

# Article 10: What Came First: The Drinking or the Bad Decisions?

by AUTHOR

I was thrilled, for all the wrong reasons, to take the First Step. I knew, well before I ever set foot into an AA room, that I was powerless over alcohol, that my life had become unmanageable. When I first became sober, it was accompanied with a perverse joy because now I'd be able to blame all of my problems, bad decisions, and poor patterns of behavior on "being an alcoholic." I planned to be just as cunning and shrewd with my sobriety as I'd been with my drinking.

Declaring my sobriety was, at first, just another smoke screen, another way to string the people in my life along. After all, it was laughably clear to anyone that I was an alcoholic and I had zero control over my life. My bottoms continued reaching new depths. As an English instructor at a local college, I once passed out in my Jeep after the first class and missed teaching the second one. I woke to the sound of murmuring, opening my eyes to see three of my students standing there in the parking lot, pointing at me. They were a little bit amused, but mostly just pissed off. As was nearly everyone in my life by the end. Going sober was the way I was going to con them all into forgiving the depths I'd achieved.

It had come to that. On a daily basis, I felt less like a human being than a MacGyver gadget held together by duct tape and bubble gum. By getting sober, I'd hoped people would forgive me at once, collectively giving me that slow-clap you see in the movies. It'd give my messy past some clean borders and context. Admitting to a decades-long drinking problem would also mean quickly explaining away all my character flaws: jealousy, self-pity, arrogance, and impatience. I could pin it all on the booze.

All this proves that alcohol wasn't the problem. I was.

If I'm honest about being dishonest, the truth has always been the real problem for me. For as long as I care to remember, I've been more confident—faster on my feet, perhaps—by dealing with the world through lies, half-truths and omissions. Lying was a reflex. It made all of my basic, passing interactions with people—acquaintances, post office clerks, airplane seatmates—light and tolerable. I just wanted to get through life without any real investment or judgment. It kept me fleeting—a permanent background actor in other people's lives, quickly exiting the scene.

When my grandfather used to ask me how I was doing, he'd joke: "And never mind the truth—just make it interesting." I took this as life advice and ran with it well into my thirties. I used to find comfort in being dishonest with just about everyone I'd ever met. Half the time, I didn't even feel like I was lying. The truth never sounded as good to me as whatever I could make up. An invented me was certainly better than the real me, I thought. Still, lying is the emptiest transaction you can have in life—it's counterfeit money handed to people you don't respect. Deep down, you don't care about them. They don't matter. Alcohol made this acceptable in my brain—it made the idea of consequences seem like I was always living on the *Enterprise* holodeck. When I

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**Deleted:** Near the end of my drinking career, I had a daily four-hour commute between Columbus and Cincinnati. I'd sail right past my office, drive across the bridge into Kentucky, hit a 24-hour drive-thru liquor store, and purchase a pint of Popov from an unblinking sales clerk at 7 a.m.—just to keep my shaking, sweats and anxiety to a minimum. I also regularly lived through the exquisite pain only an alcoholic can appreciate: the sound of the world starting to come alive at 6 a.m. outside my window while I'm awake and blitzed out of my brain.  
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discovered drinking, that was just throwing gasoline on the campfire, giving flight to every fiction and fantasy that sprang forward in my brain. I could get away with anything and never worry about it.

Now, two years into sobriety and living an honest life, I have a new problem. You can't ask me simple questions about who I am and what I like to do. I genuinely struggle with such brain-teasers as "What's your favorite movie?" or "What kind of music do you like?" Answers don't come fast enough. Until very recently, I had no idea why this was. Then it hit me: I have absolutely no idea who I am. As an alcoholic, I'd created so much of myself that when I erased the booze, I also promptly erased most of who I was. In this awkward phase of trying to figure out who I am, it's sad that I have to chamber answers to questions, but at least I no longer treat the world as some sort of weird word-association game where I answer with whatever I assume the other person wants to hear.

No, alcohol wasn't the problem, but it took all the worst parts of who I already was and put them through an Instagram filter from hell—prettying up all my lies, insecurities, and anxieties. For me, the point of drinking was to unplug from reality and excuse myself at virtually every turn with "Well, I was drunk." Now, I have to own who I am more than I have to own being an alcoholic. After all, drinking didn't come first. I was always this petty, easily hurt, defensive, angry, and incapable of letting things go.

Alcohol can exacerbate just about any existing personality flaw. For the longest time, I wasn't sure if I was a bad person who did good things or a good person who did bad things. Because I never knew who I was, I never knew who other people were either. And that's now what living a sober life means to me: recognizing that there are actual people on the other end of my actions. It's about giving myself the chance to be that good person.

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