

(In loving memory of one member in our fellowship who gave so much and touched so many. His experience, strength and hope will be missed by all who had the privilege of knowing him. He was a great man. Don P. passed away on 3/20/05. Our thoughts and prayers go out to his family and friends.)

How To Make It On The Street

For this AA, it was clear: if he wanted to stop serving time, he had to serve others.

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By Don P. from Aurora CO

Preparation for leaving the penitentiary began with my arrival. I had a one and one-half to three-year state sentence. I was on federal parole when I was sentenced to that charge, so I also owed the federal government five more years. My concern was not how to live in prison. It was knowing that sometime in the next one to seven years, I was going to be released, and it was painfully clear that I did not know how to live on the street. I did not know what was wrong with me, although I had been labeled by different authorities as a sociopath, a psychopath, and a manic depressive drug addict. I had hidden my alcoholism behind some very high drama.

Following a visit from some inmate AA members, I joined the Twelve-Step Study School. During the next five weeks, I was carried through the Steps as they are written in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*. In the sixth week, I was allowed to go to the regular AA meeting on Friday night. It was a call-up speaker meeting, which real people from the outside were allowed to attend. With the help of my sponsor, I also was given the job of taking the next group through the Steps at the Twelve-Step Study School on weekends. I was very fortunate that from the beginning, I was given the understanding that life is not about what I can get, but what can I give. It is not about what God can do for me, but what God can do through me. I must be available to life and to the promptings of the spirit.

Over the next thirteen months, I continued to work with others and learned how to perform daily tasks. My job was in the dishroom, and eventually, with great reluctance on my part, I became the lead man there, where I developed a skill that has carried me throughout my life: I am able to get cooperation from people over whom I have no authority. I learned to serve as a leader. I was being prepared for life in the real world, where showing up and doing what you agreed to do is the order of the day. My sponsor, Bruce, was clear: Want money? Get a job. Show up for the job, on time, all the time. While you are there, do some work, and at the end of a stated period of time, they will give you money. It will never be enough, but it will always be enough. When you are asked to do more, do it. As long as you take their money, be loyal. Keep your word. If you don't think you can keep your word, don't give it. There was much more, but this was the gist of what Bruce was trying to tell me: There were principles that could guide my conduct and my thinking.

I was granted parole to the federal authorities, and we all thought that I would have to finish the sentence on the federal charge. AA people had demonstrated that I could be useful wherever I was, so I prepared myself for a return to federal custody. There was also a possibility that the federal judge would reinstate my parole and release me. My sponsor told me that he did not think I was ready to return to the street but that I should prepare for that possibility. I spent the next three weeks reexamining my life, my intentions, and reworking the Steps to make sure that I was not holding on to any of the ideas that had caused my troubles and brought me to this place. I needed to be open to any eventuality, free to accept whatever was in store for me, and be available mentally and emotionally to the promptings of the spirit. When they took me to Denver for the federal hearing, I was ready.

The federal parole officer who had suggested that I simply be locked up because I could not be helped, now suggested to the federal judge that I be restored to parole. He said that I had been going to AA, and they would know within six days if I would make it or not. On the Thursday before Memorial Day weekend, 1969, I was reinstated on federal parole. Because it was a long weekend and I had no job, no place to live, and only \$17 of my \$25 release money, the parole officer and I agreed that it would be best if I remained in jail until the beginning of the following week.

During the weekend, I reaffirmed the attitudes I had been given to complete my parole and live on as a free man. I had been told that if I got to AA my first day out, I would probably stay out. I was to remember that I was still doing time; I just was being allowed to do it on the street. I was not an ex-con; I was a man who had been to prison. Ex-cons have problems with the law and society. I was to be available to the promptings of the spirit and to go in the direction I was being led as long as it would contribute to my staying out. I remembered that the relationship I had formed with my creator was on easy and understandable terms and that if I asked for direction and strength to do the right thing, I would be given direction and strength.

Monday arrived. As I walked down the tier on my way out to meet the parole officer, another inmate stopped me and gave me a slip of paper. He said, "If you have a problem getting a job, go see this guy. He can help." Following the orientation with the federal people, I was taken to the state parole officer. He was clear and straightforward. "Have a job by tomorrow, or back you go. Report every evening after work."

I knew I could get a job at Burger King in Aurora. I had worked there before, and despite my trouble, the manager was a good man and would help. I went to catch the bus to Aurora and hit my first hurdle. The sign on the bus said: HAVE EXACT FARE. DRIVERS CARRY NO CHANGE. I felt so fragile, I could not get on the bus and risk being asked to get off because I did not have the exact fare. I remembered the slip of paper the inmate had given me. It was a daily labor pool located only four or five blocks away, so I walked to Minuteman Labor Pool. I had been told to be completely open and honest, so when Jack asked me what I wanted, I said, "My name is Don P. I am an alcoholic and have had drug problems. I am on federal and state parole, and I need a job. Do you have anything?" Jack got excited and said, "You are just what I have been looking for." He took me to Dixon Paper Company. They told us that they did not hire ex-cons, but that if I worked on Jack's payroll they would put me to work unloading box cars. Jack got me work for the rest of the day, and helped me get work clothes and find a place to stay. After reporting to the parole officer at the end of the work day, I followed directions and went to the York Street Club to get with AA.

During my incarceration, one of the regulars from the outside had become somewhat of a mentor for me. We were men who would normally not mix: He was a dignified older man, a financial specialist, and a family man. He also was always at the meeting on the

nights he had committed to come, despite a two-hour drive each way. He had qualities I wanted for myself. Just prior to release, I asked Reed, "How will I be accepted out there?" He said, "Well, you will just have to come and find out. If you come to York Street your first night out, one of us who has been coming down here will be there to meet you."

I was very nervous as I walked up the steps at York Street and went inside. There stood Reed. Despite having seen him once a month for over a year, I said, "You probably don't remember me, but you told me to come here my first night out of prison." Reed laughed, and we began a friendship that lasted until he died. (His wife later told me that they never went to the club as early as they had that day. Reed had come home early and told her he did not know why, but they needed to go over to York Street.) Many times Reed and Dottie were at the top of the stairs and taught me to be there also when needed.

I became a member of the Denver Young Peoples' Group and of AA as a whole. An old-timer who also had served time told me that if I gave myself entirely to AA for a year, I would never have to go back to prison except on my terms. For the next six months, I was not allowed to have a car, so the AA people made me a deal: If I got to the meeting, someone would get me home. There were many former inmates in AA, and my parole agreement did not allow me to associate with former inmates. I had learned to ask instead of assume, so I asked my parole officer about this, and he said that if it was for AA purposes, I had better hang out with them. Our group sponsored two meetings a week: a Tuesday discussion, and a Sunday call-up speaker meeting at the club. We also went all over the area to other meetings. We wanted to be sure to be part of AA as a whole. We got involved in Twelfth-Step work, public information activities such as talking at local schools, and service clubs. I had learned that if I saw a quality in a person that I admired or wanted, I was to climb into their hip pocket until I knew how they got that quality. I picked my street sponsor because he was a family man. He was also our group's GSR and had a kind of dedication some others did not seem to have. I followed him around until I became aware that while my current responsibility was to stay sober and help others achieve sobriety, I also had a responsibility to the past and a duty to the future to serve the Fellowship in a way that would make certain that the person who comes to AA fifty years from now gets the same opportunity that I had to learn to live a life that makes sense.

For the next two years, all of my activities except for work, were AA related. I was released from parole one and one-half years early. Having begun to learn to practice the principles in all of my affairs, it was suggested that I begin to have more affairs, as long as I did not have more affairs than I had principles. I was told by Social Services that I was to never attempt to do anything to impress them to get my children back. I was to put my life in order, and they would watch. If they ever thought I would be a decent father, they would contact me. My children were returned to me after two and one-half years while I was working as a truck driver for Dixon Paper Company during the day and then working in a house where drunks were given thirty days off the streets in an effort to achieve sobriety. The cleaning up of my past has been the most important and rewarding activity of my life, second only to active work with other alcoholics. I stayed employed long enough to qualify for social security. I spent the last nine years of my work life working in corrections, both for the Department of Corrections in North Carolina and for community corrections in Colorado. We simply found ways to get the AA message into correctional facilities.

I have been married to the same wonderful woman for twenty-six years, and we do not fight. The bathroom in the home I've been privileged to live in for twenty-five years is larger than the cell in which I used to live. My children are not afraid of me. My neighbors respect me and teach me how to be a good neighbor. My children are producing children, and one of my grandsons has just presented us with a great-grandchild. AA has allowed me to serve the Fellowship in dramatic and meaningful ways. How did I prepare for this? I learned to trust in God, clean house, and help others. I have joined in the fellowship of the spirit and have indeed found a way of life better than any I could have conceived.