those words, but it was a fact. I was enjoying myself.

From that point on, things did get worse. Up until this day I have never really kept a job for more than two years. I had this 1 ½ year wall that I would always hit. Then I would become too comfortable and my use would get out of control and I would end up losing the job. I think I have legitimately quit only one job out of all my jobs. I've had about 30 or 40 jobs since I was 14 years old. I was always fired because of drugs and alcohol. It didn't matter. I was living life the way I wanted to live life. That was all that mattered to me. I was getting what I wanted to get. I thought I had it good. I always had a beautiful girl, a halfway decent job, and popularity around the scene in Orange County. It was cool.

I moved to Phoenix in 1987. At that point I was getting really strung out on heroin. I already had had my overdose and had spent some time in jail, but that was no big deal. I cruised through that. But now I was really unhealthy, really skinny, and tired of working; and I wanted to get off the heroin. And I did. About a month or two after being in Phoenix, I kicked the heroin. But the Tempe/Phoenix area is a great place to drink. I was always drinking. I took the drugs away and just drank more. I wasn't going to school at Arizona State, but I was hanging there because they had all the drink specials and the weather was nice.

I moved to Phoenix to live with my parents, but they almost immediately kicked me out because of my drinking. I stayed with some friends, then got an apartment, got a job and lost a job – my regular routine. I lived in a car that didn't run for a couple of months. I took a series of beatings. All I did was drink. I pretty much lived to drink. I'm living outdoors, so I have to drink to sleep. All day long I had nothing to do but drink.

I went to my first detox in Phoenix. A detox is not a program. It is where we get physically separated from the drugs or alcohol. I understand that some types of detox may have some type of program of recovery, but most detoxes just get you physically withdrawn from the drug. Then you have to make a decision: *Now what am I going to do?*

After the detox, I got into a 30-day quick-fix program. I thought I wanted to stop, but I didn't hear a word they said. Now when I look back, I see it wasn't that I wanted to stop drinking. I wanted all the stuff that went with the drinking to stop. I wanted to stop going to jail. I wanted to stop

living outdoors. I wanted a paycheck; not necessarily a job, but a paycheck. I wasn't ready to get sober, but I was tired of all the crap that went with drinking.

I moved back to California. Then I began making a serious career of detoxes and recovery homes. I would go to detox when things got bad, not because I wanted to stop, but because I was trying to get out of trouble for something with my folks, my boss. I would run to detox. After detox I would say, "Look at me. I got two weeks sober. Things are great." Then I'd go back to drinking.

A bad thing about alcoholics is that we clean up quick. I can take a drunk off the streets—torn up, puking his guts out, shaking like a leaf, and totally delusional. I get him in detox and in four days, a couple of showers, a little bit of sleep, a couple of good meals and he is thinking, "I've got it going on." I see it time and time and time again. It is a detriment, because the things just don't seem that bad after a week or two. I ran on that for years.

About this time I had it down. I was an alcoholic. You hear all the time, if you admit you're an alcoholic, that is the first step. That is a very small part of The First Step of AA. For me, it became an excuse. I blamed all my bad behavior and way of living on that fact. I am an alcoholic. That is why I do what I do. The judge wants to send me to jail, but I'm just an alcoholic. I need treatment. I used that a few times.

The second half of the statement in the *First Step of AA* is "and my life has become unmanageable." I didn't get that part. I thought I was managing just fine. But I wasn't managing, I was adapting. I thought I was managing because I still had a job. Then I got to the point where I couldn't work, but I wasn't going to jail. I thought I was managing just fine, but the truth was that I was adapting. I'm living on the streets, but I'm not in jail, so I'm managing. So now I am in jail, but I haven't gotten in any fights and I haven't gotten in trouble with the guards, so I am managing just fine. That was the delusion I was in. Everything is fine with me. I'm okay. I just couldn't get that "unmanageability" part.

I was taking a series of beatings. By the time I was 36 or 37, and the last couple years of my drinking, I was constantly on and off the streets, in and out of jail. In my drinking career, I have managed to pick up three drunk-driving charges, two drunk on a bicycle charges, and countless public drunkenness charges. I like to say it was just sleeping on the beach, but when you look at the bare bones of it, it was vagrancy. That isn't a nice word. I still don't like that one. I was a vagrant. I've overdosed on heroin three times, each time waking up to the paramedics pumping on my chest. You would think that kind of stuff would scare me sober.

Unfortunately, as I said before, you cannot scare an alcoholic sober. I found out that I needed to get that second part of The First Step: My life was unmanageable. It still is today, to some extent. I had to get hopeless. The only thing I found out is that all the trouble I got in—the times I was in jail, the times I lived on the streets; all of that stuff—did not make me hopeless. The *Big Book* says "no person, place or thing" can get us sober. I found that out. I tried staying sober for mommy and daddy. I tried staying sober for the judges. I tried staying sober to stay out of jail. None of that could keep me sober. I was thinking about **me**.

What does it take to get somebody sober? What does it take to get the addict willing? I know my story is depressing and you are probably thinking, I hope to God my kid doesn't have to live a life like he did before he gets sober; and God bless him, I hope he doesn't either. What does it take to get an alcoholic hopeless? **Because that is their condition: hopeless**. An alcoholic or a drug addict has to be hopeless, hopeless enough to be willing to do what it takes to stay sober. As Zach Whaley says, the pain of getting sober must be less than the pain of staying drunk before one decides to get help. I have seen people come in for treatment because their boss told them they were going to get fired. That is what got them hopeless. They became willing to work the program and stay sober. For me, sleeping under a tree in the rain still didn't make me hopeless enough.

What got me hopeless? Hopelessness was inside me. I ended up going to the State Penitentiary, "the big house." Now certainly that would scare me sober. I thought the whole time I was there, that it was enough. I was going to Bible studies, reading my Bible, reading the *Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous*, and thinking that when I got out I was not going to do this again. The scariest thing was the last month there I began thinking that prison really wasn't that bad. When I got out, I was really healthy, because in prison all I did was eat, work out, sleep and read a lot of books. On the bus leaving I began to think: "Ah, a pint of vodka wouldn't be that bad." And it wasn't that bad that first night, until I woke up the next morning needing more. That was a real short-lived trip back to hell. Three weeks of drinking. In the *Big Book* it talks about getting worse, never better. You can tell people that until you are blue in the face and they are not going to understand. It always gets worse. They call it "worsen" where I came from and it definitely was "worsen."

I was released from prison five days before Christmas. My dad said I could stay at his house through the holidays and then move into a recovery home. Two days later he kicked me out of his house. "Daddy, it is three days before Christmas. You can't kick me out." He wasn't even angry. He found a bottle in my backpack and told me I had to go. He didn't get mad, yell, or throw things. I wasn't drunk. I hadn't caused any problems. He found the bottle and he knew what that leads to. He had had all of his hopes built up for me again. Seeing the dejection on his face was very painful for me. That was the first time I really saw the pain in his face. Without screaming, without causing a scene, he just said, "You have got to go." So I did. I left and continued to drink for the last week or so. The week after that I found myself outdoors again, under a tree, in the rain in January, drunk. I said to myself: "This has got to stop. What's wrong with me?" Of course, just being out of prison I was on parole at the time and I had that little bit of fear hanging over me. That was enough fear to get me to beg my way into a hotel room, so I could clean up to see my parole officer. I got into that hotel room and drank and drank and drank for two straight days until I got to the point where I couldn't drink any longer. Then God saw fit to stop my drinking.

I was so physically sick from drinking that I could not drink. When I say worsen, detox was hell in that hotel room. I was shaking, itching, and sweating; and I hadn't slept in a week. I was kind of in and out of the twilight zone, drifting in and out of consciousness. Now, I had been stopped plenty of times by going to jail or by having my back against the wall and having to do something; or I have been stopped a couple of times physically because of having to go to the hospital for pancreatitis and alcoholic hepatitis. But in that hotel I couldn't drink the alcohol and I knew I had to get it down or I was going to be really sick. I got to that point of hopelessness; that hopelessness deep inside. I prayed to God, "Please help me get three swallows down, so I can stop shaking and feeling like this. Please take this obsession away from me to drink. Help me stop, but let me drink."

That is when it really hit me how hopeless I really was. I couldn't imagine my life with alcohol and I couldn't imagine life without alcohol. That is what got it for me. That is when I finally found that hopelessness. Now what? My best thinking while I was lying there was I go back to detox again or I go to the hospital. Now, my head is telling me I am going to go to the hospital, so they can give me drugs and wean me off and everything will be cool. That is my alcoholic thinking right there: The easier way.

Fortunately, I went to detox one more time; my ninth time. I was getting real good at playing this detox circuit all the time. When do you know that the addict is going to get it? We just don't know. Thankfully, they let me in. They could have said, "Yeah, you've been to this one four different times. We can't do anything for you." They didn't know. I went into detox this time with a willingness that I had never had before because I was hopeless and I got direction.

I had an AA sponsor that I had been playing with for years. I would call him every time I got to jail or to detox and would kind of do what he said to do, but not really because I just didn't want to stop drinking. I called him and he came down again and laughed at me, which he did every time

that he showed up at detox when I was there. He basically said, "Are you done? Are you done trying to run your life on self? Are you done fighting AA?" I said, "I don't know, but I'm done today." I had been in and out of Alcoholics Anonymous for years hearing this motto: "One day at a time." I thought that is the corniest thing I've ever heard, along with all those other cutesy things they have in Alcoholics Anonymous. One day at a time, doesn't that just sound sweet? I understand that today. I didn't understand it that day, but I was willing to do it that day, however, because I was so sick.

I had tried church many times. I had always heard that you had to give your life to God—give your life to God and do His will. My head says His will says He is going to have me being a missionary in Africa. Or, even worse than that, I was going to have to wear a tie. So I had one pre-conceived notion about God's will. I didn't know what God's will was. I'm not supposed to know what God's will is, but God does have a purpose for each and every one of us. That "Thy will be done," was real, real scary. That was the first tool I was given in the *Big Book*: "It's (*Big Book*) main object is to enable you to find a Power greater than yourself, which will solve your problem." That is real scary. Remember I am selfish and self-centered. I think of **me**. I want **my** way. How do I put my trust and power in God? I wasn't an agnostic. I grew up in a church family. I got to have God right? My prayers to God were, "God, get me out of this one. I'll do something, if You get me out of it this time." This time I HUMBLY offered myself to God; real simple. If you have any kids fighting the God-thing, the *Big Book* tells you that you we only need to be willing to believe in a power greater than yourself.

That was enough for me to make a start. We talk about those first three steps. Okay, I'm an alcoholic and finally I agree my life is unmanageable. The second step: "I came to believe in a power greater than self that will restore me to sanity." That's implying that I'm insane. That's a given. I'm insane. "Come to believe in a power greater than ourselves." Why is that? Because we have already tried getting sober for mommy and daddy, for judges, for people, places, and things, but nothing worked. But we need God. I've heard people shying away from Alcoholics Anonymous because they don't talk about religion and Jesus Christ. They have a purpose for that. It is to be open to everybody who just can't quite hear. But if you have any notion that Alcoholics Anonymous is not a spiritual program, I'll just tell you that you are wrong. It plainly states in that book, "The purpose of this book is to help you find a power greater than yourself by which you could live." It isn't about just stopping drinking. It is about a way of life. You see, I stopped drinking; but my life is still unmanageable. I got to have God. I've got to have God in here. I can be looking all good on the outside. "Hey, I have thirty days and I haven't had a drink. Let's get me a job. I'm cool."

What's in here deep inside? Finding a way to live is what those steps are about, because I never lived. I just did what I wanted to do. All of a sudden I am sober and I am faced with real life. Right there in the face. Ooh. That's painful. I don't remember pain like when I couldn't get my way; but that is not the same as real pain of real life. You mean I have to work every day? I have to pay bills and I have to give my money away. Come to find out, it is not my money. Imagine that? I am still cleaning all that wreckage up and it is probably going to be a life-long process.

I can't take away the hurt I have caused my family by saying, "I'm sober now. I'm sorry." My actions on a daily basis are part of the amends to my family.

I was talking about the conditions for recovery, that willingness. Not everyone has to go to the lengths that I had to in order to work this program. If you have kids who are sixteen, eighteen, nineteen, you certainly don't want to sit around and wait until they get 37 to get sober. The problem is that you can't make them hopeless. You can't make them willing, but they don't have to go through what I went through. What do you do? Do you think I have the magic bullet that I can tell you about and cure you? If I did, I would be selling it. We don't know. We don't know. But I can tell you what worked for my dad with me and he tried everything, and that is one of the keys: Try everything. Try **everything**. He tried the tough love: "Don't talk to me ever again

until you are sober.” He tried: “We’ll love you until you love yourself” That didn’t work. What I found did work with my dad is that he kept just enough contact with me that showed me he loved me. He gave me only enough love and support to keep me alive so I could make it to get to that hopelessness. He never said he didn’t love me. He always said he didn’t like my actions and he always showed me he loved me, but to the best of his ability, he tried **not** to enable me. He did. But I am real good at conning and manipulating and conniving and getting what I want. Alcoholics are like that. We can lie and cheat and steal and connive and manipulate. We are actors and we are very good at it. We have to be. It is our lifestyle. A “drinking career” is an “acting career.”

What do you do with your kids? You continue to love your kids. It is very important to set the boundaries and parameters. Usually, when I get referrals from my dad’s church to talk to parents who have kids who are just starting to have trouble, I tell the parents to give their kids “one freebie.” This is only my personal opinion, and by a freebie I don’t mean a free ride. I mean a serious effort to help them the first time they get caught or something; help them get into a program. If they are getting a jail sentence, help them get an alternative sentence or into a program of recovery, if they are willing. After that, all bets are off. Take care of #1. You have your wives. You have your husbands. You have your other children. Take care of yourselves and your other kids before you worry about your alcoholic kid. Easy to say. Not easy to do. Let them feel their pain.

How can you let them feel their pain without your feeling pain too? This is a family disease. The alcoholics’ behaviors and actions will affect the whole family one way or another. If you can’t fix the alcoholic, what can you do? You can work on yourselves and your relationships with each other and your other kids. You are getting experience. One of the things that I learned in Alcoholics Anonymous is that my most valuable asset is my experience with all my drinking and drugging and staying sober. How could all that bad stuff that happened to me be the best thing I’ve got going? I needed all that bad experience to get me willing to work the program and stay sober. I needed every drink, every drug, to get me to that point where I was willing to do what it took to stay sober. That’s my experience to get me willing to work the program. Now I’ve got all of this experience of staying sober. What good is that? Why do I have all of this experience? It’s to help somebody else. It’s simple. I can help another man who suffered just like me today because I have that experience of suffering like that. I can help somebody early in recovery because I’ve been in early recovery. I can help take someone through the steps, because I’ve been through the steps and I continue to go through the steps just like somebody did for me. That means I kind of have a purpose for living today. That is pretty cool. You see, I didn’t come to Alcoholics Anonymous to get a purpose. I came to Alcoholics Anonymous to stop all the crap, stop drinking, and get on with my life. I’ve gotten so much more than today. I do have a purpose: to work with others. That’s not what I wanted. Not what I expected. Nothing I thought I would ever have. Nothing I even cared about because I was still thinking of **me** when I got sober. Just get me better. I’ll be cool.

Okay, we got the parameter set, one freebie: we’ll help you out this time. You have got to be focused on yourself. As selfish as that seems, focus on the relationship with your wife or husband, focus on your other kids. You are going to have to let that kid go out and get his own pain because he will never get hopeless enough or willing to work this program without that pain. Just as I had to have my own experience to get willing to work the program, every alcoholic and drug addict is going to have to get his own experience until he gets hopeless enough to work the program to get sober.

You may still be asking: What can I do to make them hopeless? Let them go. Keep that love. Keep that contact. Let them know: We are here, if you are legit and sincere about staying sober. You will learn when that is through trial and error. Addicts can only con people only so long. You will start seeing the con or somebody will point it out to you. We just don’t want to think our kids are that bad. We just don’t want to accept that. It seems always to come back to that: “What did I do wrong?” thing, which I started with. **Nothing**. My dad did the same thing with

me that he did with my sisters. I'm the alcoholic and they're not. It couldn't have been anything that he did. He did everything that he could think of to prevent this by counseling and talking to me. We were very close. We are very close today. That is another gift that I've gotten. I found God in Alcoholics Anonymous. It didn't come overnight and it wasn't a blinding flash where I saw God. I wasn't struck sober. It is a lot of work. I tell people who are new in recovery or in detox that all the time. This is hard work. Do you have that willingness to do whatever it takes? It is worth every bit of it. Try to tell somebody that: This is going to be the hardest thing that you have ever done, but it is going to be the best for you. Yeah, sure. Isn't there an easier way? But, you know what? I found out that staying sober is the easier way compared to the games I had to play to stay loaded and to hide out and to stay out of jail. It was a 24-7 thing. Today I go to meetings. I work with other alcoholics. I share my experience. I can go through those steps. I keep reading the **AA Big Book** and that is a lot easier than what I was doing. I have a routine today. If you have kids that are getting into early recovery, they have to establish a routine. Ask them what they are doing to stay sober. Do they think just because they went through a 30-day program their problems are solved? Get involved in their recovery. Where are they going to meetings? Do they have a sponsor? Are they working the steps? Are they working with other alcoholics? That is what I have had to do. That is what most of us have to do. Get involved in their recovery. You are not going to fix them. You are not going to change them. But you can give them some assistance and you can watch.

I had to get all that experience for me to help other alcoholics. What if your kid is out there drinking and using and you can't get him stopped? What can you do? You can still use your experience. You've got that experience. John and Susan Vawter talked about Nar-Anon and about Al-Anon. They are focusing on their relationship as a couple, and as a family. Their daughter is sober today. They have a message to carry because they have the experience of having the alcoholic or drug addict in their family. They have that experience to carry to someone else. If you can't fix your son or daughter, work on YOU. You are going to get experience that will enable you to help another family. Our experience is a vital asset, of supreme value. It's no good unless we use it. Use it for God's glory. Wow! What a concept? It's real simple stuff. Everything I've been talking about is in the **Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous**. It's real simple, but we just don't seem to get it as an alcoholic. We tend to think there has got to be a way to tweak it, make it easier, or figure it out. There is no figuring it out. What I am doing today works. That is all that matters. I got faith in God today. I got that faith by walking through pain, by walking through fear. That is how I found God. I followed the steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and it led me to God. They put life in front of me, gave me ways to walk through it, and told me to put my trust in God, even if I wasn't too sure about God. As I walked through all of these different stages, all of a sudden I've got faith. I know there is a God today and He is working in my life. I have a message to carry. What a gift! I didn't come here for that, but it's the best thing I got today: faith in God. It's real good. I would never in my wildest imaginations think I would be talking to a group like this. Never. But, I am. Thank you for listening to my story.