



# ADVENTURES IN SOBERBIA

a meandering path  
towards joy in sobriety

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## [ 01 ] Practice is Not Fake

A person in New York city stopped another on the street to ask for directions.

“How do you get to Carnegie Hall?”

“Practice, man, practice.”

While I do not know the author of that joke, I like to adopt that mindset when working the program. Practice is the act of attempting something that you previously did not know how to do, and repeating it until you are able. I prefer this to the phrase ‘fake it until you make it.’ Both convey the same meaning, but the latter feels negative to me.

I have found through experience that I need to maintain a positive inner dialogue. Life is going to throw enough challenges at me to keep me busy. I do not need to add fuel to the fire by replaying negative tapes inside my head. Perhaps this is a consequence of growing up in the eighties when positive affirmations and self-help books were all the rage. However, even after the trends changed and the fads disappeared, one kernel of truth persisted for me – my subconscious believes what I tell it.

It is easy for me to forget this when thinking with my logical mind. Phrases like “I can’t do that” seem harmless, after all I know better. If I am working on something that is difficult, I expect it to take a while and that progress may be in small increments. However, the rest of me does not know better. My emotions and subconscious only hear “I can’t.” If that message gets repeated enough, I risk believing it

If I fall into this cycle of negative feedback it prolongs the learning curve, or can sometimes sabotage it fully. On the other hand, if I choose my words more carefully, more accurately, then the situation can play out differently. I am working on that. I'm improving slowly. Seemingly insignificant choices like that result in my innermost self committing the following words to memory: "I'm improving."

For these reasons I do not use the phrase 'fake it until you make it,' since my mind hears 'it's fake.' Instead, I choose to say 'practice.' I am practicing how to be a real human being. I am practicing how to be kind. I am practicing applying these principles in all my affairs, not just in meetings.

If I think back to some of my most formative experiences many are centered on this theme. As a kid I played in youth football leagues for a half-dozen years. One year we had a tough-as-nails coach, Mr. Wilkins. He was stern, and he worked us hard. I recall standing many times with my hands on my knees, sucking in long breaths after running laps. But he was also fair. He did not judge you based on your starting point, he just got busy helping you improve. That year he took us to the city championships. He helped elevate us to a level we did not know we were capable of. If I look back the main difference that I see between him and other coaches was his relentless passion for practicing. Practicing with Coach Wilkins was more intense than game day with many other coaches.

The people in the program are my current coaches, and they have helped elevate me into a person I previously did not know how to be. I have learned not to judge myself for my starting point. I am learning to shed thoughts like "You really should be better at that by now." I am replacing them with an acceptance of where I am, and just as with Coach Wilkins, my sponsor helps me get busy improving.

Today I rely on a daily checklist to ensure I do all the things I need to. At the top of the list is the item 'Think of others.' I no longer judge myself harshly for needing the reminder, despite nearly a decade of sobriety. I'm still practicing that one. When I am prompted by the list rather than my own memory to ask my wife how she is doing, it is genuine. Life does not care how I got prompted, it only matters that I took the action.

After all that, if you still prefer 'fake it until you make it,' that is OK too. In my head I'll quietly be translating that into 'practice, man, practice.' And we will both stay sober another day.

## [ 02 ] A Sample Size of One

The inability to rely on an unseen higher power is a stumbling block to many in the program. In my short time here, I have noticed that people with scientific backgrounds seem to be especially prone to getting stuck on this point. I speak from experience as one such person. Thankfully, in my early days I did not let this deter me from doing the work. I was sufficiently fearful of a relapse that I was willing to cast aside my doubts and give the steps a try.

The irony is not lost on me that I was still following the scientific method, despite thinking I had placed it on temporary hold. As both the subject and observer in this experiment, the only way for me to learn anything tangible is to enter with an open mind. To do otherwise is to let the observer bias the results. However, when I unwittingly let go of any preconceived notions, I opened the door to doing the steps in a more effective way. There was no way I could pretend to reach a given outcome nor fake the results since I did not know what was coming.

Thus, as a sample size of one I proceeded methodically through the steps with my sponsor. Once complete, I attempted to live by these principles, both inside and outside the rooms of the program. About six months later I was afforded a gift of hindsight. I realized I was in a position to make as scientific a comparison as one can make with a sample size of one:

*Is my life better now than before working the steps?*

The answer for me was a resounding Yes. Further, I realized that no amount of reading nor other intellectual pursuits could have yielded the same results. Being honest and vulnerable in the presence of another human being is the medicine that worked.

An analogy drives this point home for me, that of a diabetic person that requires daily insulin shots to survive. I think of this often when I struggle to take necessary action. Consider the scenario if this person also happens to be a doctor, one with deep knowledge of the contents of an insulin shot. If he sits and contemplates the materials within the syringe, but takes no action, then he remains unchanged. Contrast him with a five-year-old child who scrunches up her face, takes the shot, and gains a day's worth of relief. She had no understanding of molecular biology nor any other details about how insulin does its work. Yet the child got relief, the doctor did not. I draw the following conclusion from this lesson:

*Knowledge of the solution is no substitute for action.*

While this comparison may seem far-fetched, it maps directly to my experience in the program. If I only read the books and listen passively during meetings then I am the doctor staring at the syringe, taking no medicine. When I tell the unvarnished truth and become vulnerable, only then do I put the medicine into my body and spirit. For alcoholics like me, telling the truth is an action verb. There is one other important message of hope that can be derived from this analogy:

*Experience does not require understanding.*

This is crucial for someone with my mental wiring to acknowledge. I can experience the solution even if I have no idea why it works. This means that I do not have to share a similar background with anyone here, and it will still work. I do not have to share a concept of a higher power, and it will still work. I do not need to join any particular religion, and it will still work. I do not even have to like the steps, and they will still work.

That conclusion is utterly massive to me. I do not have to measure up to a bar set by any other human, and I can still get sober if I do the steps. Even better than that, I can live with joy and serenity. It is this message of total inclusion that I find so full of hope.

The second irony that is also not lost on me is that nothing I write here can directly heal anyone else. Yet I feel compelled to share. My hope is that something in my story will resonate loudly enough with someone that it helps get them unstuck. *'Maybe that could work for me too.'* The best possible outcome is that a reader somewhere gains the motivation and courage to go ask a sponsor to take them through the steps.

Or perhaps if you are wired like me and enjoy a challenge, consider the gauntlet thrown down. Challenge yourself to do the steps and live them for half a year, then compare your life 'before' versus 'after.' Be a sample size of one, and enter the process as a blank slate. Go on, I double dare you. If your results are anything like mine, your only regret will be not having started sooner.



### [ 03 ] Two Versions of Me

Everybody has gifts, particular talents that enable one to easily perform tasks others find difficult. One of mine is spatial awareness. Given a just a few visual clues I can generally recognize where I am, both on city streets or in the woods. This skill is very useful, but can also be a liability.

Areas that seem familiar to me can generate false positives, i.e. I think I know where I am, but in fact I do not. Detecting this situation requires an admission that my superpower was wrong. Sometimes I stay stuck even when presented with evidence to the contrary, circling around the same incorrect train of thought, because I believe I should have been able to figure it out. This is especially true for areas near my home, where I will wrestle with the issue for longer than necessary. This is version one of me, in the default or lowest common denominator state.

Sometimes another version of me shows up. A long time ago I travelled around Europe with a backpack and a friend. One day we found ourselves in a train station in what was then Yugoslavia, with five minutes to make a connection. The schedule boards were written in the Cyrillic alphabet, which neither of us could read. We immediately began asking for help from anyone we could find. A local person quickly pointed us to the correct platform and we boarded the train. This is version two of me.

Both versions of me faced the same dilemma. Why are there two starkly different reactions?

One root cause is based on the type of problem I think I am dealing with. Simple tasks like reading a street sign or recalling a familiar trail fall squarely into the category of 'I got this.' Foreign language boards written in a non-Roman alphabet are at the other end of the spectrum,

in the category of 'get help fast.' The gray area in between those two extremes is harder to classify.

I have learned that because I believe I am good at something, I will overestimate my abilities, causing me to get stuck on many challenges for which I should have asked for help. This is exactly my experience in the program. I languished for a year and a half in a dark place because I thought 'I should be able to manage this.' I had been good at managing my life up until this point, why would I need help now? However, my use of alcohol had long since moved into the category of the train station in Yugoslavia, yet I was still trying to figure it out by myself.

Thankfully, when the last of the illusions of control shattered on the rocks of addiction's rocky shoreline, I did ask for help. Through the process of the steps the duality of situations like those above became more apparent. Every one of my abilities can be viewed as a coin, with one side depicting a gift, and the other a defect. If used improperly, my abilities at wayfinding can keep me lost. How then do I know the right way to approach a given situation?

The phrase "and the wisdom to know the difference" points the way. Version two of me accidentally got this right. The key difference between the two versions of me is the quality of willingness. Version two was willing to admit that he did not have all the answers, and that another could help.

Today I aspire to invoke that sense of willingness for any problem more complex than tying my shoes. I let go of my definition of the right outcome, and ask how to use the coin properly. The more open and willing my mind is, the more often I lay down the coin with the gift side up.

One of the character defects I deal with on a daily basis presents a concrete example, that of being judgmental. Beneath the defect is the generic ability to make a decision. This is clearly something I must be

able to do for the rest of my life, it cannot be simply avoided. In that regard it is akin to our instincts, in that we must seek balance rather than avoidance. During my time in the rooms, I have listened to others describe how they deal with the choice. I have learned that when I apply judgment to people it is most often a defect. If I apply judgment to things, it can be an asset. This distinction sounds simplistic, yet I catch myself judging others daily. Upon realizing the mistake, I remind myself that I cannot evaluate where another person 'should be' on their own journey. I can only decide whether or not I want to emulate their behavior. This subtle distinction refocuses the evaluation on their actions (things) and not on the inherent worth of the person. In so doing I can invoke the better version of myself.

#### [ 04 ] Making Plans

I had the opportunity a few years ago to attend a meeting in a recovery center in the desert of southern California. It was housed in a nondescript building located on a rough, hardscrabble lot. The attendees were a raw group, most with less than a month of sobriety. At the time I was six years into the program, which landed me somewhat awkwardly in the ranks of long-term sobriety for that room. During the course of the meeting a few former gang members described their lives before coming into recovery. I had few experiences in common, having grown up in a low-key suburb. I recall hoping that I had something useful to say, given that drinking was the only common bond that I could see. When my turn to share came, I internally played the little mantra that helps me put my ego aside, 'speak through me.' I cleared my mind as best I could and spoke from my experience.

A man approached me after the meeting, confusion on his face.

“What does it mean when you people talk about not making plans? I don’t get it.”

He had perhaps a week of sobriety, and was asking in earnest. This is a very often misunderstood concept, similar to that of acceptance. I felt a connection with his plight, and wanted to help. Words rushed into my head, unbidden, at least not consciously. A clear picture formed in my mind and then I answered.

“When we talk about being present, living in the moment or not future-tripping, it is not an invitation to be irresponsible. The key is to not get tied up in specific outcomes. I cannot spend all my paycheck and leave none for rent at the end of the month. We all get this, but what about making actual plans?

Imagine that you have been saving a little money each month, to build up a buffer against losing your job. By the time you have a few thousand dollars in the bank, your car’s transmission dies. You spend almost all your savings to fix it.

There is a temptation to take this personally, and get angry at life for conspiring against you. ‘Just when I start to get ahead it all gets taken!’ Another view is that if you had not been saving money the transmission would have died anyway. In that version of the story, you have no money to fix it, and therefore cannot get to work, guaranteeing your job loss. Viewed in this light, it was vitally important that you acted responsibly with your funds, even though they were not used for the outcome you had in mind. Next month you can resume saving some money, and at some point, it may stick. It may take years, but it can work.”

When I was done talking, he looked me directly in the eyes.

“Thank you. I *heard* that.”

I breathed a sigh of thanks. I wish I could take credit for knowing the precise story to tell that would make sense to him, but I cannot. 'We intuitively know how to handle situations that used to baffle us.'

In other situations, it is not the outcome that changes, but the path. I recall the phrase 'an airplane's autopilot is off-course 95% of the time, yet it gets where it is going.' The continued adjustments back and forth keep the plane going in the proper compass heading.

I intentionally consider this analogy when making plans for my own life. Of particular importance to me is that a computer-based autopilot does not take a change in weather personally. It dispassionately notes the change, adapts, then moves on. Previously I used to interpret the need to handle an unexpected event as a failing on my part. I was always plagued by a sense of 'I should have seen this coming.' I now see that this was hubris on my part. The real work involved is the ongoing maintenance of the plan, not its initial creation.

A fringe benefit of this new perspective is that I have lost the compulsion to plan everything. In hindsight I can see that I would spend energy attempting to predict most elements of my day, including things outside my control. I wasted tremendous amounts of effort managing events that did not bother to consult my plan before occurring. When I finally let go of this nonsense it freed up huge reservoirs of mental cycles that could be spent more productively.

A second outcome was an ability to slow down. I noticed that once in a while I could enjoy my surroundings without feeling the need to change them. For a few moments here and there, I could go with the flow. I now see that planning too much is the same as 'getting in the way.' By letting go more often, I can get out of the way and let things happen.

## [ 05 ] While I Would Not Wish This Upon Anyone ...

I would not wish addiction upon anyone. Yet I am conflicted about one aspect of my recovery, one that I do wish to share. I would hope that others could experience deep surrender of self. I realize it sounds like a contradiction, but it was the fulcrum about which my life pivoted.

I wish I could claim to have done it on purpose, so that I could give clear instructions for how to do it. However, there was no altruism in my actions, I was motivated purely by the desire to survive. Therein lies the rub. Most people cannot or will not relinquish control voluntarily. A life-threatening event often precipitates a true surrender. This was certainly the case for me - I felt that if I did not stop drinking that I would die. I knew I had exhausted every iota of willpower and self-discipline that I had. All my efforts amounted to a sand castle before the tide. In the final week my addiction laughed in my face. For the previous two days I had been drinking against my conscious will. I remember like it was yesterday thinking 'I don't want to be doing this' as I watched my arm raise the glass.

Saturday morning around seven o'clock something snapped. I knew I was cornered and had nothing left to throw at the beast. I recall sensing a void, and momentarily experienced its blackness. Oblivion. My next thought was 'I don't know what to do. I need help.' This gesture of willingness unlocked the door to my accidental surrender.

The sensation of being surrounded by love and light overcame me. I felt the addiction leave. 'I don't have to drink' crossed my mind. I looked at my hands – my body felt different. I looked up at my wife and said "I think I need to quit drinking." This was my first admission to anyone that there was a problem. The boat anchor around my neck fell to the

ground, its chains cut by the same uplifting force that filled the void vacated by my ego.

This is the experience I wish for anyone that suffers. Minus the soul-crushing meat grinder of addiction. Some people seem to be able to muster the urgency necessary to get there on their own, at least so I have read. On the other hand, if you find yourself bulldozed by addiction, at least you know there is another path available. One that leads into the rooms. We will save a seat.

#### [ 06 ] Acceptance Is Not Approval

I remember discussing this topic with my sponsor at a coffee shop sometime during my first three months of sobriety. I was not sure exactly what I was supposed to accept, and how to handle certain situations once 'in acceptance' about them. In the years since, I have heard many exasperated newcomers state 'I can't just accept everything I see as being Ok. Some things are not acceptable.'

At first glance that statement appears to contain a contradiction, when in fact the confusion is due to an unfortunate collision of two similar words. Separating the two proved useful for me.

Acceptance means *not denying reality*.

That is all. Three words. This is the acceptance that is necessary for my serenity. Crucially, there is no value judgment in that definition, no statement of right or wrong. Realizing this distinction was important, but not yet enough for me to put the concept into practice. I still need to make evaluations about places I choose to go, or people that I see. How do I accomplish that while preserving acceptance?

Acceptable can mean many things, thus I generally choose to avoid it. Instead, I replace it with questions that help me frame the situation: Is it good for me? Is that a behavior I want to emulate? Do I need to avoid that person? None of these questions passes judgment on the other person, nor makes any statement about whether their behavior is good for them. The questions focus my attention onto matters within my control, namely my reaction.

With this perspective I can accept the reality of a friend's relapse, and at the same time set a boundary if their behavior is not healthy for me to be around. I do not need to approve of anything.

This may seem like a trivial distinction, but prior to the program I spent untold amounts of energy denying things that I did not like. Worse still, I cannot let go of something that I am busy denying. My denial firmly attaches each problem around my neck, ensuring that I carry it everywhere. Each one adds to the overall load. In the last few days before I joined the program the accumulated weight had become unbearable.

Relief came in two huge leaps for me. The first occurred when I accepted that I could not solve my drinking problem by myself, which led to my accidental surrender and first meeting. The second occurred during the steps. After doing step five with my sponsor, I finally came to a place of acceptance with myself. I could recognize not just my defects but also my strengths, and see myself as a whole person for the first time. I felt like I had finally joined the human race at forty-three years old. Acceptance cut all the chains of denial around my neck. Only then was I able to begin accepting others as they are. I state the latter in the present tense, since I still work on that daily. This is the other variable in the equation that helps me simultaneously be in acceptance about something while realizing it is not good for me.



I can also realize I do not care to be around certain people without generating resentments about them. I find this to be one of the most difficult to accomplish on a consistent basis. Whenever I catch myself falling into a place of judgment or anger about someone, I ground myself with a reset of the big picture. On the graph of spiritual progress, we are all points on the curve. Many are ahead of me; many are behind me. If I am ever tempted to view another as deficient for being behind me on the curve, I consider the perspective of those ahead of me. What do they think when they look at me? While I do not know their thoughts, I can see their actions. They treat me with kindness and compassion, not judgment. Nobody says 'you really should be farther along by now.'

I have heard that we are each where we need to be, based on what we need to learn next. I can accept that.

#### [ 07 ] In the Balance

(to-do: "If you're doing it right, there comes a point in your sobriety where you realize what you've gained is bigger than what you lost." )

#### [ 08 ] Dancing with Gravity

(to-do: Making peace with a higher power and a scientific mind. Analogy of a 1 year old learning to walk. Experience does not require understanding. Mastery does not require understanding in some cases. Describe the inability to define a river, or the coastline of Britain. We live with these undefined elements every day, yet no one worries about them)

## [ 09 ] Illusions of Control

(to-do: Attitude and focus. Choose to be willing. Willing to admit that I do not know what is next, even for me. I never planned to write a book about being sober. )

## [ 10 ] Learning A New Instrument

Many of the most difficult questions in life are simple.

“What’s it like to surf a wave?” A young boy looked up at me with eager eyes.

As someone who has spent over twenty years of his life pursuing waves, I feel like I should be able to respond. I have been asked enough times that my logical mind tells me I should have a ready reply. Yet the answer remains elusive, no matter how hard I push. All my efforts have been as effective as grabbing water with my hands – momentarily something is there, then just as quickly it is gone.

At this point I generally compare it to the best roller-coaster ever, hoping to impress the young person with my answer. Talk of simultaneous acceleration in all three dimensions would be lost on him. As would the curious state of mind that accompanies riding a wave, one that generates memories that feel more like dreams than normal reality. Further, adding more words does not grant more understanding. The impact of each additional sentence drops off exponentially when there is little shared experience with the listener. He walks away thinking briefly of a roller coaster, then asks his dad about something else and the moment is over.

The magic of surfing cannot be captured by a single sentence. To be fair, explaining any activity to someone that has never done that activity poses unique challenges. Comparison is often the most effective way to

convey meaning, however I struggled to find another pursuit similar enough to offer a shared frame of reference. Eventually I realized that anything pursued with sufficient passion can invoke that elusive state of mind. My brief experience with music is a useful stepping stone.

I have spent enough time singing and playing guitar to know that is not where my gifts lie. I have only a passing acquaintance with the concept of 'being on key'. I briefly performed as lead singer in a garage-quality band in my youth, and would memorize the proper keys by feel, not by sound. Yet even with these shortcomings I was able to experience the magic of being lost in the music. I had glimpses of being played, rather than being the player. Looking back, I see the same state of mind as riding a wave. Ask a musician what they were thinking during a given moment on stage and you are likely to get the same answer as what a surfer thinks on a wave.

It's not about thinking, it's about doing. In certain eastern philosophies this is referred to as 'doing without doing,' which sounds like double talk. However, if you have been there you know the feeling. My brain expands that phrase into 'doing without consciously doing,' since my regular conscious mind is standing aside. I have since learned this state can be called ecstatic, which means literally 'to be beside oneself.' This phenomenon has been studied scientifically and has been labeled 'flow.'

[\[1\]](#)

I like to think that waves occur when nature plays music in water. Interestingly, this is not mere hyperbole. Wave trains often join together, interfere, speed up or stretch out, much like sound waves do in air. When I surf, water is my instrument. A good ride could be described as being in harmony with the wave. There are simultaneously the sensations of being in the grip of forces beyond my control, and of being where I am supposed to be.

A decade after moving away from easily accessible surf I realized I did not have a reliable way to get into that state of mind. I had lost my instrument, but still wanted to play. This loss weighed heavily on my overall happiness. Perhaps not coincidentally, the timing aligned with the worst of my drinking. Slowly the conclusion dawned on me that if the only time I could be truly happy is when balanced atop a wave, then I am in for a long haul. I need a way to be content without the rare, perfect mix of forces that culminate in a twenty second ride. Alcohol masqueraded as a solution for a handful of years, successfully convincing me I did not want anything else. The perfect buzz replaced flow. Then it stopped working.

For the record, I did not join the program to find flow, happiness, nor a sense of joy from the little things in life. I joined simply because I did not want to die alcoholically. In hindsight I can say the most important decision I made was to embrace the program fully. I finished my first pass through the steps within four months, and began raising my hand to sponsor others.

What has transpired exceeds anything I thought I would find here. Somewhere in my second year of sobriety I found myself walking down a hiking path in the mountains, and was utterly lost in the sensation of the trail beneath my feet. The same moment occurred later on a mountain bike. The more I let go of expectations the more I can experience flow during everyday occurrences. There are many synonyms for this concept. In the rooms I generally hear it described as 'being present,' which I initially dismissed as a hokey slogan. Today I see it as a declaration of joy, and of hope. I increasingly am aware of people that can harness this joy, this flow, independently of their physical environment.

Seeing this in others forged a link between progress in the program and deeper happiness. This blew my mind. For the first time in my life, I

saw a means to be happy that did not require me to arrange my external surroundings in a certain way.

After all this, I still cannot give a succinct answer to the question about riding a wave. Instead, I found that I am no longer dependent upon a single instrument to be happy.

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