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This too shall pass

MY STRUGGLE WITH ADDICTION, RECOVERY, AND THE BUMPY ROAD TO SUCCESS

I was 32 years old before I was licensed to practice law. Sometimes this prompts questions at legal networking functions about my “first career.”

I typically respond with a mixture of humor and shame as I explain that I was not a very focused young adult, but that I had a lot of fun. Those who do not get the hint might ask me what I am drinking. After all, alcohol (and drugs, although few would admit it) is the ubiquitous social lubricant at every legal networking event – usually at a sponsored, open bar. We work hard and play harder, right? But my drink these days is club soda. When pressed by someone who will not take “no” for an answer, I like to say that I am “allergic to alcohol.” My audience is always sympathetic and concerned at this point, asking, “Oh no, what happens?”

My response: “I break out in handcuffs.” Laughter ensues and the party goes on.

I have been sober since August 31, 2001. Not “California sober” (which is some version of “I only smoke pot and take mushrooms” or “I still drink, but I don’t put anything up my nose”), but sober sober. I do not use any substances that affect me from the neck up unless they are prescribed by a doctor – and even then, I inform the doctor of my history of substance abuse. When I tell people how long I have been sober, they almost always offer praise and congratulations, followed by discussions about their friends and family members who have recovered or are still struggling.

Sometimes people apologize for drinking in front of me, but I tell them not to. I do not apologize to my

vegetarian friends for eating a steak when we go out to dinner. When I was newly sober, I stayed away from parties and events where I knew drugs and alcohol would be consumed, but that is not the case today. At this stage, if my continued sobriety were contingent upon others not drinking in my presence, I would be on some pretty shaky ground. After all, liquor is not expensive, and I know where to buy it. In fact, I am married to a “normy” (i.e., she is not an alcoholic/addict) and we have a stocked bar at our home for entertaining guests.

Starting – and stopping – young

I stopped drinking and doing drugs at the age of 24. This is young by any standard, but I also started young. I had a good 10 years of experimenting by the

time I was done. For example, I was arrested for a DUI at age 16. The court ordered me to attend 12-step meetings, but I was not ready. I went to the meetings, drank coffee, smoked cigarettes, ate cookies, and got my court-card signed. At this point, I was dabbling with psychedelics and ecstasy (“molly,” as the kids call it these days) and smoking a lot of pot, but I had not gotten into hard drugs. When I was 19, I spent a few days in county jail for leaving the scene of an accident to evade a second DUI. By this time, I was experimenting with cocaine. I liked the effects produced by uppers, but cocaine wore off quickly and I did not like the come down. At age 21, I pled to a lesser offense to reduce a drug charge and was once again court-ordered to attend 12-step meetings. I went to the meetings, but I was not ready. I had not yet hit bottom. I listened to the stories at the meetings, but I looked for the differences instead of the similarities. I convinced myself that the people in the meetings either were not as bad as me (i.e., they did not use drugs and alcohol like I did) or they were lying and were not really sober. I did not take it seriously.

Eventually I found harder drugs, which led to my bottom. I was addicted to hard drugs for two years before I was confronted with the intervention that saved my life. When I started, I would use drugs on the weekends and then sober up to go to work. After doing this for a while, I eventually miscalculated and had to take drugs to make it through the workday. It wasn't long before I was doing drugs every day. These last years of my drug use are a bit of a blur. I dropped out of college, got a job, met a girlfriend, got an apartment, totaled my car, lost the job, broke up with the girlfriend, and lost the apartment, all in quick succession. I couch-surfed for a while and, when I had nowhere else to go, ended up back at my mom's house at the age of 24. It was there that my parents staged the intervention that led to my recovery.

Family support

Many people reading this article will know my mother and stepfather, Norm

and Beverly Pine, who are successful appellate attorneys in Los Angeles. They can attest to my insanity. As can my father, Jerry Tillett, a retired artist, and my sister, Stacy Freeman, who practices law in Los Angeles. I put my family through hell. At one point my mother and stepfather changed the locks on their house when they left town on vacation because they were afraid of what I might do if left alone in their house. They were not wrong.

My parents repeatedly came to my rescue and bailed me out of situations that I had gotten myself into. It is extremely difficult to deal with a loved one who has a problem with drugs and alcohol. Most people want to help, but often end up enabling the afflicted person by giving them money and cleaning up after them, only to have them lash out and point the finger, looking for someone else to blame for their troubles. If you were to ask my parents today what they would have done differently, they would probably tell you that they would have let me fail and left me in jail when I called them to bail me out.

When confronted with the intervention, I balked, responding that I needed to think about it and that I might be willing to go in a week. Thankfully, my parents told me that if I did not go that day, I could not stay at their house. Faced with the prospect of homelessness, I went to rehab. I am not sure why, but for some reason sobriety stuck the first time around for me. I have known plenty of people (some who are no longer with us) who have struggled with sobriety, checking in and out of various rehab facilities several times. I attribute my ability to stay sober to being done. I had been beaten into a state of reasonableness and blessed with the gift of desperation. I had tried to live life on my terms, and it had not worked. My best plans had gotten me into trouble with the law, and left me with health issues, no money, and nowhere to go.

The 12-step program – a cult?

While in rehab, I was introduced to a

12-step program. I owe my life to the program and to my parents for getting me into treatment. I got a sponsor, worked the steps, and today I give back, helping other men by taking them through the steps as my sponsor did with me. At first, I thought that the whole thing seemed kind of like a cult. I am not religious and the God concept was unsettling. Thankfully, the program did not push any one conception of God on me and, instead, allowed me to conceive of a Higher Power of my own understanding. The key was that I had to be willing to believe in something greater than myself – I could not be in charge. This allowed me to let go of the control I thought I had and to take direction from another person who had recovered before me.

While in rehab I went back to school, attending community college, which I continued after leaving rehab. I found it relatively easy to maintain good grades when I actually showed up to class; imagine that. After a few years of community college, I was ready to transfer to a four-year school. I had an “A” average and applied to all the UC schools and several top private institutions, but none were willing to take a chance on me. Looking back, I cannot blame them. I had only been sober for a few years at that time and the recidivism rate for addicts and alcoholics is extremely high.

Finding success in college

I ended up attending Chapman University, where I flourished academically, graduating with honors and obtaining a Bachelor of Science in Psychobiology. While at Chapman I managed the neuroscience lab on campus, co-authored a scientific paper on learning and memory that was published in the *Journal for Neuroscience*, and presented at the Neuroscience convention in Atlanta, Georgia. I had discovered a love for hard science and aspired to become a surgeon. But when I graduated from Chapman in 2006, I was 30 years old, and engaged to

a woman who I had previously used drugs with, but who had gotten sober with me. We were thinking about starting a family and I did not want to attend another eight years of school and internships before finally making money as a surgeon to support my family.

That is when I decided to pursue a career in law. My mother, stepfather, and uncle were all practicing attorneys in Los Angeles and my younger sister was in law school at the time, so pursuing a legal career made sense. I performed extremely well on the LSAT, just a few points shy of my sister's score, which had earned her a spot at Columbia Law School. I had a 3.8 undergraduate GPA, which included classes such as Physics 1 & 2, Calculus 1 & 2, Organic Chemistry 1 & 2, Biochemistry, and Cellular and Molecular Biology, all of which I took while managing the neuroscience lab and volunteering as a Clinical Care Extender at Hoag Hospital.

Armed with a solid GPA and LSAT scores, I applied with confidence to nearly all the top-20 law schools. My personal statement was a comeback story, focusing on overcoming adversity, and rising from the lowest depths of alcoholism and drug abuse to becoming a productive, upstanding member of society. I thought long and hard before writing about my struggles with addiction, recognizing that some see addiction as a moral failing rather than a genetic predisposition or disease, and that schools may be cautious given that many addicts and alcoholics relapse. On the other hand, I was proud of my accomplishments, wanted to tell my story, and the truth provided the only sensible avenue for me to explain the gaps in my education and my failing grades before I got sober. With all of this in mind, I was sure that I would be admitted to several top schools. But that's not what happened.

Law school and a recidivist wife

One by one, I was rejected by multiple top-tier schools. When the dust settled, I was wait-listed at Columbia Law School and accepted by USC but rejected

by every other top-20 law school. I was very proud to have been admitted to USC, where I ultimately attended law school, but my ego was severely deflated.

I did not enjoy law school very much. As a science major, legal concepts were like a foreign language to me. However, stressors at home proved to be my real obstacles during law school. My then-wife had decided that she no longer wanted to be sober. When she announced that she did not want to toast with grape juice at our wedding, I was concerned, but there was not much that I could do. It was her decision to make, not mine. In short succession, she began using drugs again – first pot, ecstasy, and hallucinogens, but eventually cocaine, and harder drugs.

During my first year of law school, my then-wife had applied to nursing school, but she did not score high enough on the entrance exam. I wrote a letter for her, appealing the school's decision. I argued that her entrance test score did not reflect her intelligence and it worked. I got what I wanted; she got in. But there was turmoil in our house as I struggled to help her through nursing school. I went to law school during the day and helped her with her homework and tutored her at night. But I could not take the classes for her, and pharmacology is a bear, even with a pre-med background. She eventually failed out, after which she continued to get deeper into drug use. While I was studying for the bar exam, I learned that she had been cheating on me with a mutual friend who had fallen on hard times and was staying on our couch.

I was gutted. I filed for divorce and was forced to pay her money that I did not have as spousal support. Despite going through this nightmare scenario, I moved back into my parents' house where I continued to study for and pass the bar exam. I was grateful for the help and support of my family, but I felt betrayed by my wife. In fact, I hated her for many years. Here I had been working hard with my eyes on starting a family with a woman who I loved despite her

flaws, and she threw it all in my face and then made me pay her for the privilege of having my heart torn out by her.

Forgiveness: a gift of the 12 steps

Over time, I have come to forgive her. That is a gift of the 12 steps. Years later I married my current wife and moved on. One day my father called me and told me that my ex-wife's family had called him looking for her. Her father had passed away and left his house to her in his will, but they had not heard from her in some time and did not know where to find her. With the help of some friends, I was able to help her family find her. She was homeless and living in a tent behind a store near Sunset and Western. Her family went to see her and tried to convince her to come with them, but she refused, convinced that they were trying to trick her into going to rehab. They took pictures of her, which they sent to me. She did not look anything like her former self. She was weathered and hardened by years of drugs use and living on the street.

Seeing the images of my ex-wife and learning about what had happened to her floored me. It was like seeing the Ghost of Christmas Future. There but for the grace of God go I. If I was lucky, this is what would have happened to me had I continued using drugs. The reality is that I likely would have ended up in prison or dead. I went through the stages of grief, feeling denial, anger, responsibility, and depression. Eventually, I made peace with what had happened. More importantly, I forgave her. I had hated her for years for having cheated on me and suing me for spousal support. But she did not do these things *to me*. She was an addict, and I was a casualty of her disease. She would have hurt anyone who got in her way; it wasn't personal. For addicts and alcoholics, staying high and/or drunk becomes paramount to all other things. We will do anything for another fix, no matter who we hurt.

I am no exception. In the throes of my addiction, I had repeatedly hurt my

family and people that I loved. As psychopathic as it sounds, it wasn't personal. I needed to stay high and drunk and I was willing to go to any lengths to evade the pain of reality. I would have hurt others if they had given me the chance, but my family cared about me, which made them vulnerable. They were a casualty of my drug use, not a target. When I accepted that the same was true for myself when it came to my ex-wife's drug use, a weight was lifted. I no longer harbored resentment towards her. Instead, I wished her well. Today I pray that she may someday recover from her addiction and live a peaceful and fulfilling life. I do not know where she is, much less if she is still alive.

You can stay sober

I tell you all of this to illustrate that you can stay sober no matter what. The only thing that is constant is change. Life is full of ups and downs and to expect that everything is always going to go smoothly is delusional. Those who have recovered from substance abuse are no exception. In fact, it can be even more difficult for us. We cannot safely numb the pain of heartbreak and loss with a drink or a drug. Much more than a drug problem, I had a stopping problem. Today I know that there is no problem in my life that a drink or a drug cannot make worse. Sure, I will forget about whatever I am struggling with in the short term, but when I come to, my problems will all still be there. But they will likely be compounded by health issues, financial stressors, legal problems, and one of many other all-too-familiar consequences of my drinking and drug use.

Today I have replaced my ineffective reliance on alcohol and drugs with tools that are positive and lasting. For example, I meditate, exercise, and help others to get out of my head when I am feeling down. I discovered these, and other tools through the 12-step program. I have a fulfilling and happy life that I get to keep as long as I put the 12 steps first.

Despite the hardships that I experienced, I made it through law school and passed the bar exam on my first attempt. After law school, I practiced litigation for approximately four years, focusing on plaintiffs' class actions, personal injury, products liability, and employment law. I am currently an appellate attorney at Pine Tillett LLP, and I love it. I was named as a partner in 2016 and I could not be happier. I am a Certified Appellate Law Specialist by the State Bar of California, and I have received repeated recognition for my appellate advocacy, including being: a recipient of the Daily Journal's 2020 California Lawyer Attorneys of the Year (CLAY) award and recognized as one of the 2021 "Street Fighters of the Year" by the Consumer Attorneys of California.

Timing matters in recovery

Timing is one of the key factors that I attribute to my recovery. When my parents finally confronted me with the intervention, I weighed only 135 pounds, and I was dying. I was too tired to fight, and I reluctantly agreed to go to rehab. This was pure luck. If any other option had been available, I likely would have taken it. I was also very fortunate to have a family who cared about me and who had the means to offer me help. Many families cannot afford to send their loved ones to rehab even if they are willing to go and some have so badly damaged their relationships with their families that they are not willing to help. I am also extremely grateful to the 12 steps. I am thankful for the fellowship and the altruistic nature of the program that focuses on one addict or alcoholic helping another. I have seen miracles in my own life as well as the lives of those who I have helped on their path to recovery.

Mine is a success story. There were several trying times along the way, but I put my recovery first and the rest fell into place. Becoming an attorney was not in the cards for me when I was young.

I believed that I would have been lucky to make it past the age of 30. Getting sober was a tall order in and of itself. I have read statistics that as few as 8-12% of alcoholics are able to stay sober using the 12 steps (that number is even lower without the steps). Whatever the percentages, my own experience is that very few people stay sober for any appreciable time. But I have not merely managed to stay sober; I have thrived. I have a full life from my family, friendships, and career, to giving back to my community and my hobbies (I am a DJ, a brown belt in Japanese Jujitsu, and I work on and drive '80s cars in track and autocross events). Hopefully my story will inspire others who have experienced hardships in their lives – alcoholism or otherwise. I am living proof that it is possible to overcome seemingly insurmountable odds.

There is life after addiction

There are many misconceptions about alcoholism and drug addiction; the fact that attorneys are particularly prone to substance abuse is not one of them. Addiction is one of those strange concepts that most people in our society publicly recognize as a genetic predisposition or disease, but privately believe is a moral failing or lack of will power. Either way, I have raised myself from some of the darkest depths of society and become a success by any measure.

People who are thinking about sobriety or who are new to recovery need to know that there is life after addiction. We are sick, not broken. We need to be able to read about others like us who have achieved great success despite enduring extreme hardships. My hope is that after reading this article someone struggling with addiction will believe that they can do it too. For resources and information about substance abuse and recovery, visit the Consumer Attorneys Association of Los Angeles Wellness Platform at <https://www.caala.org/?pg=CAALAWellnessPlatform>.

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Specialist by the State Bar of California. Along with his partner, Norman Pine, Tillett was a recipient of the Daily Journal's 2020 California Lawyer Attorneys of the Year (CLAY) Award for his work on the landmark wrongful-death civil rights action, B.B. v.

County of Los Angeles (2020) 10 Cal.5th 1. For his work on this case, he was also recognized as one of the Consumer Attorneys of California's 2021 "Street Fighters of the Year."