**Marvin Seppala**

**Narrator**

**Amy Sullivan**

**Interviewer**

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**Minneapolis, Minnesota**

Marvin Seppala -MS

Amy Sullivan -AS

AS: This is Amy Sullivan interviewing Dr. Marv Seppala. It is November 6, 2018. We are at Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation in Center City. Dr. Seppala, do you give me permission to record this?

MS: Yes, I do.

AS: Alright, thank you. So tell me—you might state your name, your birthday, where you grew up.

MS: Okay, my name is Marvin Seppala. I go by Marv. My birthday is July 22nd, 1956. Born in Seattle, Washington to Finnish parents. I am 100% Finnish. My mom immigrated from Finland with her brother to Tacoma, where a second-cousin sponsored him after World War II. My dad, his parents were both born in Finland and he grew up in Northern Minnesota in Virginian after it got logged out. My grandfather was a lumberjack. He moved out to Tacoma with the family to the other Finnish community.

AS: Oh wow, so you had roots in Minnesota too.

MS: Oh, yeah. So ultimately, we moved back here and I grew up in Stewartville, Minnesota.

AS: Stewartville. How old were you when you moved back here?

MS: So, I would have been eight when we moved to Minnesota, but we lived in Eden Prairie for just a few years. Before the start of sixth grade I moved to Stewartville.

AS: And what do your folks do?

MS: My dad was a chemical engineer at IBM and my mom was a housewife.

AS: Mmhmm. And you’re, are you… tell me about your siblings, or...

MS: Sure. I am the oldest of five and I have three brothers and the last sibling is a sister. She is ten years younger than me.

AS: Oh lucky girl [laughter]

MS: [laughter] Yeah. So, that ten-year gap was big because it was at seventeen when I was kicked out of the house for my addiction. She was just seven years old, so we never really bonded very much.

AS: Oh, right, right. Right, you wanna talk about that? [laughter] You kind of jumped to it.

MS: [laughter] I know, I did jump to something

AS: Seventeen, being kicked out, it seems like an important place. You want to go a few years before that? What happened in Stewartville, you got there in sixth grade?

MS: Yeah, just before the start of sixth grade.

AS: What was that like?

MS: You know, it was funny because I think about it... Seattle, San Jose, Bloomington, Eden Prairie... and then Stewartville. For me, as a kid, at that age, I didn't notice the difference really, in terms of being in a big city and then being in a really small town. My focus, this was the fourth move already, and every four years, which is kind of funny when I start college and medical school.... training is every four years!

AS: Oh yeah, your life is in four years, that’s interesting

MS: [laughter] Which seemed kind of nice is a way, it was weird.

AS: So, every four years you’re like hmm… is it time to go somewhere now?

MS: [laughter] So, what my difficulty was being a somewhat self-conscious, anxious kid and now I've got to make new friends and start a new class, and I don't know anybody.

AS: Yeah, and in sixth grade that’s starting to be awkward.

MS: Yeah, it was really awkward. But also, in a small town, I think it may have been easier. I don't know that. I met people pretty readily, in class of course, in the only school [laughter].

AS: One school, where all the kids are in the whole town [laughter].

MS: Everyone in sixth grade is there, so it worked out that way [laughter].

AS: So, who’d you meet? How’d you start getting in trouble?

MS: Sixth grade was nothing like that. It was that summer though, after sixth grade, so twelve-years-old.... I'm just trying to get this right. Yeah, so twelve years old, it must have been the start of seventh grade and I am at a farm with two friends, Kim and Rick, both guys, at Rick's family farm, right outside of Stewartville. And, I don't know how this idea comes up but all the older guys that we looked up to, are like the athletes and the sports teams. You know everybody. So seventh grade we were in the high school. There was no junior high. It was seventh grade through twelfth. So sixth grade I was in grade school and seventh grade I'm with everybody. All the older guys are drinking and they're all the really popular guys and the guys on the athletic teams. My mother was a cross-country skier in Finland growing up and was on the Olympic team but broke a leg and never got to compete. Her dad, my grandfather, was a world-champion cross country skier. So I grew up with athletics being a really big deal. So was academics. But in my mind as a kid, athletics was certainly more important. So, these athletes are all doing something that we're not supposed to but it seems like fun so I am attracted to it. So the three of us are at the farm, we steal some whiskey out of the kitchen and we go out to the barn, which we had to clean [laughter]. It was just part of the deal. It was a little dairy farm. And we drank. I can still remember it. At one point in my training, I was at the VA hospital and the councilor there, this ex-chief-petty-officer in the Navy, six-five, big guy. Chief Petty Officers are known for being very deliberate, really strong minded. So he was this incredible guy, remarkably passionate about what he did for these veterans. He had them all describe their first drink. And they almost to a person, they could.

AS: Really?

MS: It really captured them somehow. As if something really important had happened. That was me.

AS: What is that called, in addiction medicine? There’s a name for that.

MS: I can't remember that. So I'm not sure if I should do it really, but I'm all in.

AS: But you remember it feeling good?

MS: I remember I just could hardly understand why anyone would swallow this stuff. It tasted so bad. It burnt my throat and then all of the sudden, feeling like I belonged. Like I was part of these other two guys who had grown up together and I no longer had these worries or fears about that or anything else really. It was like I was suddenly part of the world or something. I don’t know, it was like my whole life changed. It was really remarkable. And I knew I was going to do it again. That's for sure. I was going to do this again. I didn't get to for months, but it was like a goal. I wanted to feel that way again. So, ultimately, the following summer, I did again. Then I started doing it more frequently that summer.

AS: Do you remember if you got drunk the first time you tried it, or you just got the buzz?

MS: I didn't get sick or anything. We just took a few sips each, you know, because we had to replace the bottle. [laughter] So it was mostly just this remarkable feeling.

AS: Yeah, that warmth, and...

MS: Yeah, and there was more to it. It felt like I was part of something for the first time, and that is a strange thing to describe. In the midst of my addiction, it seemed like it was almost a quest to feel that way. It was almost like this spiritual quest because it felt like that almost, at the onset. And almost every new drug I took was that same sensation of "Wow. This is what life should be like." or something. It never would last. I never really could get back to it. There was a sense that I am missing something and I am looking for it, and seeking it, and never finding it. Except for those first couple of times with each particular substance. Other people have told me that as well over the years of my work. And even I've heard some speakers describe the same thing in regard to their substance use. It certainly was for me. It was just like, "Man. This is what I thought life would be like." or something.

AS: Yeah, and to be twelve or thirteen... how old were you?

MS: Yeah, twelve the first time. So a year later, drinking again with some friends and then an older brother of one of my friends that was a year ahead of me in school had just returned from the University of Minnesota after his freshman year. He was a guy I really looked up to, both an athlete and a really good student. He was on the honor roll and everything. Also went to the same church as I did, and overall, just a really good guy. So, he comes back and tells the two of us that he is smoking pot at the University and describes the importance of it and how fun it was. And I remember saying, "I would never do that." That was my initial response. I am really young, and then, a week later, I'm doing that. [laughter]

AS: That was short [laughter].

MS: [laughter]. It's funny because I have certainly read about peer pressure and thought about peer pressure in regard to its influence on people. When I look back on my own life in regard to substance use, I was always pushing the envelope and seeking more substance use and I needed to find people who were doing the same, so that I wouldn't stick out. There might have been some peer pressure to start something… once I got going, I didn't want people to know how often I was using, how much I was using, all of the different drugs I was using.

AS: Right. So you looked for those people…

MS: I had to hang out with people who were doing the same so I wouldn't feel as bad.

AS: Right. So it was more like peer support.

MS: It was. It was. All of this shame and guilt about doing it at all. At least I wouldn't have to be around people who would elicit that in me. [laughter].

AS: Right, right. That’s really powerful, that’s a really interesting take on it. Because other people get blamed a lot—the “bad kids.”

MS: Yeah, they do. And I was probably one of those bad kids because I did try and convince my friends. You know, "You gotta try this now! I smoked pot and it is so much fun. You have to do it too!" It was only a couple of people, less than a handful of people that I would do that with. It was the late Sixties, early Seventies. It was one thing to do it quietly, it was another to get other people involved. There were a few friends that every time I tried something new, I would go tell them just how great this was too. You know, "You gotta try this." [laughter] So I was probably pressuring other people for sure.

AS: So you’re smoking pot, at this point you’re thirteen, fourteen…

MS: Yeah, thirteen or fourteen and once I kind of broke through smoking pot when other drugs became available, I didn't have that same resistance or hesitance. I just tried it. So speed was available, and not that much else. There was LSD. Sometimes.

AS: Who were you getting it from? These college kids, when they came home?

MS: You know, there would always be someone in town, usually an older guy. [laughter]. And there was just a group of people who used drugs and a larger group who didn't in the high school. The people who did, they just somehow got it from somebody, I don't know. There were dealers that some people knew. When I was younger, I didn't know who or what and they would just kind of share and sell to each other basically. By fifteen, I am using just about anything and almost everyday. So, it just really quickly went to daily. I would say it wasn't absolutely every day but pretty much every day.

AS: How was it at home? Did your parents know?

MS: My parents really didn't notice initially. I don't know how that is. I did everything I could to avoid them knowing and to prevent them from knowing, that's for sure. I didn't want them to know and I lied a lot. When you are that age and you are staying out late with older people, you gotta have a reason to be out every night after school. And I was still on sports teams, so I was usually gone anyway for that and I wasn't missing most practices and I wasn't missing school at this point. But I came up with all of these other reasons and things that I would be doing later in the evening. Early on that wasn't that hard because I wasn't staying out past curfew or anything. Then I did later, as a junior or senior start to do that. And there wasn't much in the way of them controlling that. I just kept doing it.

It was usually a combination of things. Once in a while you would get caught and just drink or just smoke pot, but in general, it was a combination of substances and again, just kind of in small groups. And every now and then we would get up to Rochester, of course a bigger town where more drugs are available and probably more dealers. But it was usually still within this same, well-known group that that occurred. And with that, I had summer jobs, but until I was over sixteen I really couldn't drive. So I couldn't really get a job. We had a minor allowance. I had to start finding a way to get drugs or get money, so illegal stuff fairly early on to do so.

AS: What would you do, like steal stuff?

MS: Yeah, steal stuff or sell it. The first time we took the whiskey from the parents' supply in the kitchen. That next summer I had gotten a job loading trap at the local gun club. The guy who picked us up to go to the gun club had this really old rusted out station wagon and he always brought the booze out to the gun club. So he would carry in the cases of beer and cases of whiskey, whatever, into the gun club. It was part of the job. It didn't occur to me at the time because I was younger, it was like the seventh or eighth grade. At this later point when I started drinking, thirteen or fourteen, was when I realized that....

No, so this is what happened. I was hiking... this would be early spring, late winter. I am in boy scouts and there are three of us out on a hike. We're out on the root river and we've got one 22-caliber rifle, a single shot. Once in a while we were shooting something. We're just hiking along the riverbed and it was a really unusual day. The river ice was breaking up. There were these giant chunks of ice floating down the river. This is the same Rick that I drank with the first time. So he and I tell my brother Brian, who is also with us, we give him the 22 and we hang out from this oak branch that’s out over the river waiting for a big chunk to come off and we dropped on top of it. The two of us-- Brian stayed on shore. Brian then threw us a big stick so we could control it. [laughter] This is a big chunk of ice, probably not quite as wide as this room but pretty close. At least how I remembered it. We picked it because it was so big. The river of course was swelling because of the melt-off and I had never seen this before. I haven't seen it since. It was really a remarkable day. We're going down the stream, not fast, but we're moving decent. We realize that every time we move the ice chunk with our stick to try and control it, we just go slower than in the current. So we toss our stick, so we eliminate the only control we have for navigating this thing. We're going along... it was a long straight section where we started, so we're just thinking, "This is great."

We come around a bend and there is this chunk of ice, a dam of ice chunks across the river. They look kind of smaller than ours. Ours is just big so we thought that we'll just hit this and we'll go right through that dam. That was our discussion. It was limited to that. We're right in the middle of the river at this point, the river is wider than this room. We hit that dam of ice chunks and ours starts to go under. I can still remember these little ice chunks going out from under our feet as we're trying to run across them to get to shore. We went towards the shore that Brian was on, I think it was just closer, it wasn't that far. Maybe here to that wall, ten feet at most. All of the sudden it all breaks through, just as we're reaching a four foot bank of mud. Luckily, there were tree roots in that bank of mud and both of us managed to grab those roots. We're soaking wet, we crawl up the mud, we get out, and it doesn't even occur to us that we almost died. We're just like, "Wow, that was exciting!" [laughter].

The reason for this story is that we get up... We were meeting my mom, who dropped us off, and we were meeting her at Low Water Bridge to start the hike at the Gun Club. That's a nice spot for pick up. We were just going to go down the river, but we're on the wrong side now. Usually there is a place where we could cross near the gun club. It's maybe a third of a mile across a field from the gun club. It is usually really shallow. But because of the swelling it was much deeper. Brian is up above his knees, we're all really cold. It is melting. It is not warm out. So we're probably close to hypothermia, soaking wet. It is getting towards late afternoon, so we're briskly getting up to the gun club. Because I'm freezing and we're there early... My mom wasn't going to be there for some time. We didn't have cell phones or anything. We were just counting on a specific time.

I remembered that when I worked there, the back window by the backdoor, this tiny little window, little tiny back porch, a few steps up to this 3 x 5 back porch where the kitchen was, this window was unlocked. It was broken. I remembered that for some reason when I worked there. So I say, "Let's see if that thing opens." We can go in and get heated up, we can warm up. So I try the window, which is up above and it was open. So I crawl through, open the door for those guys, we all go in and we turn the heat on and the ovens on. Everything we could to get heat and warmed up. We took our clothes off and hung them over the deep fat fryer. I realized I can break into the gun club, but this is meaningless to me at that time besides that we got warmed up and my mom comes and we're all dry, basically. She didn't even notice. We don't tell her the story of course. Why tell her this story? [laughter]

AS: “We had a great hike, mom” [laughter].

MS: I know, we did. [laughter] So at this later point, I had met this older guy. He was a year older than me, not that much older. He was more worldly, let's just put it that way. He had drank, at least more than I ever had, and he was on the varsity football team. He knew all these older guys. So, we're hanging around. I don't even remember how this all even started. But we're hanging around together. He lives in a trailer home, only with his mom. His mom works every day. So, it was just us. We're trying to figure out how we can get some alcohol and it suddenly strikes me that we can go out to the gun club and break in. Which I've done before! And it doesn't even occur to me that this is really stupid and illegal, and I shouldn't do it. It was more just like, "Oh, we can get some alcohol." My family had a canoe. So, we grab the canoe, bring it down to Lake Forest right down in Stewartville, paddle up the river to behind the gun club. This is summer now. The same sort of spot where we were going to cross that day. We stopped there and got out. We worked our way up through some trees into this final open field to get to the back patio at the gun club with the broken window. It's open. It isn't locked. So, I do the same thing. I crawl in, I open the door, I let Al in. We each grab a case of beer, close the door, race across the open field. It was easier for him than it was for me, running across this open field with a case of beer as this tiny little, skinny kid. We hide in the trees and go down by the river where the canoe is and we each have a beer or two, I guess. Then we decide we're going to save it all for that night because he's got a plan to get all of these older guys together and we'll drink beer. I think this is fantastic. So, we paddle back into town and we hide the beer back in the bushes by the football field and get the canoe back to my folks’ house.

There's a little traveling carnival in town. This really funny little carnival. It was a hot and humid summer night and the carnival is in town, so we meet all of these older guys. He and I go and get the beer and bring it there. They have cars. Neither of us do. So they think this is wonderful, free beer. Not only is it beer, it’s free beer. There are two cases. So, they grab that and they grab Al and ditch me. Because why would you want this little kid along anyway? So I am devastated and just go home. But it kind of cemented in me that I did drink enough to have that same feeling again. And it was like, why would you have to pay to feel like this?

AS: So you justified it, in your brain.

MS: Oh yeah. And it kind of remained that way. I mean I did pay for drugs and alcohol when I had to, but as much as I could, I didn't. It became this really strange pattern. Anyway. I was on the basketball team. It must have been in eighth grade and I was playing well enough that I could be on the junior varsity. Practice was going really well, and I did a lot of basketball in the front yard. I was in a car accident. I was with a friend... it couldn't have been eighth grade, I would have had to have been older. I'm jumping around a bit…

AS: It’s okay, that’s what memory does to us.

MS: My friend was driving. He was older than me. Wayne was older than me. We went to a party and there was a keg and sweet corn, which is not that uncommon. We had one beer each. So just one beer. It was his car. We had heard about another party where there were more kids our age that we knew. In particular, there were some girls that we knew. So, we decide, let's go there. Wayne is driving on a country road that neither of us know. We don't really know where we are when trying to find this party. We come over a hill and it is dark. When we come back down there is a T in the road, right in front of us. He tried to make the corner. It was gravel roads. He didn't and we rolled through a really steep ditch. I broke my collarbone. And no seatbelts, so we bounced all over as we rolled and then we landed on the wheels. I didn't notice it initially, I was just in shock I think. And then all of the sudden I realized, "Man", I didn't realize it was my collar bone, but it was really painful. So, we get back in the car. It was a really steep ditch, it had to be six to ten feet that we were down in this thing. He is rocking back and forth, rocking back and forth and then he just guns it and we somehow... he tried a couple times and we didn't get out... so suddenly he just really guns it and we fly up on the road, right over the road into the other ditch right on the other side. [laughter]

AS: No way.

MS: This time, the car goes in and it is stuck. It is not coming out [laughter]. So, we walk to a farm house and we get a ride into town from the family who drop us off downtown in Stewartville, but I am in need of medical care and there is nothing in Stewartville. None of these older guys agree to bring me to the hospital. It's pretty late at night at this point...

AS: And where are your parents?

MS: I've been drinking, even though I had just had one beer…

AS: Oh, you didn’t want your parents to even know you’d had one beer.

MS: Right. Right, I didn't want to tell anybody. And finally, I am desperate, so I tell a police officer. He must have smelled beer. He is really strict and angry about it. He agrees to take me up to Mayo, St. Mary's Hospital. He just dropped me off at the ER. Doesn't ever mention the beer or anything, but he just brings me there and drops me off. So I get the collarbone X-rayed and set, and then my parents get involved because I am at the hospital. I end up at home. The beer never gets mentioned by anybody. [laughter] But that fall, between the start of school and Christmas that year, I was in six car accidents. I was driving in two of them. By the end of it, I was absolutely frightened to go in car, except for my father's.

AS: Six car accidents?

MS. Six. Yeah.

AS: With people your age?

MS: Yeah. All people my age.

AS: Were they impaired while they were driving?

MS: A couple of times. A couple completely unimpaired.

AS: Wow, that’s incredible.

MS: Yeah, It was awful. Yeah, so my girlfriend at the time, he parents said that she could not date me. I was just a "whatever", I don't know, I was dangerous. And I couldn't even go in a car, I really couldn't. Actually, Wayne, the guy that was driving in that episode, he convinced me that we gotta go skiing. We were going to drive over to Lake City to Frontenac’s Ski Area, this little tiny place, and I just said, "I can't do it." I had been putting it off for a couple weeks because I just couldn't get in a car. I was too scared to get in a car. And finally, I said, "Okay, if I drive, I'll go." And I drove like thirty miles per hour [laughter] even slowing down around corners and hills. He was like, "We're never even going to get there." He finally just got mad and said he had to drive because I was going so slow. So, he drove and I managed to somehow get there without being too freaked out by it.

So then, that is right in the middle of getting high all the time, which kind of relieves some of that. At that age, all you can do is go get high in a car. That's what we did. We would just go drive around the country and stop some place and drink and get high. It was always in cars.

AS: Right. And therefore, accidents.

MS: Well you would think so, but it was just that one four-month period. No more after that. Even though I was way more intoxicated... yeah. That's my life basically. And ultimately, one Christmas vacation my senior year, somebody I knew... I can't remember who. But they were dealing speed and he asked me if I wanted to help him out. So, I said, "Sure." I had no money again, like usual. By doing so, if I sold it for this price, I would either get a little bit of money out of it and pay him this amount, or I could have some of the speed. So, I did both, kind of somehow. I paid him what I owed him. But I was doing speed consistently for Christmas break, so for maybe two weeks. Which I had never done before. I would do it once in a while, but...

AS: But now you had a steady supply.

MS: Yeah. And I ran out the day before school started and I didn't think that was a problem. I didn't know there was such a thing as amphetamine withdrawal. So, I get to school the next day and I am crashing. That's what they call it, crashing. I had no energy, I actually pretty much passed out in my precalculus class with my favorite teacher. I'm on my desk and I am just asleep, and I hear a yardstick slam on the desk and I just kind of look up momentarily and I just went right back out. So, he got me to the school nurse, which they still had. She sent me to the local doctor, Dr. Risser, who immediately sent me up to St. Mary's hospital again at Mayo. And they think I've either got encephalitis or meningitis. No one asks me anything about drugs or alcohol.

AS: No one asked you anything?

MS: Not a word. Not a single question.

AS: So they do a spinal tap?

MS: Yeah, they did a spinal tap. And I don't know what is going on. I probably would not have said anything if they had asked, but I didn't know that amphetamine withdrawal did this to people.

AS: Right. And why would you tell them?

MS: So, I am just like, "What the hell is going on with me?" I thought it was the amphetamine, but I didn't know. So, I go through this whole thing. The spinal tap leaks, which was probably because I was so debilitated. It meant that I got these horrible headaches every time I sit up or stand up because it was dripping out, not a lot, but it was. When you get a spinal tap, if you lose a little bit of fluid, which because of the pressure differentiation, it causes really bad headaches. It stuck around for a while because of the leak. It should have gone away within a day or so. So, I can't sit up, I can't stand up, I gotta lay down or I'll get a terrible headache. And they sent me home because there was nothing wrong. They couldn't figure it out. Now I'm fine, except for the headache, which they caused! Right? [laughter]

So, I go home... My mom would go out for whatever, go visit friends or go to the grocery store or something. I would call my friend Dave and have him pick me up. I would lay in his old Chevy and I would go out and get high with him and then try and get back before my mom got back and pretend that I had been there the whole time. This goes on for a little while, and then the headaches went away. But I told my mother that the headaches went away and I told the school that I was still at home. Then I just didn't go to school and it was great, until my folks figured it out and then I had to go to school. So I go to school.

AS: So at this point, you’ve never been caught by your parents?

MS: They... my dad gave me his old Volkswagen when he got a new car, and they found in it that fall, before this Christmas break, some kind of a pipe for smoking pot and some papers. So, they assumed I was smoking pot. I don't know what else they knew.

AS: But did you get in trouble?

MS: I got in some trouble for that, but not much. It was like, not that big of a deal. So, yeah, they had no clue the extent of it. But they were getting increasingly concerned, I know that much. But it's a Finnish family, so they're not talking a whole lot. And I want nothing to do with talking, with them about anything, but certainly not about this.

So, I am playing this game and I go to school finally, but I'm still getting high every day. But I'm attending at least. I had a physics class and I really enjoyed that, too. The teacher asked me to go to the board to do these problems the day before we had a test. I was the only one in the class who knew how to do them. And I'm up there writing them out... they were easy to do because I had done my homework the night before. I had done some speed the night before, it was the first time since this happened. I am at home, for some reason, I don't know why, so I did my homework. And I'm all prepared! I'm up at the board writing it all down the next day.

That night I went out and got wasted smoking pot, no speed, I don't know if there was alcohol. I get to class the following day for the test, and the only thing that goes on my paper is my name. I cannot remember how to do the problems that I was up at the board doing the day before, because of the pot, you know. So, I am just ashamed of myself. My grades haven't really shifted much. I was always kind of bored at school, it wasn't that difficult. I didn't study, but I was always able to maintain them [grades]. Well, I couldn't. I couldn't even answer one question. I walked out of the class and I walked out of school and I was so ashamed. I just decided I wasn't going back. I didn't think it through that way, what I thought was "I'm going to go get high and I am not going back."

AS: Right. You didn’t think you were ashamed.

MS: Yeah. I just left and it was over. I quit school that day without a declaration or anything. I just didn't go back. I told my parents I wasn't going to go back. I moved out of the house for a little bit, like two doors down at this older guy's basement. I had no money.

AS: But did you have any fight with your parents, did they tell you you had to stay in school?

MS: Not really.

AS: So, you were just like “I’m quitting school and I’m moving out.”

MS: Yeah, I think that was part of it. If I left, they couldn't do anything about it, right? So, I

just left. And this family had very little money and they let me in. But I had no money and I'm just a freeloader, so that didn't last long. So, I moved back home, but I am now adamant that I'm not going to school. I think that's when they realized that this is really trouble.  But it still goes on for quite a while before anything happens. And I am just dawn to dusk now. Until late at night, I am just getting high all the time and hanging out with people doing the same—like I said, I had to. But the shame and guilt is just massive. I can't stand myself.

I don't know what's wrong. I don't know that it is the drugs and alcohol. In fact, I think that is the only relief I get. I really don't think that it is the problem. I think there is a big problem. I can't understand why I keep doing these things that I am so ashamed of, you know, stealing and lying. I've quit school, which I loved. I've been kicked out of sports by this point, which I really loved. And I don't know how to change any of this. I can't do anything about it, and that, I do not understand. I'm not really even able to have plans, I couldn't figure out how to do it. I didn't know. I didn't have a clue and I couldn't tell anybody. I didn't want anyone to know how awful I felt.

And then I got home at four in the morning one night and my mother wakes me up with the local doctor, Dr. Riser. All I remember him saying is, "Yeah, he's on something." and then I passed back out. And I ran home from a friend's house that night at like four in the morning because I had been drinking and smoking pot and I had done some speed and I was scared I would not fall asleep if I didn't run home. I drank a lot to be sure that I could pass out, which was kind of what I had become. That was my pattern, to try and pass out so I wouldn't lay there and think about myself, because it was so painful. So, I get home and I pass out. At six, they wake me up. I am barely conscious. I go back out and I don't know when, but I wake up and the local minister and my mom wake me up and they say, "We're going to the hospital." And I... I was just out of it. It doesn't even occur to me that this is unusual. I just put my clothes on, like, "Okay, we're going to the hospital." I wasn't going to talk to them or ask them questions. [laughter]. So I get in the car and we drive, Stewartville is just south of Rochester. We drive to Rochester, thinking we're going to Mayo, that's where we always get our healthcare, but we don't. We go pick my dad up at IBM. And then, we go north towards the Twin Cities. And that's just weird.

AS: And you’re like, what’s going on?

MS: Well no, not really. I am in this debilitated state. Just kind of intoxicated and wiped out. I learned later that the minister was right behind me in the car, thinking that if I jumped out, they would be able to grab me. Which at the time, hadn't even crossed my mind. I'm not even thinking, let alone acting. So, we get to Minneapolis/St. Paul and I'm thinking, "I wonder why we are going to a hospital in the Twin Cities." Those are the only thoughts I'm having. Yeah, I was not thinking clearly or much. Then we get passed the Twin Cities and that's when I got really frightened. Because in my understanding of what was going on with me, I just thought I was going crazy. That was my high school understanding of my behavior. I am just going crazy and that they finally figured it out. And now they are taking me to a sanitarium in the North Woods.

AS: Oh right, you think you’re going to a mental hospital?

MS: Right, yeah. I don't know what it is. I've never been to one, but I am just assuming that must be what they do with people like me. But they kind of did! They brought me here! [laughter] Not really, but you know.

AS: No, but in your mind—yeah, what is this place? And here would be Hazelden.

MS: Yeah, I had never heard of Hazelden when we drove down the driveway and I saw the sign. I was like, "What the hell is a Hazelden?"

AS: And the year is?

MS: 1974. Yeah. Right before Easter.

AS: And how old are you?

MS: I am seventeen. Yeah, they put me in a room with a counselor, who is the first person who I have ever met in my life that actually knows what is going on with me. It is just uncanny to me. I am shocked by this. He knew addiction, right? And I didn't. So, I am just wondering who told him this, because I never tell my parents any of this, they couldn't have told him this. No one could have told them this, I know that much. But he knows me somehow. He knows what I have been going through and what I have been doing, in this really unusual way. And he is really pleasant and likable. And he kind of knows me. So, I tell him some things that I have never told anyone. Not much, but at least a little bit that I am clearly an addict in his mind. And he said, "Okay." and we finished the interview and we go out to meet my parents and there are a bunch of other people and they say that I've got to sign these papers, so I can stay and get treatment for chemical dependency, which was the terminology of the day.

And I say, because I am not staying here because I realize I am not going to do this, I probably thinking that I wouldn't get high today, I think I was. But it was mostly like, I do not want to stop getting high. I certainly don't want to stay here. I have never even heard of this. And it's a threat in a way.

AS: Oh, absolutely.

MS: In a big way. So, I refuse. And this is when my bluff was called because I don't think they could have done this, but my dad says, "If you don't sign the papers, we're all going to meet in court and you will be forced in here." I don't believe that it could have happened, cause when I got into training later, that wasn't even possible in the Eighties. No. No, but I'm thinking when he said that, the last thing I want is to be in any legal situation, in court. You've got to be kidding! I'm a drug addict!

AS: Right. What else could they find out about you?

MS: Right. I can't admit to this. So, I can't go to court. So, I say "Okay." and I sign the papers and I stay. And I am put on the men's unit, in the original farm house that Hazelden started in, in 1949.

AS: That little white house?

MS: Yeah. That was a unit. This building wasn't here, but the parts that were left of the other buildings were built in 1969. So, I am here in 1974, but they were still using the original farm house as a men's unit. That's where they put me. And I find out later that, that unit, called "The Old Lodge" was for people who had multiple treatments and really hardcore addicts. And they put me there because they didn't know what to do with a seventeen-year-old. Because, five years later, I find out I was the first adolescent to ever be treated here. And that's where they put me. So, I am with all of these older guys, I am the youngest by a long shot. And I argue that I don't belong there at all.

AS: You spent time doing that?

MS: Yeah, well, two weeks. It wasn't a lot of time.

AS: Oh, you were only here for two weeks?

MS: I was here for four weeks, but the first two I argued. You know, "I do not belong here, I don’t have this chemical dependency." I still have the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous that they gave me, and the Twelve by Twelve, the twelve steps and twelve traditions. In the margin of the first step in the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, I have these little cryptic notes about why I don't belong here, why I'm not an alcoholic.

AS: That’s incredible. [laughter].

MS: Yeah. [laughter] It is. So, every day we would have to fill out something called a significant events sheet, just something we learned today or something we had experienced today. And every day, mine was why I don't belong here. I am making my argument day in and day out, based on the books and my experience and what people say. And I am fairly bright guy, and I am writing this up every day. And every morning, there was an intercom system that would say, "Marvin Seppala, please come to the unit office." [laughter] And It's my councilor, who sits me down to talk over my argument with me. It was never a bullying thing or us butting heads, he is just suggesting that my argument is not right. And he is doing it in a way that makes sense, but I just don't care and I don't belong here anyways, so I'm not going to listen.

This is the wonderful thing about group therapy for addiction, actually, is that in the midst of this resistance on my part that I might be an addict, that I can't even see, I can absolutely see it in everyone else in the group. I mean they are describing it. Even if they believe it or not, I can see it. I mean, they have given all of these examples, you know? They've described their life and *they*should be here because of what they have been doing. And they're a lot older, but they have lost their jobs, they have lost families, and all of these things. And I can see it in them. And then it finally starts to dawn on me that all of these examples that I am using about them are the same examples in my life, you know. Whether they have pointed it out or my councilors have pointed it out, or that I have thought it through, which was not much. It is exactly the same. It finally occurred to me. I go to my councilor and tell him that I finally believe that I have this chemical dependency, whatever that is, and that I have to do something about it, and he kicked me out of his office. He said, "You finally realized the only way out of here." [Laughter] Which truly wasn’t the case.

AS: But he thought you were pulling one over on him, he didn’t believe you at that point because you had been arguing so, so smartly.

MS: Oh, yeah. Yeah, it was like that one day and then the next day it was like, "Wait a minute." So, I talked to my peers and they were like, "Well it does seem like you kind of changed your tune about this." So, they just took me in, and they had all along. Which was the most amazing thing about being here, is that they accepted me, which wasn't happening much in my life. They understood what I was going through, which I wasn't telling anybody. Not even my closest friends understood me. And they valued what I said, which wasn't happening with anyone I knew. And they validated my experience, which I couldn't even understand because I didn't know what I was doing or why. They understood that and validated that for me. They cared about me. That is what got my attention.

In addition to that, the other counselor on the unit was Ed Jergins. He was this really big, bald, Scandinavian. And my dad and my grandfather are both bald Scandinavians, so I wanted nothing to do with Ed. He scared me. My father and my grandfather were pretty mean, stoic, Finns, right? So, I assume he is exactly the same. He is bigger than those two. So, I stay away from him. Then, I'm in group, and this was before that I even figured out that I had this. Ed is sitting there and his eyes are closed and I assume this old guy is sleeping. He was all drooped. He is supposed to be the councilor and he looks like he is fast asleep. This guy is talking about his marriage and how he wants to get a divorce, and all of the sudden, Ed starts talking from this position. He raises his head and starts to open his eyes and he has heard every single bit of this. He wasn't sleeping at all. And he expresses this most incredible statement about this guy. Just this really supportive statement and then talks to the whole group in this incredibly loving manner and then he starts talking about love, which I have never heard a male talk about in my life. And that got my attention. It was unbelievable.

Then after witnessing him do this a few times, and I realize that he talks about spirituality and love all the time, and *that,*I wanted that. I didn't want to get sober, but I wanted that. Then I wanted that and I wanted to get sober. And I was also starting to experience whatever that was from those guys who were really serious about getting sober too, at least the small group of guys I would stay up at night with and talk about things with. Which was just amazing. We’d talk about life, really, for the first time in my life. I had a few friends that I could do that with on occasion, but it almost wasn't even real. It was during this period in my life where I was just getting high all the time, so I'm just a mess anyways. I don't know what I was saying or thinking. Sometimes I felt like there was really a bond there with Ed and with this group. So, I really decided that I've got to do something. But that wasn't enough.

I was scared to leave, because four weeks really isn't enough. It goes by quick. And it was four weeks, whether you needed it or not. It was twenty-eight days back then, and that was it. There was no follow up of any kind for a seventeen-year-old in Rochester, Minnesota. They told me to go to AA. This is the only thing, this is it. There wasn't anything else. There really wasn't anything else in 1974. So, they told me to go to AA, and they would have anyway, but that was the only thing. And there is no AA in Stewartville. So, I get back. They get me back into high school and back into my house with my family. I wasn't really out of the house, that was part of the deal, I would live at home. I went back to school and they told me not to hang out with my old friends because they are all using. So, this is a long time in the early part of my life...

AS. That’s okay. We’re good if you’re good.

MS: Good deal, okay. So, I go to school and it's a small town and a small school. One hundred in my graduating class. The people who I am not supposed to hang out with, I just stay away from. I am trying to do it. And the people who don't use drugs, especially, they want nothing to do with me. And there were all of these rumors about where I had gone and what I had done. Just wild rumors. People had told their kids to stay away from me. You know, it was a small town. So, I am kind of ostracized.

AS: You are alone.

MS: Yeah, I was alone. And it hit me rather quickly. I was already sensitive to such things anyway, and I never really felt like I had belonged *that* much. I had some friends that were kind of close, but very few and they were all using, so I couldn't hang out with them anyway. But on the weekend before I left, that prior week before I left treatment, I really worried about going home. I don't know that I am ready. I am just really scared but I just really want to leave. Both are going through my head. And I see an ad for a Marshall Tucker Band concert in the Twin Cities. So, I decide, that is a great idea, which is really the last thing I should be doing because I had never gone to a concert without being wasted. Somehow, I don't know how it happened, I think it was after I got home, I convinced my best friend using Dave, that we should go see Marshall Tucker. And this is after these few days of trying to be alone, I decide I am going to go to something with Dave and go see Marshall Tucker. So, we get tickets.

As we are driving to Minneapolis/St Paul, he is driving, and smoking pot and drinking. And I am sitting there and telling him all about treatment and why I can never use again. I am like lecturing the whole way to Minneapolis/St. Paul and I tried also to convince him, because he is my best friend who is doing exactly what I do, that he has to stop as well, right? So, he doesn't buy that at all. He doesn't argue with me because most of what I am saying seems to make sense to him, just not for him. It does for me but not for him. So, we get to the concert, we meet some other people there. And there's pot being passed up and down the row and a joint comes by and I took it and smoked it. I took some, and then more, and then had some beer, and I don't know what else. I was just right back to where I was, just like that. Not any thought about it. Didn't even feel bad about it until later. When we get in the car and we're going back, I finally realize what I have done. I think I was trying to convince myself in telling Dave not to let anybody know that this has happened. That was how I was all along anyway.

I tried so hard to not let anyone know about this, so I could live this double life of getting good grades, at least when I was in school, until I quit, and getting still high. So, I'm telling him that he can't tell anybody. And I am kind of thinking that I won't keep doing this. But it was over. I was right back at it the next day with him. And everything I had told him on the way up was like a distant memory. I was just off and running. I got to go through the graduation ceremony with my class but I didn't get a diploma. I did go to school until graduation. I showed up. They even let me on the track team and I was pretending to.... I was smoking cigarettes and pot and drinking. I was a mess.

AS: Did your parents ever clue in that you were using again?

MS: They really figured it out and they disowned me and kicked me out. They told me they wouldn't pay for my education.

AS: When was that?

MS: Just a few weeks after the graduation ceremony. So, in June. They got me a job with our next-door neighbor who was a contractor and I quit going. I never quit a job and I never got fired, I just never showed up. So, I had some other job after they booted me out at Crenlo that built tractor cabs in Rochester. When they kicked me out, I took my Volkswagen, threw my stuff in it and moved to Rochester. You can call that a move when you drive eleven miles without a place to land and just bum from friend to friend and live out of the car. I got this job at Crenlo and then I quit going there. Every time I would just some money and get high and not go back. I had no thoughts about a future, really. I just assumed I was going to die really young. I didn't think I would survive. Not graduating from high school was kind of meaningless, in spite of the fact that I had been to treatment. That was the only thing-- like I said, I hated lying in bed without being able to fall asleep. Well, it was even worse now, because I knew there was another way for me. Morning and evening were really bad.

I failed to mention that my girlfriend at the time, Linda, came to treatment and visited me. And so did Wayne, the guy in that car accident. They were the only two people. She was the only girl who came to visit, besides my family. And she and I were dating afterwards as well. She didn't know what to make of all of this. She thought I shouldn't use because of what I had been told, but she didn't know anything about it either, except what I told her, basically. Which when I was in treatment, was pretty accurate. So, I'm kind of living with her more than the other people at the time. My dad was at IBM, so I knew they wouldn't give me a job. Mayo and IBM were the two primary employers. So, I go to Mayo and I apply to be a janitor and they sent me away. They didn't have a job. I lied and said I graduated from high school.

Two weeks later, they called my mom and got a hold of Linda who found me, and they said to go back in for an interview. They sent me over to a cardiovascular research lab where I am hired by David Donald, who is this world-famous physiologist, as a lab technician. So, the way I look at this, I said I was attracted to Ed and his discussions of love and spirituality, and the same discussions I had with people in treatment. I look at it as even before I started to care for myself, I was being cared for in really miraculous ways. I get into treatment when I was seventeen, when I shouldn't even be there. Then, I get this job. I stayed sober for five days after treatment. That was it. I get this job and I stayed sober for two weeks. And my intent was just to stay sober. I tried as hard as I could and it lasted two weeks.

On the first day on the job, it was an animal surgery lab, so we were studying a lot about hypertension and its causes and cardiac function and stuff. People from all over the world came to work under Dr. Donald and John Shepard, who were the two leaders of the lab that I was assigned to. Dr. Donald is this eccentric old physiologist. He was trained as a veterinarian, but he became a physiologist and helped invent the heart-lung machine. John Shepard was the president of the American Heart Association at the time and he was on the board of governors and the board of trustees at the Mayo Clinic. He was really one of the top administrators, the top docs in the whole place, and famous world-wide for research. So, suddenly, there is this drug addict working in their lab. On the first day that I was there...

AS: Who’s eighteen?

MS: At this time I had turned eighteen. At the end of the day when they were orienting me to the job, it wasn't them, it was the other technicians, one of the technicians said, "And there's the drug cabinet and you have to make sure that it is locked at the end of the day." [laughter]

AS: That was your job to make sure it was locked?

MS: Yeah, it was one of my jobs. Yeah, and I'm thinking, there's no one that is going to pay more attention to that cabinet. So, I last two weeks and we were studying cocaine. I was weighing out cocaine for experiments. Cocaine is a vasoconstrictor and it does it in a very specific manner. We were studying how veins and arteries constricted and cocaine helped us to understand that process, physiologically to figure it out. So, I took some. Then I just took more and more, and over a few-weeks-period, I am just addicted to cocaine, in a way that I have never been addicted to anything. I am using a lot of it because I can just grab it out of the cupboard. It's right back to something that isn't being paid for.

AS: And it’s not being monitored?

MS: No one is monitoring it. I am the only one monitoring it. There is no monitoring of any kind.

AS: Did you ever find out how you got this job?

MS: No. I have no idea. Dr. Shepard was out of the country when Dr. Donald hired me. So, he hired me.

AS: But you had applied to be a janitor?

MS: I did, I applied to be a janitor. So, actually, the day I started is when they told me about the drug cabinet. The next day, second day at work, I realize that I have got to tell them that I haven't graduated from high school. I didn't tell Dr. Donald, I went to the HR department and said, "I haven't graduated from high school." I didn't say that I lied, but I did. I made up another lie about why I didn't, this big family problem of some sort of why I missed half of my senior year. I don't mention that I went to addiction treatment or anything. They still give me the job. They didn't even balk. They we're just like, "It's okay."

I don't have a clue how this happened. I knew no one who worked at Mayo, no one in my family. I can only say again that I think I was being taken care of. So, I just plummet with my addiction and I miss a week of work. Which doesn't seem like a lot, but I knew they warned me that I had a three-month probationary period. They could fire me or I could just leave, no questions asked. Which I kind of liked, because that is how I left jobs anyways, but I didn't know that I was going to like this job. It turns out from the first moment I walked into that lab, I loved this job. It was like unbelievable to me. I was stimulated in a way that I hadn't ever been in my whole life.

AS: And you were just mostly cleaning things up, and helping? But around things you were interested in.

MS: Well, yeah. I had to assist in surgery on animals, mostly dogs but sometimes cats. I would stand right across from the doctor or some fellows from all over the world. I was either assisting a fellow or Dr. Donald. One or the other. And they would tell me about the experiments and they would tell me what we were doing and why. It was just fascinating to me. I wanted to learn about it. Physiology, I found really interesting. It explains things, right? I just found it incredible and I really liked these people too. They cared about me. It was somewhat similar to my experience in treatment, but remarkably, there wasn't really anything at an interpersonal level, but it was in a way because it was more about knowledge. But they also cared about me in other ways, like how come I'm not seeking college? And what do you think about going on to school someday? Even at the very beginning.

Dr. Donald in the interview asked me how long I would commit to the lab. I remember this question because that prior summer, I had gone to a recruiting thing in the Twin Cities with a friend to join the army. I was so desperate. The Vietnam War was over, but it was still a mess. They put us up in a hotel and of course we just drank and goofed off. I had a physical the next day and in the physical, my hearing was inadequate. I had hearing loss that I didn't know about until that moment. So, they told me that I would have to sign a release if I wanted to be in the army because they didn't want to cover my hearing. So, I just couldn't imagine that. For some reason, that stopped me. I didn't want to sign this release. But Dave went into the army. My best friend. So, I tell Dr. Donald that I just recently looked into going into the army for two years, so I'll stay two years. That was as far as I could think about my life. You've gotta be kidding me, how long am I going to stay here?? Two years. I told him the story even, I just looked into going into the army but I couldn't because I have a hearing loss and I couldn't do it without a release and I didn't think that was wise. So, it turns out that he was in the Royal Airforce. He didn't tell me that then, I learned it later.

Way later, at that talk that you said you were watching, after I gave that talk and I walked behind the stage, and a woman from Mayo's development department, a young woman, came up to me. I had just seen Saturday Night for the second time ever. And she tells me that my father and I have just bought Dr. Donald's old house, that he had died and had donated his house to Oxbow Park in Biren, Minnesota, just outside of Rochester, because it was right adjacent from the park. He is a really eccentric guy. He just lived out in the woods and he was really odd that way. She said that we're going to turn it into a halfway house. She said because my father is in recovery and he wants to do that and I am going to help him with this because it is really important to me as well. And Dr. Donald was in recovery from alcoholism. Well, he wasn't in recovery when I met him because on rare occasion, he had a terrible tremor in the morning doing surgery. I noticed it just a few times, but somehow, we connected. Most of these fellows came there to work under him and John Shepard, but none of them could really get along with him. And I got along with him fantastic.

Somehow, he hires me. I have no clue. I always tell people that I think he was playing a joke on John Shepard because Shepard was out of the country. I never saw him out of three-piece suit. He's like Mr. Clean. Dr. Donald wore a white lab coat and had white athletic tape around his shoes holding them together. He is just this eccentric, brilliant guy. So, I always thought, "What the hell, he just hired me so he could give Shepard a hard time with this hippy drug-addict kid.", that he didn't know was a drug addict at the time. I had long hair, I didn't look like anyone else in the lab. [laughter] And there I was.

AS: So, you miss a week of work?

MS: Yes, I miss a week of work and I am so scared to lose the job, I am getting desperate.

AS: Were you taking cocaine home with you?

MS: Yeah, I had a big supply that I grabbed. So, I was gone but I still had a supply. My folks had disowned me. I didn't get back into the house for two years.

AS: Really? That’s hardcore.

MS: Yeah. After a while, it was both parties’ kind of contributing. Like, I wasn't going to go back there either. There was no invitation either.

AS: That’s hard.

MS: Yeah, it was. It was also probably good for my siblings because I was stealing from them too. I was just a disaster. And I was certainly not being the role model of the kind that they needed. I never talked to my father, but in this desperation, I called him, which still kind of surprises me when I say it even. I tell him exactly what is going on. I am stealing cocaine from the Mayo Clinic, I am scared I am going to lose this great job and I don't want to lose it, and I don't know what to do. He had, in the meantime since I had last seen him when he kicked me out, helped start this adolescent counseling center in Rochester and he was on the board of it. It was for kids with drug and alcohol problems.

AS: Really?

MS: Yeah. It was called Sunrise. He says, "I'll meet you tonight and we'll talk about this." I tried to put it off because I didn't want to talk to him. I would call, but that was as far as I was going to go. And I am thinking, if I meet him tonight, then... I can't use. So, I don't want to meet him tonight. Somehow, I agreed. We meet and then he brings me to Sunrise and he says that I can talk to somebody there about this. And he knows that he is not the right person, too. I meet Jane, a counselor, who talks to me and I go back the next night and I don't do any cocaine. And I go back the next night, and I don’t do any cocaine, and I realize that this place just opened and that she was a social worker. I learned that later when she worked at Hazelden and so did I. [laughter] But I realized that I know more about she does about addiction. More than anyone there does, just from my one month of treatment, I know way more than they know. And, in treatment, they told me the only thing that is going to work is going to AA and I have not done that. So, I go there one night that first week and I tell them that this is not going to work for me. I don’t think this is going to work for me. I didn't tell them that I think I know more about it than they do… I felt like I did. I think I actually did, honestly. I am going to go to AA like they told me to when I was in treatment.

**[End of Part I, beginning of Part II]**

MS: So, I say that I am going to go to AA. And I am sure they are thinking that this guy is not going to AA, right? They think that I am just going to go get high again and then he is gone. And I didn't go back, so they never found out actually, until I met her much later.

AS: So, did you start going to AA?

MS: I did. I went to an AA meeting that Sunday morning in this club house, the only one that I was aware of at the time in Rochester. I don't think there was another one. It was on Third Avenue. There were three guys there over seventy.

AS: That was their group?

MS: That was the group I walked into. Yeah, and I don't know what they said, I cannot remember. But I went back the next Sunday.

AS: There was only one a week?

MS: That's all that was recommended. Once a week. That’s what people did back then.

AS: So, we're in the state of Minnesota in 1974...

MS: 1974... No, 1975...

AS: And there is one...

MS: No, it was '74 still.

AS: Okay, still. 1974 or 1975, here we are...

MS: And people went to one AA meeting a week. That is what they did and that is what they told me. Come on back next week. That is how you went to AA then.

AS: Interesting, that is a new thing for me to know.

MS: That was reinforced over time too. If things are really, really bad, maybe you go to another one. Maybe you call your sponsor and talk to people. But you couldn't really go to another one.

AS: This is something that I will have to look up again, to understand when did it become that you should go every day.

MS: Because I moved around with school, you know, so all the sudden I was in places where people went a lot. I didn't know about that transition.

AS: Yeah, me either. I'll let you know when I find out. [laughter]

MS: So, I go back and these guys... I mean, I felt really connected with these guys. It was that same description in treatment. They understood me, they accepted me, they validated me, they valued what I had to say. I hardly talked, but they listened. They supported me and cared for me in ways that I was completely lacking. I hadn't had experience with it, so I went back. And whatever I wasn't getting at Sunrise, I got at AA that morning. I know I got it. I got there out of pure desperation. I called my dad, I went to this Sunrise place. I walk into AA, which I was supposed to do after treatment months before.

AS: Right, but how would you have been able to do that given where you were? You went right back home. You were set up to fail.

MS: Right. Right back to the home where everything went on and school where everything went on. So, AA was like an oasis or something for me. These people really understood me and really cared for me. The meeting grew rather quickly, so it came to be men and women. There were several women in this meeting. It never got big, twelve or fourteen people maybe. But there was a police officer, a real-estate agent, and a teacher. A couple of docs started showing up, a nurse was there. There was nobody my age. Nobody even close. So, I was going to AA, staying sober, working in the lab, and then trying to figure out what to do with myself. I was living with Linda by this time. I learned how to fly-fish with a guy who worked in a different lab. I always wanted to fly-fish for some reason. I was doing that a lot in the spring and summer, because I could. I did it by myself because I had no other friends my age, really. There were two other guys, one worked in the lab and one worked with the animals in the kennels and stuff that were close to my age. One was about my age and the other was a little bit older. So, they kind of became friends, but beyond that, I was mostly by myself and with Linda, trying to stay sober, going fishing or whatever. And the meeting grew and because I was so young, there was a lot of parenting in addition to everything else that goes on in AA.

AS: For you?

MS: Yeah, just because... because, I was a kid.

AS: Group parenting.

MS: Yeah, it was. It was great. I know in a lot of treatment now, it is important to separate adolescents from adults, but there's something to it. I really got a lot out of it. So, I am going weekly and I am going on six months. I am feeling better than I have in my life. My job is great. I am just having a ball at work, in a lot of ways. I am getting close to a couple of these fellows and I really enjoy my work and I really got it down. I am able to learn some stuff too. One thing that Dr. Donald did, two things: At the end of an experiment, after animal surgery, you know it is just a mess. So, my job is to clean it all up, right? And wash all of the instruments and prepare for the next day, for the next surgery. But, if he did the experiment or if it was in his lab, he stayed and did all of that with me or with the other technician. If he stayed, the fellows stayed. So, it was this whole group of people gets done really quick and everybody goes to their offices except us and we stay in the lab to go do other things, because there is a lot to do. And when he didn't stay, the fellows all disappeared too. There were no rules about this of any kind, but it was absolute. If he wasn't there, they didn't stay. He was remarkable that way. And then we had a Monday morning lab meeting, every Monday morning. And they would present their research and they would present their speeches they were about to give at conferences. They would just talk, have these remarkable discussions about physiology and about what they were doing and ideas. What else we can do? How can we solve this problem? For me, it was just fantastic. It was just fascinating. In one of the early meetings that I attended, Dr. Donald presented a talk he was about to give at a major medical conference. It was something about cardiac physiology. So, he presents the whole thing and usually when they presented, then everyone there, the six or seven people in the room, would start asking questions and commenting about the topic. He immediately stopped and then said, "Marvin, what did you get out of my talk?" And I'm like, "What?" I'm still... I have no self-confidence, I am really shy. I don't want to answer this question. But I do, I tell him what I got out of the talk, you know? I am wondering, why would he ask me? In the process of asking me, he engaged me. You know? I am a part of this team, which was amazing. I felt that, too. And after I said my answer, he said, "That's good, I'm glad because I am going to be talking to a group of physicians that are not physiologists and I gotta be sure that I can explain it in a way that they will understand. And if you do, they will!" [laughter] And I'm like, "Wow. This is incredible." I was valued in a way that I didn't expect. It was just an amazing experience.

So, I am being influenced by science in the lab, but also by people and caring. And in AA I am being influenced by the Twelve Steps and love and spirituality, I think. My life grows in all of those spheres. I am six months in and, like I said, I am feeling better than I ever have in my life. I miss a Sunday morning. I just don't go. I didn't consciously decide not to go, I don't even know why I didn't go. I was just feeling so good I didn't go, thinking that I didn't really have to. Sunday, I miss. Monday, I open the cabinet, grab some cocaine and walk to the bathroom. And it wasn't even on my mind. There was no deliberate plan of any kind. What I didn't recognize in that moment, is that those three guys at the first meeting, had died in that six-month period. They were like these angels. They just disappeared. They died. And I didn't even think of it, it didn't even occur to me that this was an issue or a problem for me. I was so self-focused, so self.... I didn't go to funerals, I didn't even think of them, I didn't do anything because I didn't think it bothered me a bit.

AS: But you knew that they had died?

MS: Yeah. And There I was using. I didn't think that had anything to do with it. It took me years to figure out... which is weird to say that.

AS: No, I think that is perfectly normal.

MS: [laughter] Yeah, maybe that has something to do with it. So, I had been meaning to ask this guy John to be my sponsor. And the reason I hadn't is because I hadn't done anything besides just show up at the meeting. I didn't read about it, I didn't socialize with anyone, I didn't do any of the steps.

AS: Was John one of the three?

MS: No, luckily. John was like thirty-five, I guess. He had five years sober and I always liked what he said. I just liked listening to him. He kind of talked from a similar spiritual perspective that I thought of. And so, I did the cocaine and I walked back into the lab and... this is the worst day of my life. Six-months and I am no longer sober, and to me, I tried treatment and that didn't work, my own efforts got me two weeks, and AA got me six. That doesn't work either. And they didn't tell me anything else that I could do. There is nothing else that works. There is nothing else. I don't know of anything else. I was never exposed to anything else. I think that I am hopeless. I did as much as cocaine as I possibly could, more than any other day in my life. I didn't even notice it because the pain was so bad of losing that, of what I had. So, I call John from the lab and he worked just a few blocks away in downtown Rochester. I didn't know that, but he said that he was just three blocks away from me. He said, "Come on over to my office." I lied and said, "I can't, I have to stay and work until 5. So, I am doing as much cocaine as I can and this doesn't work. The pain doesn't go away. So, I go to his office at five o'clock. He has to coach his son's pee-wee football team out in Biren, so he asked me to follow him. So, we talked just really briefly and I just sit on the sideline and watch him coach football. Then we go to his house. I tell him what I just told you. I went to treatment, that didn't work. AA doesn't work either. And thank god, John says, "You know Marv, AA works fine, you just haven't started." And he said, "You come to the meetings, but you're not working the steps, you're not reading the books, you're not talking to anybody, you're not sharing yourself with anybody. You need to start doing that. AA works fine. I'm proof."

So, I said, "Okay." And I did exactly what he said. I mean, when I say exactly, he gave me this worksheet. He went to Hazelden, too.  Which was also partially why I was attracted to him as a sponsor. This sheet was a ten-step inventory sheet. So, it had thirty-one days across the top and all of these columns and rows that had on one side, a list of liabilities, and the other side, a list of assets. The liabilities were like laziness, dishonesty.... they were listed there, like twenty or twenty-five adjectives. And then the assets were their opposites, basically. He said, "Fill this out every night." in addition to everything else that he told me to do. And I filled it out every night for five years, because I was so scared that I would relapse. And then it got so wrote I had to change it around. But, early on, in those first months, I had a black and white description of my behavior to look at. I was putting a "X" by dishonesty every single day, day in and day out. And lazy, and other things. I could see it. I didn't have a sense of my own behavior and that gave it to me.

AS: What were you being dishonest about every day?

MS: Everything. I just couldn't be honest. I was so dishonest for so long that it was almost a ritual. Most of the time it didn't even make sense to be dishonest anymore, but I did. So, John, he kept telling me, "You know Marv, this is an honesty program." And that's all he would say. It wasn't done in a confrontative way, it was just, "Marv, this is an honesty program." And I would think, "Well, why would you tell me that?" [laughter] And he kept doing it. And finally, I realized, because I am looking this end, hearing this question, that I am always dishonest. It's time to do something about it. He was an ideal person for me. He never confronted me. I would tell him something going on in my life, like I'm having trouble with my girlfriend Linda, or whatever. And he would just tell me some story from his life. It would always have some connection to what I was talking about. But he wasn't analytical. You hear that a lot of people in AA are always just really, "Go work Step Two." or something, or go do that. It was never like that with John, it was just like, "Well, this is what I did." [laughter]

AS: That is really great.

MS: And I think for an adolescent, if he would have been telling me what to do, I don't know what I would have done. He had kids just a little younger than me. He had a daughter that was maybe two years younger than me-- the oldest. And then maybe two sons after her. I don't know what he was like at home really, but I wasn't that much different that his own kids.

AS: How long did you stay with him?

MS: I don't even remember. A long time.

AS: So, you stayed in Rochester? What did you end up doing?

MS: So, I stayed in the lab and then these docs kept asking me what I was going to do with my life, suggesting that I go to school. Especially the fellows would talk like that with me. I got this envelope in the inner-clinic mail, you know? Those yellow envelopes. It was addressed to Dr. Marvin Seppala. I still have it actually. Someone just made a mistake and put that on there. And I had already been thinking that I liked what these guys do, and so I started thinking that I wanted to be a doctor like them. So, I go to John one day and I tell him, "You know, John. I gotta go to college because I want to be a doctor." And this is within my first year of recovery. Most recommendations are don't do anything big in your first year. But I'm not paying attention to that, I really think that I should go to college. I've wanted to go to college in some points in my life but I didn't think it was possible. During my use I had just given up on it. It was not going to happen. Now, it was like, maybe I could go to college. And if John were to have doubted me in any way though, or doubted my ability to do it, I would have just crumbled. And he knew me as a high school drop-out. That was it. High school drop-out, works at Mayo, comes to AA, that's it.

So, I don't know what he was thinking when I say that I decide that I want to be a doctor. But he said, "You know Marv, if it is God's will, it will happen." That's how he answered me. Those are his exact words. And I thought, wow, I guess that it is true. If it is God's will, it will happen. So, I just hung on to it. I started looking into schools and trying to figure out where I wanted to and how I was going to do it. My parents, I didn't even ask for money. I hadn't even seen them. I had talked to my dad that one time and that was it. And I assumed they wouldn't help because they said they wouldn't help. And my younger brother was off at college at the University of Minnesota and we didn't really have a lot of money, so I kind of thought that there was no use even going down that path. I hadn't had any contact with them. I assumed they would stick with what they said.

So, my kids are in their thirties now, and they both applied to multiple schools, right? Like eight schools or something. And I decided in the end... I talked to one of the fellows a little bit about applying to college, but I didn't really talk much about it. I just decided that I was just going to do it on my own for some reason. Just stupidly, you know? So, I apply to one school. I apply to St. Olaf and I decide if I get in, I get in and if I don't, I don't. And I got in. So, on my one-year anniversary from that six-month relapse, I walk into my first classes. The neat thing is that I was in this dorm with all of these guys and they are all coming to college like it is some free-for-all, and I'm trying to stay sober.

So, I go back to Rochester on a lot of weekends because I want to go to AA on Sunday morning, which I don't tell them, but I might have told some of them. I went to an AA meeting in town, in Northfield, too. I was still dating Linda. And those guys, like one time, I was studying in the library all evening, which I did a lot of because my memory was just kind of shot. By the end of the first semester though, it was beginning to be quite good. It took a lot of effort. And I walked back to the dorm and in the entry was a big lobby and they were having a Christmas Party. I start for the punch because it is supposed to be a dry campus. That's laughable. It wasn't a dry campus at all. There were drugs and alcohol everywhere. But five guys come out of all corners of the room as I am walking towards the punch and grab me, "Marv! Marv! We spiked the punch! We spiked the punch! Stay away from it!"

One time, the second semester, I was somehow... I don't know what was going on, I can't explain it, I don't remember what was happening. But I am in the room known for people who smoke pot all the time, right? And there are about six guys and they are handing a joint around. And I am sitting in there and I am not thinking about using or planning on using, but I am there, which makes no sense of all. So, I must in some way be thinking about using. My next-door neighbor in the dorm, Jack, suddenly shows up in the door and says, "Marv, come here. I've gotta talk to you about something." And he gets me out of there. Jack and five or six of these guys and I still get together. [laughter] And he got me out of there, somehow. And I had told these guys my story.

AS: It probably made an impression on them.

MS: Well they just said, that makes sense Marv, you shouldn't do that. That was their response! You just shouldn't do that! It was true. So, they were just really practical. And they had no experience with addiction of any kind. So, that's how that all went. Linda and I had decided to get married after freshman year, just stupidly. We're twenty-years-old, we get married. Neither of us have money. She was working but she wasn't in school. She was taking some classes at the junior college in Rochester at the time. We decided that we would go to school together. [laughter] Which sounds just crazy, and it was. But we go off to Drake University in Iowa and went there and it all went well. Neither of us get any help from our parents. Her folks really can't help her out, so we're just getting grants and loans and I'm doing work study and she is doing some work study, which was just basically just a job at the school. And we were able to make ends meet. We both went to school and then I graduated a year before she did and got into Mayo. Dr. Shepard, while I was in college was named Dean of Education of the Mayo Clinic. When I applied to medical school, well, the Dean of the Medical School opens a letter from his boss... [laughter] I had done my part in college.

After that first semester was rough, I got mostly B's and then it was almost all A's.

AS: Did you and Linda stay together?

MS: Yeah, I started medical school a year before she graduated, so she was still at Drake and I had an affair with a classmate. We almost divorced. It was just horrible. I mean... It hurt both of us equally. It was just awful. Somehow, we stayed together, and we've been married forty-one years.

AS: Oh my gosh, that's incredible.

MS: I know! And we love each other!

AS: That's really great. And we love each other! Not only are we together, but we love each other. [laughter] That's always a good thing to add.

MS: It is!

AS: Cause, "We're still together" can sound like you're in some kind of marathon.

MS: It's true. But it's just getting better.

AS: That's really great.

MS: So, I don't know, it's almost 5:30pm. We should probably meet again.

AS: Should we meet again? Then we can get into the weeds about opioids.

MS: Yeah, cause that's the trouble talking about my story.

AS: No, it's not. Often, my time with doctors has always been longer, because there is the story of the life and then what are you going to tell me about addiction medicine. Okay, so let's just pause for now.

[End of recording]