

His name was Don, and on this page, it will always be just that.

There are probably thousands of people alive today—clean, sober and well—because of things he said and did. Don took no credit for that. He said, “God uses what he has to work with.”

I'm writing this because most people never get to meet a person like Don, and I was fortunate enough to have known him. I won't tell his story, because I never could successfully do that. He told it countless times, and it was often recorded—you can find it if you look.

Back in the fifties and sixties, Don was not the person I write about today. The first time he went to prison was for getting drunk and missing the sailing of his ship for the Korean War zone. As he related, the Navy took a dim view of that, and he was convicted of a felony. The last time he was locked in a prison was for drug smuggling.

He was sober when he took that trip to the Colorado State Penitentiary, but he wasn't, by any definition, recovered from the devastating disease of alcoholism. In prison, he met a small handful of men who had recovered, and were willing to teach Don how they'd done it. They read to him from the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, often called the AA Big Book, and they told him how it had saved their lives. They taught him that he wasn't a psychopath or a sociopath or a drug addict—all diagnoses that had been pasted on him along the way to the penitentiary—he was in fact an alcoholic, as that's explained on the pages of the Big Book.

Those recovered drunks explained that what had worked for them would work for Don, too. He'd have to rely on what the Twelve Steps of AA call a Higher Power, he'd have to make genuine amends for the wrongs he'd done, and most important of all, he'd have to help others.

They probably never told him that he'd have to spend most of his energies helping others, for the rest of his life—and maybe he didn't really have to do all of that to stay sober. But he did it. Don got sober in 1967, and left the Penitentiary a couple of years later. He wasn't the same man who went in. He had to rebuild his life, which meant he had to work. From casual labor, to truck driving, and finally to a career in drug and alcohol rehabilitation, he did the kind of work that makes for a paycheck, until his retirement.

But that wasn't his real work. From even before he left the penitentiary, he began helping other men and women learn how to exchange lives of utter despair for lives of peace, satisfaction and usefulness. He helped them find themselves in the AA Big Book. He helped them to accept the truth about themselves and their lives, and to turn to Higher Power for recovery. He taught them how to be useful and to help others.

He told people the truth, and he listened to their truths. He gave them hope. And he lived. Anyone who wanted to know how to live only had to watch Don. He never preached anything he didn't do. He never stopped doing the next right thing.

He carried the message of hope he'd found in the Big Book. He carried it to the AA meetings he frequented in his home town, to hundreds, probably thousands, of AA conventions and conferences all over the country and the world, and even into Russia. He served his home state as a Delegate to AA's General Service Conference, and later on its Board of Trustees. He also carried the message to other Twelve-Step recovery fellowships, and he was a valued friend to many of those fellowships.

Far more importantly though, he carried his message directly into the hearts of all he met, one heart at a time. There are no words to describe that part. The people he touched know it, deep within them. They'll never forget it. And each in his or her own way will always carry it to all whose paths they cross.

The last time he spoke publicly was in an appropriate setting. It was at the site of an AA meeting, regularly attended by a bunch of bikers. They meet in a converted warehouse space. The room probably has a capacity of about 150 people, but twice that many were crammed in. Don wore an oxygen tube, and spoke seated — in a strong voice, but far more quietly than usual. The talk had features from his typical speech, but more than the ordinary amount of reminiscence. He was saying goodbye. He knew it. Everyone did. He stopped every few minutes to breathe. His voice waned from time to time, then strengthened again. He spoke for forty-five minutes or so. He cried a bit. Others did, too.

He's gone now. He lived about twenty-seven hours after he finished that talk, then succumbed to the cancers he'd been suffering and fighting for months. He came as close to dying with his boots on as it was possible for him to do. He likely helped someone stay sober on that last night that he spoke. He certainly taught many in his audience one more lesson about how to live.

I'll miss him. I celebrate him. Peace be with you, Don.

(Please Note: Don's anonymity is protected here, because he was a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. The author is not a member of that fellowship, so is not restrained by its tradition of anonymity from writing about it here.)

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<http://www.greatreality.com/Don.htm>