

WHAT'S YOUR STORY

OUR READERS SPEAK



WILL IT EVER STOP RINGING?

BY GARY STROMBERG

The caller ID said it was T.J. on the phone. “Shit,” I thought. “Now what?” “Hey T.J., what’s up?” I asked too lightly, trying to disguise my annoyance at him for calling so late. “I just want you to know that he died,” T.J. mumbled, so quietly I could hardly hear him. “My dad passed away an hour ago.” “Shit, shit, shit,” I whispered to myself. “What’s wrong with me?” I knew his dad had gone into hospice and it would be over soon, but I’m so wrapped up in my own bullshit I forgot all about T.J.’s troubles.

It’s not just T.J. who causes me grief, I’m a sponsor to six or seven men in my 12-Step program, and on any given day I’m dealing with the problems of at least two or three of them. On this day though, the fates have

conspired against me and they all seem to have issues that need to be talked about now. A good sponsor is supposed to put the men he works with first, and be available to them no matter what. I’ve tried to do this through the thirty-eight years of my sobriety, but it can be a pain in the ass, just like it was today.

Jason called first thing this morning. He and Patricia had been fighting through the night and he felt he was losing it. “I’m either gonna kill her or kill myself,” he said, almost hysterically. “Hold on youngblood, hold on,” I said, in the calmest voice I could muster. “Let’s talk this out.” I’m often put in the position of being the voice of reason for the men I sponsor, and I wonder if they have any idea who they’ve entrusted their

secrets to. Sometimes I'm as scared and conflicted as they are, but I've been given tools that I've learned how to use to get through most situations. This is what I give to the men I work with. A half-hour later Jason had gotten control of himself, regained his senses, and promised to write an inventory about his relationship with his wife, and now I had the beginnings of a migraine!

Sponsorship requires paying close attention to what your sponsees are talking about, and it's a responsibility I take seriously. As I said previously, I was not much of a candidate for this trusted position, but I've grown considerably in my recovery. I had no sooner hung up with Jason and made myself a cup of strong coffee when the phone rang again. "What the fuck is going on here," I asked myself?

The caller ID informed me it was Mike, the newest and most needy of my sponsees. He's only been sober a few weeks and requires a good deal of my time as he tries to get his feet under him and headed in the right direction. For a moment I considered not answering, as the day was getting away

from me and I still had some work to finish, but I thought better of it and picked up the phone. Working with men who are newly sober has special challenges, as they are often physically as well as mentally sick. When talking with Mike I try to be firm, but upbeat, giving him all the support and encouragement I can, to help guide him in the early stages of his recovery.

Mike had a good career, but for the last couple of years, he had been going downhill fast, along with the physical and mental deterioration brought about by alcoholism. It's strange, but seldom do men make the connection that drinking is responsible for many of their problems. Alcoholism is called the disease of denial and Mike has a suitcase full of excuses for his current problems. "It's her fault, COVID is ruining my life, my boss just doesn't get it, the economy did me in" etc, etc.

His voice is filled with fear as he relates his newest concerns to me, mostly having to do with the financial mess he's created, and I listen carefully. When he's done, I take a breath and relate to Mike my own story of a broken career; I was a failed big shot,

I tell him, but I emphasize the positive outcome I've arrived at as a result of staying sober and working a spiritual program. I tell Mike I've become, through working this program, the man that God intended me to be. Not sure Mike believes me, but it helped me just saying it.

A.A. works because we don't give advice; we just relate our experiences in similar situations. This is how we learn in our program of recovery. Alcoholics are often belligerent and defiant people, so telling us what to do is usually met with scorn and most likely refusal, but telling what we did creates empathy and is usually heard.

Mike and I share for what seems like an hour or so, when I finally end the conversation. I'm nearly exhausted from working with these guys today, but I think for a moment about how fortunate I was to have guys that were willing to help me out of the darkness of my past, so I say a simple, "thank you God," and head to my kitchen to fix my dinner and relax a bit. Finally, a couple of hours to myself, I think, and plop down on my couch to catch quick nap, when what do you know? The phone rings!

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