



IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

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THOSE FRIENDS THOU HAST

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's character Polonius advised his son Laertes: "Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried, grapple them unto thy soul with hoops of steel." I first read those words many years ago in a high school literature class. At the time, I neither understood nor much cared what this archaic phrase meant. It was not until I began my recovery from the disease of alcoholism that I learned its meaning and, in the process, the meaning of friendship. This is my story of how I came to have friends, how they helped to save my life, and why they are today steeled unto my soul in a way I could never before have imagined.

My school days, my legal career, and my alcoholism all followed parallel paths. During college and law school, I prided myself on my focused commitment to my studies. As I looked around me, I noticed few others willing or able to spend equivalent amounts of energy pursuing what I thought were the benchmarks of academic success. I achieved good grades but had no close friends.

My early years as a lawyer continued in much the same vein. I prided myself on my focused commitment to my chosen profession. As I looked around me, I noticed few others willing or able to spend equivalent amounts of energy pursuing what I thought were the benchmarks of professional success. By now I had a family – a caring wife and wonderful children – who had my love but not my time. I achieved professional success, but still I had no close friends.

As the years passed, I continued to expend vast amounts of energy in the practice of law. Gradually, a few drinks after work became a regular part of my evenings. Problems, crises, and fears always seemed less daunting with a drink in my hand. As I looked around me, I noticed few others willing or able to consume equivalent amounts of alcohol. I was proud of my drinking prowess, but I continued without close friends.

During all those years, I seldom thought of the consequences of my drinking. My mental picture of an alcoholic was of someone else; the absence of close friends was due to my busy practice; the void in my soul was merely an existential enigma. Insidiously, my drinking increased: occasionally, a couple of drinks in the morning; a beer or two at lunch; a few in the car on the way home; continuous consumption during the evening; a few quick ones when I awoke in the early morning hours. My life soon became one of physical and emotional isolation. I distanced myself from my wife and children, and my drinking was progressively done in secret, away from family and law partners. I had no friends in whom I could confide.

My tipping point came quickly. I began staying home from work for days at a time, literally drinking from morning to night. During these few weeks, I realized I could not function without alcohol. It stopped my hands from shaking, put me to sleep at night, quieted my mind, and stilled my fears. Fortunately, with the encouragement and support of my family and with an enormous amount of anxiety, I finally sought help through a residential treatment facility.

OREGON ATTORNEY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

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From my first days of sobriety, I found myself surrounded by others with whom I shared a common history – people who, like me, had fought a common enemy, soldiers of sorts who had been wounded in combat and were now recovering from the physical and emotional injuries of the battlefield. We connected as veterans of war connect with one another. We spoke the same language, shared the same fears, cried over the same pains, and laughed over the same embarrassments.

Following treatment, I continued to seek the fellowship of the recovery community. I found it in the Oregon Attorney Assistance Program. There, I met other men and women in my profession. Our practices were often different, but our stories were not. We connected in ways that defy description. We knew without saying it that we could depend on one another. We were comrades-in-arms who shared a common bond – not because we were lawyers, but because each of us had at one time been lonely and scared and lost in our addictions. At last, we had come home.

I now have friends. They, along with my family, saved my life. Like my family, they will always be there for me, and I for them. And, as with my family, they are today steeled unto my soul in a way I could never before have imagined.

Grateful to My Family and Friends

This article was adapted from one of the recovery stories shared at the OAAP's weekend retreat for professionals in recovery on September 16-18, 2005.