

In Defense of the Drunken Text Message

By AUTHOR

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At the height of my drinking, I apparently texted my younger sister at 2:30 am. All it said was “Help me,” or something to that effect. I heard about this much later from my mom, when I’d finally gotten sober. I don’t remember sending the message, but it sounds like something I’d have done—especially after putting away a pint of cheap, bright-smelling vodka. But it was a far cry from the messages I normally sent out into the world at two in the morning: garbled Facebook status updates, random messages to long-out-of-touch friends, the occasional phone call and slurred voicemail. Near the end of my drinking career, I dimly knew I was in trouble, but it was only in my darkest, blurriest moments that I tapped into truth. Turns out, drunk text messages were some of my first, most important steps into recovery.

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When the truth of my alcoholism was finally clear to me in my drunk text messages, I no longer had just a drinking “problem”—I’d hurtled way past the point of no return. Every time I drove away from the Russian liquor store in my neighborhood, the promise of the bottle sitting on the passenger side in a brown wrapper, I knew that it wasn’t a temporary phase. It was eventual that, one day, I’d have to get sober. My texts and Facebook messages pointed to my troubles. No one needed a Rosetta Stone to translate those hieroglyphs. It was pretty clear to anyone. But the nature of my messages started to change. They started to get more precise, like smart bombs surgically finding a house instead of flattening an entire city block. Some part of me knew I needed help and it started to reach out even when, truth be told, the rest of me didn’t want to get sober yet.

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Drunken texts are stabs in the dark. Anyone who’s in recovery has sent more than one. And their content is often a weathervane to progress, or lack thereof. For instance, after going to treatment, I relapsed a few short weeks later. With my wife and kids asleep, I zoned out and started aggressively posting YouTube videos on people’s Facebook walls. But something that night was different. I’d made a friend in treatment and had his number. It was going on three or four in the morning—that time of night that’s too late and too early—and I’d drunken myself into a state of self-pity. I was lying there on my couch, wondering why alcoholism had happened to *me*. Bad news is always supposed to happen to other people, not you. So I searched my phone, closing one eye as I scrolled through my contacts, and found the guy’s number. I sent him a quick hello.

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I was horrified to see, immediately, the ellipsis appear on my iPhone. Those three dots told me this guy was texting me back in the middle of the night.

“How are you?” it asked.

The question stabbed back at me there in the dark. It was just too real. More than that, I didn’t know the answer to his question. So I did I what I always did when I was drinking: I hid. I didn’t reply. I went back to Facebook and eventually passed out. The next morning, I went through my normal routine of surveying what public damage I’d caused

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just hours before. I had to see what nonsense I'd put out into the universe. When I saw the text to "AAMike," I winced. His reply just sort of hung there against a white space, orphaned. I ignored it for a couple of days. Then, when I drank myself into watching old *Twilight Zone* episodes online, I summoned the courage up to text him back. It was well after midnight and right around the time William Shatner thought he saw a creature on the wing of that 747.

"Sorry, man," I wrote back. "Got busy."

This was a bald-faced lie, since I was unemployed and both of us knew it. There was no excuse. Either way, once again, the three dots popped up almost immediately.

"Hey, no worries," he replied. "How are you?"

Again, I had no idea how to reply.

I went for broke, texting him **out of the blue**: "Will you be my sponsor?" It was like asking a stranger **if I could accompany him**, on his Caribbean cruise,

There was a pause, then the dots came.

"No."

I was taken aback. I watched as that sky-monster lumbered across the 747's wing in black-and-white, with Shatner not believing his eyes. I felt the exact same way. Then again, it's not like I even knew what the hell a sponsor was. It just sounded like something I needed to ask and I'd been rejected. I'd later find out "AAMike" knew I wasn't ready to yield. It was pretty clear that I was still out there, telegraphing my battle with the bottle. Still, for the first time, I'd zeroed in on someone in recovery and asked for help without even fully grasping what I'd done.

I'd love to say that "AAMike" eventually became my sponsor and gently guided me into sobriety, but that's not how it went down. Life in recovery is messy—it doesn't have neat, tidy, scripted endings. For me, sobriety has been anything but Hollywood-perfect. It's been shaky, tentative, uncertain and everything in between. I had to be ready to stop drinking. I had to face the same *Twilight Zone* monster that was my alcoholism, which lurked just beyond the window, before I could really make any sober strides. Several years later, I've gotten drunken, late-night messages of every variety. I can instantly tell the difference between the late-night "wish you were here" messages and the "I might need help" ones. I've received messages from acquaintances who are just feeling terrible enough to send an SOS and good friends who desperately want to get better. Very often, it's not as important what we say so much as that we simply said it at all. Occasionally, we send the right combination of words at the right time to the right person. Sometimes, we alcoholics and addicts get it right. A drunken text message becomes a safety flare fired against the night sky, arcing toward sobriety. It's what we do with whatever the flare reveals, though, that truly matters.

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