

11th Hilton Head Island Conference

1991 | Reading edition

FORMAT	DURATION	RECORDING ID
Transcript PDF	01:16:53	DP-1991-HILTONHEAD_01

Automated draft. Timestamps have been removed for readability. Names, specialized terms, and unclear passages require human review.

[Listen to the original audio source](#)

Transcript

Timestamp-free reading edition | Automated draft; human review required

My name is Don and I am an alcoholic. I'm a member of Good Standing today in Alcoholics Anonymous because I haven't had a drink of alcohol. Before I get started, I really need to tell you all what a fantastic committee this has been. We get to do this in time and time. We've even been places where we didn't have a hotel room when we got there. Bob and Jim, Bethany, of course, bonded with us and have made us feel at home since last year.

So, we already know you all. Did I say it right, y'all? I had to learn to speak a little southern before I came down. So, thank you for all your hospitality. My home group is the Denver Thursday Night Group. We meet in Denver every Thursday night at 8 o'clock. And if you're ever up our way, we'd invite you to come and visit with us. We have a very basic AA meeting. We only have one topic. What we were like, what happened and what we were like now. And you're called to a little podium and you have five minutes to seven minutes to share that with us. And then we want to hear somebody else.

And because so many young people started getting sober in our group and some of you know it's a little hard to find a lot of 12 step work anymore. And they started complaining about it in order to talk to some fresh drunks. So, we now on Wednesday night take that same meeting format to a treatment center so we have a chance at some live ones. And then on Wednesday night at 6 30 we have a big book workshop for those who wish to get serious.

Sit down, we spend about 36 weeks going through the big book as a group and just doing everything it says. And we have found some remarkable things happen. Alcoholics start getting sober. So anyway, that's the commercial for the Denver Thursday Night Group. We hope we will treat you as well as you have treated us. That's not where I got sober. In fact, I didn't get sober, I was got sober. Had I had to look for Alcoholics Anonymous, I'd have never found you because I had no idea that that's what my problem was with alcoholism.

I was a really sick cookie when you finally found me. Heck, that was a sick cookie the day I started this deal. As you can tell I'm wandering around, there are three people in the room I came to talk to. I hope the rest of you enjoy this, but I know three of them I came to talk to. And it is my devout wish that you started listening about the same time I started talking and that you'll stop listening about the same time I stopped talking.

If we do that, we'll all kind of have some fun tonight. I can tell you very briefly what it was like for me. I drank my way out of high school before I was finished with it. And then I joined the Navy for four years and two years later I drank my way out of the Navy before I was finished with it. And I came home and I got a job with Mountain Bell and three months later I drank my way out of that good job before I was finished with it.

And I started a little family and I drank my way out of that family before I was finished with it. And Christmas night of 1967, I just flat drank my way out of life. And I was finally finished with it. God gave me back my life as a free, cleared gift, December 26 of 1967. And then He hand carried me to you, to Alcoholics Anonymous. So that gift could take on some dimension and some purpose and some meaning. Because I had

finally hit what I think is the absolute rock bottom of human experience.

I came to the day when I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that I was useless. And there's nothing more painful, nothing more painful. But I didn't even know why. Now, since I got to Alcoholics Anonymous, I have found out why. Because I drank my way out of everything before I finished with it. Now, I started drinking because that's what you do when I grew up. When you're 15 or 16 years old and you're running the streets of Denver, you get one of the fellows from an hour air base to buy a bottle of whiskey and you go out east of Denver and you drink it.

And that's what we did that night. I started the evening out, three feet tall with a big ugly ward on the end of my nose. And I felt funny and I talked funny and I acted funny. And I didn't belong anywhere. I was running with six other guys that didn't belong anywhere either. We just kind of hung out together. And we got the whiskey and we started to drink. And the work went away. A number of things happened that night, but I think what I remember most about that night, and isn't it funny that we Alcoholics remember that night?

I know people would drink and don't remember that night at all. But I remember that night. For the first time in my life, I had plans that night. I'd just been bouncing off a life for 15 or 16 years. But that night I had some plans. Somewhere in that early part of that drinking. There was a fella in my high school that hadn't been treating me very well. And he was going to be a bill-bombed driver in later that evening, and so was I, and I was going to whip him.

And I could have done it that night. And there was a girl in my high school class who hadn't been treating me at all. She was going to be a bonnies also, and we were going to have a little visit. And that night I could have done it. I did not know that it is in my nature if one works take ten. See, I found me in the big book of Alcoholics Anonymous in the story of the car salesman named Jim. I found that my kind of insanity is described right there.

Lack of proportion in the ability to think straight. That's what's wrong with me. Anything worth doing is worth overdoing. My identity has always been tied up in things. My car in high school wasn't used to car. My government had a car. He had an old 38 Ford. I had to have a maroon, mercury convertible with leopard skin seat covers so that I could get those two bones to get in the car. And they did. And the first day they broke the top of the convertible, and I didn't want to be anything anymore.

And that's kind of typical of how I behaved. I nearly died that first night because I drank a bit more than my share. Something happened to me that night, and I drank out of control for the first time, and I drank out of control every time thereafter. And I didn't have a clue, but that was alcoholism. In looking back over my life when I finally began to be able to remember some things, part of my identification was that no matter what else I did, alcohol was there.

When I was on the straight and narrow, alcohol was part of my life. I'm one of the people that came out of Berkeley in the 60s, throwing alzies acid around screaming where there's dope there's oak burned down city hall. I am not a drug addict. We won't talk about that from this podium, but if anybody wants to talk about that, we can do that later. But when I did that, alcohol was there. When I was off in my criminal activities, alcohol was there.

Whatever I did, alcohol was there. And it took me a long time to be able to see that. Well, I finally had enough. I want to tell you about my last week so we can get into the reason that I'm here. And that's to carry the AA message. And I'm going to say it several times in several different ways, and this is a good time for you three I'm talking to. This is the AA message. If you are an alcoholic, you don't ever have to drink alcohol again, ever.

You don't ever have to feel away you've been feeling ever again. And we do not promise you a pain free life, but you don't ever have to suffer like you've been suffering. We'll teach you some new dimensions of suffering. Christmas week in 1967 is the week that I will cherish forever because that's the week I died. That's the week I participated in surrendering. Surrender for me is a very simple thing. I recognized the lies of my life for what they were.

Lies. I didn't have many left. We were down to just a few. I was on federal parole for a little indiscretion I'd committed in 1966. I did that. I was trying to raise two little boys whose mother had left years before that. They'd been on a road with me for three and a half to four years before the federal people got me. And they got me because somebody told one of my kids about school. So we stopped so he could go and the train hit me.

With my lifestyle you did not stop. Now, but we were stopped again. We lived in a \$40 a month basement apartment beneath an old lady who raised cats. I mean she had cats everywhere. And one of my lies was no matter what else. The kids have a home and it's warm and it's clean. And we eat every day. And this week as I looked around my own house I recognized that her place was cleaner than mine was. And one of my lies caved in on me.

The food we got was because we were on aid to dependent children. And the check hadn't gotten her yet so we were a little short. The lies began to cave in. Now I'm one of the rare ones in a day. I come from a functional family and I'm the only alcoholic in it. We had an uncle one time that we really thought probably was one of us. But 20 years ago his doctor said Walter if you don't stop drinking you're going to die.

So he quit. He doesn't have any stamina or perseverance at all. He's quit. What that means is that I know what Christmas is supposed to look like. My people are still married to each other and they like each other. My brothers are professor of music at the University of Colorado. My sister just retired from IBM as a supervisor. I've been in three penitentiaries. There's something wrong with this picture. But I know what Christmas is supposed to look like.

And it didn't look like that in my house. Our trade was one of those alcoholic wonders. We had found a dollar in the snow on the 24th and on the 24th they'll give you the biggest tree on the lot for a dollar. And we bought the great big one. The room was about seven feet tall and the tree was about eight feet tall so it tilted it to top. And it was decorated with the kind of stuff that people like me decorate their trees with.

Cut up paper boxes, tin foil. The stuff that you put on the tree. And now we're little presents there. I had managed to get a present for each of my boys from the public merchandise, Martin Denver on credit. I didn't have any money. Little pair of cowboy boots and a little shirt. But my boys had taken everything that would fit and wrapped it up in blue paper towel and stuff you want windshields with and put it on the tree.

A piece of me broke. That isn't how it's supposed to be. There were a number of other things that happened

that week that began to destroy the lives but the killer came on Christmas Day. Thank God. We went down to my folks house so we could spend time with Grandma and Grandpa Christmas Day. And my dad met us at the door and he said, Don, I'm sorry but your mother says I can't let you in here anymore. If you can't stand watching you die.

And for the first time in my life I saw what I'd been doing to my people. The lie was leave me the hell alone. I'm not hurting anybody but me. And I saw what I've been doing to my people and my kids clearly. So that lie was gone. Then dad smashed another one. They live in a big old house in East Denver and he snuck us in anyway. And I've been saying nobody cares about us. And that was a lie. I didn't have very many left.

And when it was all over I went home and I walked past the self-pity. There was enough of that. And faced the fact that everybody on the planet would be better off if I wasn't here. My dreams were dead. My people's dreams for me were dead. They were just never going to happen and I knew that. I spent my whole life doing things I didn't want to do. And I could never seem to get around to doing the things I did want to do.

And I didn't know why. I've been on a spiritual search since I was a tiny child. My problem has always been that I've looked outside of myself for it. So I'd get temporary boosts. I've even had visions for goodness' things. Real visions. We had the pleasure and the privilege of eating peyote with the Indians in the ceremony in Easter in Nevada one time. And I had a vision of a great bird flying high with no head. And I understood that was me and my life.

Flying high going nowhere. It kept me sober four months. For you three that I'm talking to, if you're considering visions, they're good for about four months to worry. I can tell you that. But I'm in for the game. Okay. That's not enough. Everything I tried had failed. And I knew that there was nothing left. So I did the only thing I could do. I surrendered totally. I took a two month supply of the garbage that was in the house and put it in my arm, drank everything in the house, and laid down and died.

And I can't tell you how bad I felt the next morning. When I woke up. And the police were at the door. I knew I wasn't dead. And I didn't care. During that last week, I had set myself up to be arrested. The little thing that would have gotten me at the most six months in the county jail. Because I was really, really tired. And I needed to rest. And for people like me, county jail is rest camp. And in case you're not through here yet, let me tell you how to survive it so you can get back to us.

I lied to you for ten minutes. You lied to me for ten minutes. And we both go take a nap. That's it. If you'll do that, you'll survive any county jail in this country. Every now and then you may have to work a little, but keep your mouth shut and just do the work and you're all right. That isn't why they came. They had nine charges this time, and the first one called for three years to life in the country. And Denver D8 told me he'd bring the rest of them one at a time if I beat him on that one, but I was through.

And I really didn't care. The kids were going to be okay. They were taken to a foster home, which by the way was not okay. Turned out later. And I was taken away to lay up and jail and get ready for whatever was next. And the alcoholic ego is a magnificent thing. You know, it can go from death to reasonably good operation in about three days at the outside. Okay? And there's another thing you do in county jail. You walk back and forth and light each other and talk about what you're going to do when you get out.

And it's always the same. As soon as my partner gets here with my bond money, any day now, we'll get a keg of course bigger and we'll go up in the mountains and we'll get smashed. We've earned it. Not one of us could make a hundred dollar bond. I can remember walking that tear saying that with the rest of them, somehow inside of me, I didn't want to do that anymore. I did not know there was any other way to live. I just knew I didn't want to do that anymore.

I had finally gotten into a wonderful state of mind. I had become, because of alcohol, willing to go anywhere anybody said and do anything anybody said, if it meant I didn't have to be me anymore. I was teachable finally. Well, and I'm telling you about this, because I need to tell you about my first experience with the power of God. In the big book of Alcoholics Anonymous, there's very little thing. There are a few things that we're told.

One of the things you're told is that we're going to need to come to believe in the power of God. I don't have to believe in God, but I do need to come believe in the power of God and that happened to me before I knew his name. I owe the federal government four years, because when the state arrests you, they get testing, and I still owe them four years. They got together with me, the Democrats who would turn in the federal people, and they made a deal.

If I would plead guilty to a reduced charge so I wouldn't give them the cost of a trial, they would suspend that sentence, give me back to the federal people, and they could take me over here to Fort Worth, Texas and fix what was wrong with me. Well, I am not an idiot, I'm a drunk. The federal hospital beats penitentiary, and two of me made the decision. There's always at least two of me at Worth. My sponsor just skits a friend and kid one time, and he didn't have a chance.

Not a chance. I knew that if you put me in a hospital with doctors and books, I'll be on the street in six months at the outside. They would tell me what was wrong with me. They would tell me what it was going to take to fix that. And they would tell me all the symptoms I had to present to them to convince them I was getting better. And that's been my best game since I was little. But I was also truly willing to go anywhere.

So I took their deal, and they kept their order. Now, if you know about power, you know the one the state and the feds get together and said, Don goes from Denver to Fort Worth. Don goes from Denver to Fort Worth. Everybody kept their deal, and I set back half the way to go to Fort Worth, and five days later, I was in the car, I stayed penitentiary. Saying, wait a minute. This is not what I signed up for. It seems that at the last minute the federal man who made the deal changed his mind.

He said, there's nothing we can do to help this one. Let's just get him off the street before he hurts somebody. One government agency had me certified as Associate of Path Type II, whatever the hell that is. And the other one had me certified as a psychopath, and you can't help either one of them. You see, one doesn't know the difference between right and wrong, so how can you help? The other one knows the difference and just doesn't give a damn.

And he said, I was both. One bunch had me down as a manic-depressive. Well, I'll tell you, I can give you manic-depressive symptoms at the drop of the head. And one I've been drinking hard and shooting a little speed to stay awake with. I act like a manic-depressive. I come through like a tornado. My children and I get kicked out of 13 crash pads in 13 days one time. And I didn't understand why. I carried energy with me.

My eyes looked like that, and we were on the run, and you wouldn't want me around. I didn't want me around. It was in that penitentiary that you found me. I almost hate to talk about penitentiary because it seems to add some kind of a flavor or identity. But I have to because that's where you found me. We were sitting in the fish tank in the third week, and I can still hear it. The guard said, you people will come down and you will listen.

And the first miracle of my life took place. I went down, and I listened. If you are new here, all you need to do for a while is listen. I think God is funny, has a marvelous sense of humor. Because what he has made out of me is a listener. I'm asked to talk all the time. I think that's funny. I'd much rather be listening. While we went down, we listened. And they had three guys there in green clothes with numbers on their chest just like we had.

The guy got up and he said, my name is Doc. And I'm an alcoholic. And that means that I'm powerless over alcohol and drugs and guards and all of the other circumstances of my life. And my life has become unmanageable. And if any of you smart bastards think you can still manage your lives, look at the reward the state just gave you for the nifty job you've been doing. I heard him. I heard him. I didn't resist that at all.

I heard him. Then they gave us the aid message. If you're alcoholic, you don't ever have to drink alcohol again, ever. I don't know, I was alcoholic and loud. Then they said things like, your very best thinking got you the penitentiary. You're not doing so good, are you? I'm going to argue with that. But we can show you a new way of thinking. Oh, did that interest me? I was not the least bit afraid of that penitentiary.

I don't know how to live there. It's like any other community. They had guidelines. And if you live by them, you live. And if you don't, you die. So you weren't living them. What had me really frightened was that I needed it some time in the next year and a half to five years, I was going to be put back on the streets of Denver, and I didn't have a clue as to how to live out there, not a clue. I just knew I couldn't live like I had been living ever again.

Well, they invited us to come to their 12 step study school. My friend, Jim, and I had talked about it. We had no idea what it was, but it offered promise, and it was the first door that opened. What it meant was that every Saturday afternoon and every Sunday afternoon for five weekends, we went to school, a 12 step study school. At the end of that time, we would be allowed to participate in the Friday night at a meeting where they let real people in from the outside.

You had to finish the school first. We went, Jim and I, and I encountered sponsorship of the finest kind from the very beginning. We sat down, we knew guys. One of the three guys that were there got up and said, now you knew people for the next five weeks have nothing to say. If you knew anything at all, you wouldn't be here. I'm allowed to do anything. We weren't allowed to talk in those sessions. As they hand carried us through the big book and their own experience in the steps.

Now, new people have to talk a lot. We all worked in the dishroom and just babbled at each other. And then every now and then, they'd come visit us. And that was one of the things Bruce had that I wanted. He got in and out of his cell whenever he wanted to. And raised my name at us when I was locked up and couldn't get out, he'd come by and visit with me. It was different than the school. When he came by, he'd visit with me.

Out of one of those visits, he said to me, Don, do you know that it's possible for me to think one thought at a

time? And he had me hooked. Whatever it takes, I'll pay the price for that one. I'd become everybody I'd ever met. They were all talking at once. One thought at a time. My goodness. What a thing that was. Well, the thing that they did and the thing that I do when I sponsor people and I think the thing that A does so well and the reason that we are here is because of a piece of information that Bill Wilson carried to Dr. Bob that he didn't have.

You want to remember, or I try to remember, that Dr. Bob was actively living as close to a spiritual life as he could. He was a very active member of the Oxford movement, praying his heart out and drinking. What Bill carried to him was this little piece of information that answers the question that ate my heart out. What's wrong with me? They explained that to me by using the big book, Dr. Silkworth opinion of what the disease of alcoholism.

What's wrong with me is I had a disease called alcoholism and it has recognizable describable symptoms. And they're described clearly. Silkworth gave it to Bill and Bill gave it to Dr. Bob. Dr. Bob went on one more marvelous drunk and came back and with that piece of information never drank again. And they put it in a way that I could understand it. I was in my first federal penitentiary when I was 19 years old because of alcoholism.

When I drank, I get lost and I can't find my way home. And there's a federal law against that when you're in the Navy, and I was born. They'd give me a 24 hour liberty and expect me back in 24 hours. And I'd be 25 for 26. And one time I was 23 days late. And when I got home it wasn't even there anymore. They were taking it to Korea and I was in big, big trouble. I ran with a kid, an Appleton, Wisconsin, that was slicker than I was.

He got us on a Pan Am Clipper. And we baked the ship to Japan by three weeks. So they couldn't shoot us. Now I don't know how mad our skipper was when we didn't show up. But I can tell you the look on his face when he saw us on the dock. He was not happy. So I went to some rainbrags in the federal penitentiary in Tokyo and got a bad comeback this charge and came home. And now I know why I did that. I've always wondered why I did that because I love the Navy.

My favorite word in the big book is the word baffled. Because that was a lifestyle for me. And I was baffled. Why did I do that? Well, I know why I did that. Because I have an allergy to alcohol. If I had an allergy to tomatoes and I ate tomatoes I'd break out of the mix. My allergy is alcohol. If I take a drink of alcohol I'd break out of the mix for more alcohol. I started drinking in Long Beach on a 24-hour liberty.

And 22 days later I was in Pershing Square in Los Angeles, poaching drinks and money. And I could not even think about going back to that ship. I hadn't found it yet. The magic gift that we're always looking for. On day 23 my madness was gone. And like any other same human being, I turned myself in. And went back to face the consequences. Dr. Silkworth talks about men who'd been working on a business deal. It would be subtle favorably to them.

And a day or two before their appointments they started drinking and they missed their appointment. I was. One of my duck feathers was in place. Now I used that when I sponsored people but I've discovered something. Some people come to Alcoholics Anonymous too smart to learn anything. I'm currently sponsoring the chief psychiatrist and founding psychiatrist at one of the most famous alcohol and drug rehab places in the world.

The only problem is he's not been able to stay sober very long. And we started working. We got into that and I'm trying to describe this to the man. And he knows too much. I can't get it across. And when I sponsored people I pray a lot. So your lives are on the line. And I don't know what I'm supposed to say. So I'm just praying. What can I say to this one? And I thought came to him and I said don't know what happens to you after the first drink.

They said while I'm on the fourth or fifth drink I started going crazy. And then I started doing all these crazy things and I said no, no, no, no. What happens to you after the first drink? All around the fourth or fifth drink I started going crazy. And I started doing these crazy things. And I said don what happens to me after the first drink is the second drink. And if you're new here that's all you need to know about alcoholism to begin the recovery process.

What happens to me after the first drink is always the second drink. And I have no choice from control from that point on. I don't know whether it'll be a one day spree or a ten year spree. I have no way of guaranteeing you where I will be when it ends. What I will do between now and when it ends. I can only guarantee that none of us are going to like any part of it, including me. And if you think you don't like me when I'm drinking, you ought to live in here.

Well I came to know that. That made sense. I explained events that wouldn't be explained any other way. And they said now that's academic if you never take another drink by the way. If you don't set fire to that you won't have that fire. So what's really wrong with me? Well my life is unmanageable. My sponsor is very careful to help me understand we're talking about this life. My thought life is unmanageable. That's what's wrong with me.

I become obsessed with the idea that somehow alcohol is okay. Let me describe it the easy quick way for you as I understand it. I've been living in the same house with the same woman for nearly 14 years. And when that happens to you, you eventually end up talking with your neighbors. It's a wonderful thing. The difficulty of your alcoholic is that real people do a thing they call small talk. And I don't know how to do that.

Life is earnestly real and has to have some meat to it. But I want to be a good citizen so I've learned enough small talk. I can get through three or four sometimes as much as five minutes. I know there's at least three kinds of grass. We don't run in our neighborhood. Well four, the neighbor doesn't know what his kid was doing in my backyard for a while. I can talk reasonably intelligently about the Broncos and I don't even know what to do.

They don't either from what I understand. If you run me out of small talk, we will end up talking about the only thing I know anything at all about. That's alcoholism and alcoholics anonymous. And he pushed me one day. We went past it. My neighbor owns a bar, so he was interested. And we started exchanging stories and I'm careful with normal people just how much they've yet. But we talked a little about alcoholism. And it turns out that he and I share a common experience.

He told me about a night years ago when he drank too much whiskey. And he got drunk and he fell down and he threw up. And he made a fool of himself. And he hasn't done that since. Isn't that strange? You see I had the same experience. I drank too much one night, fell down, threw up, made a fool of myself. I got up and found out it wouldn't make me throw up so early in the evening. I think the difference between he and I is very simple.

He can remember vividly how badly he felt about that evening. And it attaches to a thing in his head that says then don't do that again. I can still remember vividly how bad I felt many nights. And it doesn't attest to anything at all. Once in a while it was bad chili. In my case the only time I ever remember attaching anything was on my first drunk. We drank bonded bourbon that night I almost died. I have never had bonded bourbon since.

That's how my mind works. But it even more danger to me are those blank spots that will happen to every alcoholic. Those times when I'll have absolutely no mental defense that everything I've learned here won't show up. Or if it does it'll show up so weekly that some trivial reason will get me to take a drink. All worse I had an experience when I was six years sober that just drove this home to me. I was not working behind the walls because God always sees to it I get full circle.

I got to go back and give it back where I got it. And in that process I had to come over to Denver because they always make the penitentiary at least 100 miles away from anything. I came into town once a week to catch my home group because I don't miss that. And to deal with the business people and the police officers and the parole officers we had to deal with. We were having dinner or lunch at the Yellow Leals Restaurant in Denver.

Very fine place and one of the men at the table had discovered a new liqueur. And it came in a tall skinny glass and it was green and it wasn't enough in it to do anybody any good. But they were passing it around so everyone could taste it. And everything I knew showed up. I knew the danger, I knew I wasn't going to drink it, I knew why I wasn't going to drink it. All of my mental defenses were available to me. As it came by me I thought well it's here, I might sniff it and see what it smells like.

And while it was under my nose the truth burst into my head. The difference between life and death for me at that moment would be the twitch of a muscle. When I have something in my hand and it gets to my mouth that's what it does. With everything working I was that close to a drink. And then I knew God was on duty because I got out of my body quick and watched him move my hand off. And I haven't sniffed anything green since.

I am convinced that my disease is that serious. I'm truly powerless. If I put alcohol in my body I will go insane. And there is in me an insanity that says put alcohol in this body. And you can't stop it. And I can't stop it. There's no human power that I know of cause stop it. Alcoholics Anonymous can't stop that. Treatment can't stop that. There is nothing that will stop that. Thank God. We can all quit trying. I did. I quit trying and I haven't had drinks since.

They said it would take spiritual means. It would take the power of God for me. That my sponsors used to say things like Don we don't even think the truth is going to work for you. They said yeah you take the truth in and your ego catches it. He says I can use that later. By the time I get around to using it it's not the truth anymore. I've warped it. I love the word warped. What means you don't fit? Well I used to complain and say things don't feel like a fit.

My sponsors say that's cause you don't fit. God Bruce I feel weird. That's cause you're weird. I don't seem to belong. That's cause you don't seem to belong. I came to believe in the power of God and the power that is in Alcoholics Anonymous by watching it. This was not an intellectual process. I saw three human beings whose lives had been changed. Bruce was a killer. He'd killed some people in a shootout one morning in downtown Denver.

The man who was telling me the story was incapable of killing anybody and I knew it. And when I asked him about it he said that's right I've been changed. God changed me. I didn't care who changed him. He had been changed. I didn't come here to be sober. I came here to be changed and the process got sober. Roy Nichols was one of my heroes before I quit having heroes. He was a stick up man who was no longer capable of sticking people up.

A very spiritual man and I knew it. But about every three months Roy would get pissed at the group and quit. You know we were in a group of about a hundred guys. 90 to 100 guys and maybe 10 or 15 of them at business and the rest of them were all trying to get it on their parole jacket and get out. And he got where he couldn't stand it. He'd get angry and he'd go away. And a week or two later he'd come back and he'd be all right.

He'd found out what he was doing. He went back and rode inventory and cleaned himself out and came back and tried to get out. Phil Guterres was a terribly violent man. Phil came to us from Guam and he looked like a Chinese bandit. When he smiled he was absolutely menacing. And he smiled a lot. Phil was there because seven years prior to that in a drunken fit he'd throw some people out of the window three stories high and hurt him.

That was his game. He came in one day and he smiled and he says you know I just realized I've been sober in AA in this penitentiary for seven years and you're the very first person I've ever sponsored. You will stay sober. I lived up on the fourth tier. Now what I saw on Phil Guterres was who I am. Phil was the gentlest most loving human being I have ever met. In a penitentiary Phil Guterres taught me how to touch physically.

And no one ever thought that was strange when Phil did that. See he knew something that has been around here for a long time. And we know that. There's a great healing power in touching. This is the lonely disease. But if you touch someone they can't be alone no matter how much they want to be they can't be. We're healers. Think about that. I do. Because I'm not smart and I don't have any special powers but we've been giving a job to heal sick people.

We need to touch them with our minds and whatever is available. And so I think about healers from time to time and there are two examples I would like to share with you because they come from my life. Well three because Phil started it with the touching. My wife is a healer. She's a nurse and she works with little ones. Babies. Now I believe we all get a certain grace period when we show up here. Well you don't have to do a thing but just show up and you'll be alright.

But I do also believe from watching over the years eventually I have to begin to participate in my own sobriety or I won't have it. I've got to become an active participant. First you have to tell me what's wrong with me. Well my wife can't tell her little ones what's wrong with them. So I watch how does she do that. It's so simple. She pats them and pets them and says it's going to be alright honey. And does that long enough that somehow they begin to participate. They come to believe it.

And isn't that what we do? I walk into A&M meetings all over the world and the first thing somebody does is grab my hand and touches me. He says you're in the right place. I watch what we do in newcomers. Oh are we glad to see you. It's going to be alright you know. And they say when. And from these lofty halls of wisdom we say oh you just keep coming back. It's going to be alright. And we say it long enough and with enough conviction they begin to believe this and begin to participate.

I think of the great healer. And what he did. He'd be walking along a country road and spot some fellow who was blind and crippled and had swords all over him because he was alone. He wasn't alone because he had the swords. He had the swords because he was alone. And he'd reach out and touch him and he'd say anybody home in there? And the instant you touch someone there has to be somebody home. And he would say you know what? You don't have to do this anymore.

And he'd say what? He'd say yeah if you believe what I'm telling you you don't have to do this anymore. Well I believe it. Well then get up. And I go to a lot of meetings and you know what I hear? You don't have to do this anymore. If you're new to us you don't have to drink anymore. Was that right? If we say it with enough conviction they believe this and that's the identification they made with me and that's the one I must make with new people.

Whether you like my lifestyle, whether you like my coat or the way I comb my hair, I've been sober a while. I can tell you with conviction. You don't have to drink anymore. And you don't have to stop with how long I've been sober. A couple of my buddies are 38 and 40 years sober. I know you can stay sober 40 years. I know you can stay sober 49 years because I know somebody who has. And you knew people have really got something coming. God when I think about it it thrills me.

There are some of you in this room who came to us so young that in your prime you're going to have been sober 40 and 50 years walking hand in hand with God and working with drugs. Boy are you going to be something. I wish I could stick around to watching. Gonna be something. Well I came to believe in the power of God. And I wanted what you had. So I went back to myself because they said God had done it and I had to make this prayer.

So I went back and said the prayer and had the worst experience of my entire life. It's an alcoholic. If it goes boom I'm a hero. I can deal with it. I went back and I said the prayer just like it says during the big book and absolutely nothing happened. I can't stand that. I think what I really believe, I was still believing in magic then, that if I said that prayer just right, then my green clothes would turn white and my cell door would spring open and they'd holler from the other hand.

All right Don you can go home now. We don't need you anymore. That nothing happened. And for you new guys if you do something your sponsor says you should do and you don't get the results you think you ought to get. Go bitch Adam. I did. How come I didn't have a flashlight? What's going on here? Bruce said you dumb me. Now that was going up in the morning I was 38, 9, 84 and already I'm a dummy. You dumb me. You ought to be grateful you didn't have a flashlight. They're going to kill you all your life.

We talked about some of my flashes of light. My vision is Southern comfort on a hot day on a roof in Arizona will give you a flash of light. I don't think it's by mistake that they call alcohol spirits. I don't. It causes a spiritual like thing to occur. It brings me into the heart of life. Of course all right for me to be me and all right for you to be you. There's a time there when I'm spiritually tuned in. Anyway, we began to examine my concepts of God.

I had some beauties. Sadie Claus. Numbers of them. Visions, magic. Even we discovered that day that even Jesus loves me was getting in the way of me having a meaningful spiritual experience. Because everything we

discussed that day was outside. I have always tried to take it from out here and put it in here so I will feel better. I was informed that whether I feel good or not has absolutely nothing to do with anything.

But I probably will feel better but that's not the gauge on whether or not this thing's working or not. Thank God because I have felt worse over at certain times in my life than I ever did drinking. I've experienced some genuine losses and that hurts when you're home. Anyhow, I ended up screaming at him that day. You're asking me to turn my life and well over to the cure. Nothing. And he said, why not? Nothing can run your life better and you've been doing it.

And then he spent those precious things that people do. He spent his own time explaining and sharing with me how it had come for him. He said, Don God knows you probably can't stand one more big shock anyway. Not in the shape period. And it had come slowly for him. And I wanted it to be real. And we found I had one final reservation. God we drunk some marvellous. Coming from death, I still had one thing I wasn't willing to do.

Y'all said that there's good news here to give you life to God is get work for you to do. As far as I was concerned that was not good news. I knew what it was. If I really got turned my life completely over to the cure of God. I'd end up in the corner of Colfax and Broadway handing out watch tar magazines. And asking perfect strangers, have you been saved brother? I couldn't see me doing that. And my sponsor said the words that should strike care to the hearts of any alcoholic when his sponsor says them.

Let's talk about that. That means be quiet while we straighten you out. Now I believe in my heart that truth without love is cruelty. And confrontation without a real answer is brutality. But he loved me and he had a real answer. So he took out his spiritual scalpel and went for my jugular. He said, Don do you suppose that the guy that's in Colfax and Broadway hand and out watch tar us today had breakfast where he wanted to and I said probably and he said you didn't.

Do you suppose that that guy is making a fool of himself asking strangers have you been saved brother? He's wearing clothes he picked out to do it in. I said probably and he said you're not. Do you suppose when he's all finished for the day making a fool of himself? That he gets to go home and he had me because I didn't. He helped me into a state of mind and I'm still in it. Anything at all that God may have in mind for me is better than anything at all that I will ever have in mind.

My life is no longer my business. What a relief that is. And it makes it so easy to get along with you. If my life is none of my business you're damn sure isn't. So I quit meddling with you. Okay. But he said this won't last. Unless you clean house it won't last. The old stuff will creep back alcoholism is a deadly disease. How do I make it real and he said Don God will reveal himself to you as you reveal yourself to you.

And I was sent off to do an inventory. Two hours later he wanted to finish it and brought it back to him. Oh yeah. He took a quick look at that thing and he said that's garbage. That can press me get away. Same guy that just spent all that time being loving and kind to me. And I took it to another fellow by God I'd worked hard on it. And as a result of doing it wrong I had some spiritual awakenings. I would caution you new people.

If you don't want what we have don't do this. It works anyway. The awakenings were simple. I learned the truth and for me a spiritual awakening is very simple. Anytime any alcoholic anywhere understands any part of

the truth that's a spiritual awakening. And I'd tell this guy something I had done because I just made a list of some of the bizarre things I've done. And I'd tell him why don't we say well it wasn't that bad.

I began to awaken because some of them were that bad. I woke up to the fact that once again I picked somebody who tell me what I wanted to hear. So I didn't have to tell anything about it. And if I didn't quit that immediately I was going to die a very ugly death. And I knew it. And I'm not afraid of death. I've died three times that I can remember. There are numerous ways of dying I'd rather not participate in but death itself is no big deal.

But to die an ugly death means that for some period of time just before that I'm going to have to live a very ugly life. And I can't stand that thought anymore. So I got real. And I went through the big book process. I'm writing inventory. Discovered I had brought all my troubles on myself. I woke up to some things. I created it all. When the federal agents almost shot my four-year-old son in a raid I discovered that I had created that.

I'd done the things that brought him to the house. And we hear a lot about the promises of alcoholics anonymous. I believe the first two are in the first and second sentences of the first forward to the first edition of alcoholics anonymous by the way. We are more than a hundred alcoholics who have recovered from the seemingly hopeless state of mind and body. I do not have to learn how to cope with this deal. I don't get cured of it, but I get to recover from it.

And then it says to show others precisely how we recovered is the main purpose of this book. My life work is laid out by me in the first two sentences. All I have to do once a day is show some other alcoholic how I recovered precisely. I fulfill God's terms. That's easy. But there's another promise in that inventory that's so important I couldn't live without it. There's no way I could have accepted the guilt of almost having my son killed in a raid.

If it weren't for the promise just before the inventory starts it says this is an effort to face and be rid of the things in ourselves that are blocking us from this spiritual experience. Face and be rid of. There's the promise. If I'm wanting to go through this and learn about it and discard it, I get a new mind. I don't ever have to think like I used to think before. And the only thing I can offer you is proof that that works.

There hasn't been a federal agent in my house for over 25 years. They don't even get to come for dinner. And they may be very nice people. But I don't want to do that to my kids again. I don't want to do that to me again. And I've got a new mind. So I don't have to do that. Face and be rid of. An old friend of many of us, old Chuck used to say this whole deal about uncovering, discovering and discarding. Just let it go.

I don't know how to turn anything over to anybody. But I do know how to let go. I've been abandoning my baggage for years. That's all I had to do. I learned about fear in the inventory process. I thought I would live in my building where I felt it. You know, I have a high grade manufacturing plant up here in my head. I can turn good morning into stark terror. I was two and a half years before I could write a sex inventory.

I couldn't remember anything. And when I did I wished ahead and it fit on a three by five card. I'm really surprised I had children. I get frustrated standing here sharing with you. I've got to tell you honestly. Because I've got about 10, 15 minutes left and I have some things I want to share with you. And I don't have time. I've been

walking hand in hand with the God of the universe for 23 years. And that means every single day of my life since then, the unusual and miraculous has taken place.

The extraordinary has taken place. And I'd like to tell you about every one of them. What we do is when I'm through here we get the whole weekend we'll sit around and visit with each other. But there are some things I need to share with you because of their impact on me. I think for me the greatest spiritual activity that I got to participate in just before doing 12-step work was the making of amends. The setting right of the wrongs that I had done because I was left with a need to do that.

It was no longer a guilt. Somehow I just know the most spiritual thing I know is that if I harm you, I owe you. We must get square. And it's up to me to do it. And they wouldn't let me out. I was in my evangelistic stage about this time. You know, when I work with people and we get to the eighth and ninth step, if you don't want to save the world, we start over. We missed something. We had the opportunity to be at a meeting with some Russians in Moscow.

Five months sober, this kid had the same need. He and some of his partners were unemployable and they had finagled train tickets to go north 100 miles to help a young American girl set up another AA group and a hospital up there. And they didn't have any choice. They were just driven. And I loved it. They're all still sober by the way. But then I was needing to go make amends and I couldn't. Now my sponsor was free and he was to never leave the penitentiary.

But he was free and I want to know how he did that. Because by then I was beginning to understand this is all an inside job. It has nothing to do with my honor circumstances. He said, here's what I want you to do, Don. You go back to yourself tonight and make a list of all the people you harm. We have the basic list from the end military. All the people would hurt me the worst. And then he said, just to add anybody else you can think of because if you met him you messed with him.

And I thought later I didn't have direct amends to make to all of them. But it was good for me to understand if I met you I'm messed with you. Then he said, I want you to close your eyes and picture each one of them separately. And see if you can feel the one I missed to look each one of them right in the eye and say to them, I've been wrong. I've harmed you. Would you please tell me what I have to do so we can get these books to balance?

He said, you know what you did to these people but you are so insensitive. You have no idea what it did to them. So you're just going to have to take the blanket. And I said, what over the left's that night? And began to realize that if I have harmed you in any way you just tell me what I have to do and we'll get it square. I had the experience I've looked for forever. I was lifted and set free. They didn't know I was free.

They kept me locked up another eight months or so. It didn't matter. What this did was allow me to set straight to things that can't be set straight. How do you score it with the mother that you put in a position to say on Christmas day, you and your children can't come in my house? That's a toughie. How do you do that one? Well, this thing implies that once you've asked the question, what do I have to do? You shut up and listen.

Well, they tell you what you have to do. And after I've been out several months, my mother finally allowed

me to come over very reluctantly. And I don't blame her. And during our short discussion, I found a way to ask the question. I didn't ask it directly, but I found a way to ask it. And then I listened. She said, honey, all I've ever wondered for you is that you'd be happy. So I've been going by my mother's house on a regular basis for twenty-some years, happy.

And it worked. She told me it was six years before she really thought I was going to make it. But I wasn't wanting to prove anything. I just went by so she could see me happy. That's all she wanted. She's a wonder. She's an absolute wonder. She thinks AA people are the most magnificent things in the world. I had a problem for a while because of your trust and kindness. And because you allow me, you understand I have this burning need to serve this fellowship.

You let me serve you. And I was a period when, for four years, I was your trustee at large on your general service board. I'm traveling a lot. My mother, I heard her talking to one of her friends one time. She thought I was the president of AA. And I thought, my God, I'm single-handedly, I'm sobering up the world. See, that's all she can see. I got a straightener out, I thought. But I don't do things that will affect people's lives unless I pray about it.

If I pray about it, it occurred to me that after all the years of pain and agony I've given her, if she wants to think I'm the president of AA, let her think it. As long as you and I know I'm just another drunk, we're all safe from me. To my mother I have been allowed the privilege of experiencing anonymity. Didn't think I'd ever get to do it. We talk about it, but I got to experience it. I got to see the hand of God at work.

You see, I've experienced so I believe that God takes my very worst transgression and turns it into a tool of healing for other people. Just as my life is none of my business, my sobriety is not for me. It's for you. We tell each other all the time, if you don't give it away, you don't get to keep it. That means it's not mine. I get to enjoy it, but only as long as I give it away. Well, the worst thing I did, in all of my various criminal activities, the worst thing I believe I did was one time in desperate need I stole my mother's \$2 bill collection.

I needed the money and I knew where it was and I took it. They don't get any worse than that for me. I had been able to talk to her about that to get it square on the surface, but if you remember, there's a period of time there that \$2 bills went on to circulation. I wasn't able to replace the collection for her. We both kind of forgot it. Because my life is none of my business, I ended up over here in Virginia four or five years ago.

They took us up to Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's home. And, sure enough, they're back in circulation. They had boxes full of them. I was thrilled. I'm an emotional person anyway. You almost cracked me up. Miles, when you started early on, here I go again. I bought enough \$2 bills to replace her collection. And, of course, I was touched. So that night I told the crowd about that. And we all had a nice cry and it had a good time.

And I brought them home and gave them to her. Two weeks later, an envelope showed up from Virginia anonymously with \$2 bills in it. Taking the worst thing I've ever done in God's hands, he's turned that into a tool for someone else, who looked down about the same thing, obviously, and couldn't get free because it couldn't square the deal. So they did that. It has become an incredible thing. My mother now has two collections.

Wherever I go on, sometimes through the mail, people started writing her, separately, sending her \$2 bill.

And I get to just watch it because I had nothing to do with it. She has the collection that I stole and replaced, and that's over here. And then she has this other growing envelope for \$2 bills that she drags out when people come over to her house. So she can tell them what alcoholics and nozzles is about. That's who we are, she thinks.

And I think that's a good image for her to be turning to the world. We are people who care. She loves the little letters she gets. The money's nothing. She loves the little letters. And it's not that people care about each other. And that's what I hate. A wonderful deal. This last year, some remarkable things happened to me. I stayed very busy in the program because I sponsored a lot of people. And I don't know one way to do it.

If I sponsor you, you show up at my house on a regular basis. I don't care who it's once a day or once a week. But you've got to show up on a regular basis at a particular time. And you and I will sit down and we'll go through the big book together. And we'll just do everything it says. At least one of us will probably stay sober. That's my lifeblood. So I stay active in the steps. But periodically I like to put myself in the hands of a friend and let them carry me through the deal.

With new eyes. Because one thing I know about my alcoholic mind is that eventually I get to where I know too much. And then I'm a menace. Well, when I rotated from your General Service Board, I'd been four years of very active running around the world about 80,000 miles a year. My business had gone to hell. My family life was still pretty good, but she was getting edgy. They were saying things like, who's that in the living room?

Oh, that's dad. Oh, I needed to find out where I was. And I had to laugh. I sat down in my basement in my lovely home with all my stuff on the walls. In the place I've created where I can go to be with God. And I'm thinking, where's mine? I'm 55 years old and I'm broke. Where's mine? Sitting in my basement in my lovely home surrounded by my family. Where's mine? I knew it was time to do some inventory and find out what's wrong with you, kid.

Anyway, we got that cleared away. The business picked up. I felt better. The thing worked. I do this for a major reason. I truly believe that while God speaks to me mostly through you, He also speaks to my heart. And God never yells. Never. Not of me. It's a tiny, tiny voice. And I must have a clear, quiet mind or I won't hear it. And that's what this did. It was clear. I did really severe damage to my two little boys.

They were with me on the road. I went out in Hell's Angels' places and crash pads. And when I was running dope, so were they. When I went to jail, so did they. They ended up in some bad places. My boy wasn't on that inventory. But as I was sitting quietly in my basement now, visiting with my God in my garden, I began to think about my older boy, Terry. The young one healed up pretty good. He works with me and we've talked about it.

He's still at 29, he's still a lunatic. But he's in pretty good shape. My older boy, I could never think of without great pain in my heart. And Terry has always had pain. He's always believed he is responsible for most of this stuff. And he was never really part of the family. We didn't get invited to his wedding. He could come by and visit once in a while. He could say, I love you, Dad. But only after I had said I love you, Terry.

There was something wrong. And we'd talked about the problem for years. I'd apologize and tried to clean it up until there was something wrong. I started thinking about my boy. And it occurred to me that the last time I had gotten arrested, he was eight years old. And his brother was six and a half. And they ended up in a very bad

foster home. Some bad things happened to those kids. The worst thing that happened is that my older boy had to grow up at eight.

And they come a man to protect his little brother from these bad things. And it just damaged him terribly. And then it occurred to me that for all the talk he and I have done, I had never thanked him for that. And because I know that there's only one time and that's now and there's only one place and that's right here. In that here and now I've got a hold of him immediately. And I said, Terry, I know we've talked about this many times.

But I want you to know that I think what you did that time when I got arrested was a very brave. And I want to thank you for taking care of your little brother when I couldn't. I heard his voice change on the spot. I heard it. Now I get Bronco tickets and I don't go. I really don't care. And two weeks before this, with a little pain in my heart, I'd call Terry and said, you won't go to the Bronco game. He said, sure dad came by and got the ticket said thanks and win.

Two weeks after I visited, I called Terry and said, would you like to go to the giant game? And he said, dad, are you going to go with us? A few weeks later he called. And those of you who have kids know when your kids call you just listen for a while and they get around telling you what they want. And we visited and I listened and we visited and I listened and we visited. And we'd been visiting about ten minutes when I realized we'd been visiting about ten minutes.

That's the only reason you call. He wanted to visit with me. Not too long ago I went over to his house and I went all the way back to the car. He put his arm around me for the first time ever and walked me back to my car. All I did was say thank you. Christmas I had some fun with him. I bought his little boy, my little grandson, an H.O. gauge choo-choo train. Every little boy, I had a train. And I told Terry about it and Terry said, well, that's really neat.

He got excited because you know I never had one. And I got thinking about that. He's got one now. You want to have some fun watching a 30 year old kid unwrap his first train. And Christopher got a little bit out of shape because I got Terry a big one and Christopher a little one. But they're both the same gauge so they can play together. And just as soon as they get that down on the plywood where it works right, I'm going to go over and play with them.

All because I said thank you. And I got thinking about that. That's all this is that we do. That's it. The healing power that I understand comes from saying thank you. When I go pick up a new drunk, I'm saying thank you. To those who brought it to me. And to the God who saved my life and gave it back to me and made it useful. I'm learning to say thank you in as many languages as I can just to see what it'll do. Spasiba, shushu.

You should have seen what that would do. That's Chinese. And my wife and I like to eat Chinese food. And in her restaurant the other night I said shushu to the waitress and you should have seen her lighten. It just tickled her to death. Because it's a recognition that you're here. If I say thank you, it's a recognition that you and I have done something together. Bill's last message to us carries an Arabic phrase that says the same thing.

We salute you and thank you for your lives. What a wonderful thought that is. So I'm playing with thank you these days. Let me give you my gift by way of thanks. Because if you don't let me do this and other things like

this once in a while, I will wither and die a sick old man. I have become everybody I had ever met. And I really believe I was going to have to spend the rest of my life sorting it out so I can find out who I was.

And you said no that isn't what we do here. We'll help you find out who you're not. We'll get rid of that and whoever you are will just show up. It's like what happened when the fellow saw Michelangelo's statue of David for the first time. And he went to Michelangelo and he said, Mike, goodness, how did you do that? And Michelangelo supposedly said, well, I took this block of stone and I just chipped away everything that didn't look like David and that's what I got.

That's how I see us in Alcoholics Anonymous. With God as a sculptor and our little meetings and our books and all these little things we do as a chisel. One day at a time we're simply chipping away everything that doesn't look like done. And so far this is what we've got. Thank you for my life and yours.