GRATITUDE FOR THE LIFE I THOUGHT WAS OVER

SIMON'S RECOVERY STORY

Simon's first Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meeting was pivotal, not just in helping him turn his life around, but also in setting him up to make future significant contributions to NA both in the UK and abroad.

1. Early memories—the first stirrings of addiction

My earliest memories are a mixture of almost photographic images, and stories told to me by others—especially my mother and brother. I guess it goes without saying that these memories are at best subjective, and at worst filtered through the long lens of experience, so it's not easy to be clear about their veracity.

I have very few memories of my father, who left home when I was six, was an unresolved diabetic, and died when I was 15. I remember him coming into the room I shared with my brother to tell us he and my mother had been in an accident, and that my mum was in hospital. I remember going to stay with him and his parents for one of my half-term holidays and getting my first pair of long trousers.

I remember visiting him in hospital with my grandma when he was very sick. He'd had a stroke and was unable to speak or feed himself. He was a heavy smoker all his life, and my abiding memory of that visit, other than watching my grandma feed him, was watching him shuffle down the ward towards the smoking room. He was so thin and emaciated by this time that he had to use one hand to hold up his pyjama trousers. I have a strong memory of the pyjamas falling down and him being unable to pick them up without help.

I would have been about 14 at this time and that experience had a huge effect on me. I remember feeling mortified for him, but also for myself. I had walked past his bed and not recognised my own father. I had watched him humiliated, but it was about me; it felt like—and this is how I remembered it—that it was me who'd been wronged.

One other strong memory from around that time concerned a visit my younger brother and I had made to my grandparents, where my father was living after my parents' divorce. My granddad had given my brother and I some money, and my father walked us to the station. As he was already sick, he wasn't allowed to smoke, but I gave him my half-a-crown so he could buy cigarettes.

For a long time, I'd remembered this as me offering my dad this money, but my brother remembers this differently. When we discussed it a few years ago, he told me that my dad had taken this money from me, against my will, and had bought cigarettes with it.

I was already at boarding school by this time. I'd started at the age of 11; being born in July made me one of the youngest in my class. It was not a school based around privilege at all, but a charitable foundation for those with ability whose parents hadn't the resources for a private education. It was, as a result, a very tough place to be, and I was completely unprepared for it.

Without being conscious of it, I'd always depended on the safety and certainty of my home and family, and waking in a room with my brother in the next bed. Now, without any preparation, I found myself at night in a dormitory with perhaps 40 older boys. I cried myself to sleep for a long time, but without making a sound, as I quickly learned not to show any signs of weakness. I phoned my mother every day, sometimes several times a day, to ask her to let me come home, but she told me I had to stay.

There was a tradition at this school, as in many similar places, of a second-year pupil 'nurse-maiding' a first year. It was my fate to have Kevin Stanley as mine. Kevin was a bully and took great pleasure in tormenting me. He coined my nickname 'Chinky', as I looked a little oriental when I was young. He and his pals would search me out and goad me into tears. I was small for my age and cried easily. It had never occurred to me to strike out and defend myself, so I retreated further inside myself and became a solitary adolescent. I spent hours at a time sitting in a toilet stall feeling sorry for myself.

The school was in rural Sussex and had its own train station. There was a lorry park next to it and there would often be lorries loaded with cases of beer parked there overnight. One of my friends and I would climb the fence and steal cases of beer, which we hid in the woods. I remember one day we'd drunk a few cans and I was caught returning to the schoolhouse really drunk—I was perhaps 13. This didn't stop me drinking —bingeing on alcohol—it just taught me to be more careful and not get caught.

There were a few things that gave me relief from my sense of isolation in my time at this school. I had started smoking cigarettes whilst doing a paper round during the school holidays. It made me feel grown-up and it also gave me my first real buzz. There were a group of people at school who smoked, and I hung around on the periphery of that group for the rest of my time there. I realised later that most of this behaviour was played out in isolation. I'd already learned that nobody was to be trusted, and that I was safer on my own.

I liked carpentry and spent many hours in the woodwork building, planning and carving bits of wood. I also loved drama. The school built an award-winning theatre and I directed a play there in my final year. There was a drama teacher at the school who rather took me under his wing and encouraged me to apply for the National Youth Theatre, the first ever application from my school. I passed the audition. I was 17 and spent a wonderful summer holiday with like-minded girls and boys, who were all really talented.

Two connected things happened that summer that had a big influence on me. There was a free concert in Hyde Park, and I went along with some of my peers. Someone passed around some pills and I took them. I guess they were downers, because I returned to the theatre but slept in the green room through the whole of

the performance. I'd forgotten that my mother had chosen that evening to come and see me, and it was a very difficult conversation afterwards, trying to explain why I wasn't onstage in the chorus.

Returning to school two days late after the final performance of this play, and filled with a self-confidence I'd never before had, I was immediately called to the housemaster's office and caned for something that I'd not done. I remember a crushing sense of defeat and hopelessness descending again, and I began to count the days before I could leave. I felt that I'd done something nobody at the school had ever done, but it wasn't even mentioned in the school magazine. I really remember the sense of injustice I felt.

My lack of engagement in my education meant that I made no effort in my final year's studies and I did poorly in my exams. As a result, I was unable to get a place at any of my university choices, so I moved back home and started work in an office for a large corporation.

I hated it and lived for the evenings and weekends, where I drank more and more, and started mixing with a group who played pool every night and got wasted every weekend. It was only when a family friend used his influence to get me an audition for drama school that my life changed for the next few years. I passed this audition and spent the next two years at a London drama school.

This was my first time living away from home, having girlfriends, living with my own choices. It was a real adventure for me, but as the saying goes: 'Wherever you go, there you are.' My shaky self-esteem and sense of separation began to take over. I was rocked when my girlfriend got a great job with the Spanish Royal Ballet and moved to Madrid at really short notice. I was crushed and decided to end my life.

With the benefit of hindsight, I recognise that I was shouting for help, but I took all the pills I had and went to bed. My sister shook me awake some hours later, thinking I'd overslept, and I was pretty sick for a couple of days. I'm not sure what would have happened if I'd had more—or different pills…

2. Full-blown drug addiction

I struggled to make any meaningful connections throughout my time at drama school, but I had some ability as a character actor, and was one of the few students with an agent when I graduated. I also had a good connection with my two favourite types of drug—cannabis and amphetamines.

For some years, I'd been a small-time dealer—it was a useful way to ensure I always had enough drugs, but it was also my main source of income. My school was for both ballet and theatre studies, so there were many dancers who were desperate to stay thin and were therefore a good source of income.

My peer group soon consisted solely of people who used drugs like me; the difference between them and me being that for them, drugs (including alcohol) were a means to an end, but for me drugs were an end in themselves. I became completely immersed in this world; buying, selling and using drugs was almost a full-time occupation.

It is clear to me now that, for me at least, addiction was a progressive condition. I'm also pretty certain that it was not like that for everyone. Most of the people I knew and associated with, passed through using drugs almost like it was a fashion; it came and went for them, and they grew out of it.

That was never my experience, and the more I learned about drugs, the more I used them. They gave me something I was unable to find within myself—an identity, a purpose, an ambition. I became a student of drugs and their effects. I read Carlos Castaneda and Huxley and experimented avariciously with new substances.

I soon found myself trying heroin, and I loved it. It was what I'd been searching for! I stopped taking almost every other drug straight away. I was home. I was in love with the poppy and it quickly became a way of life for me. I found a good source of drug and established myself as the local dealer. As a result, I was always in demand, something I mistakenly conflated with being popular.

The idea that I might make a career out of acting had evaporated as a result of my drug use, and its effects on my reliability and punctuality. I was late for appointments, and once caused a West End performance to start 30 minutes late. I was 'let go' by my agent, but this hardly registered with me. I convinced myself I was a 'resting actor', but in reality, I was a drug-dealing heroin addict with a serious alcohol problem.

I continued to burn bridges faster than I could build them, and was finally forced to move back to my family home—just me and my mother. Using heroin had stopped being fun a while before, and I was now regularly in withdrawal and struggling to find the money I needed to maintain my habit. I was using more than I was selling. All the reasons I'd used heroin for in the first place had started to re-appear—my sense of hopeless separation, my fear of 'real life' and of other people—it was a kind of autism. I felt like I had become almost sociopathic.

My mother was very co-dependent, and she was my enabler in many ways. It reached a point where she was driving me to my dealer and giving me the money to buy heroin. It's hard, even now, to understand just how difficult that must have been for her, and for the rest of my family.

3. A moment of clarity

There were only a few occasions when I'd seriously considered stopping using drugs completely. In my mind, I had complete control over my using, as evidenced by my ability to stop using heroin. I did so twice, with the help of a combination of methadone and alcohol, wanting to show myself that I was in control. I'd never identified myself as alcoholic, because I wasn't addicted to alcohol (or so I thought).

The days of having a good opiate connection, with quantities of drugs given in advance of payment, were long gone. I was now in the prey of those to whom I'd sold drugs to previously, and they proceeded to short-change me as much as I had done to them. Money went out far faster than it came in, and I got involved in

various frauds around cheque books and credit cards. These were the days when an imprint of the card was made by the teller, and a phone call to check was only made if the transaction was for more than about £50. It's amazing how many things it's possible to purchase—and sell on—for £49.50. Most of this was alcohol and we'd sell it to pubs.

I have a vivid memory of the day my life changed—on the inside, if not the outside. I was 'buying' some trousers to order in a clothes shop and the teller produced one of the new phone connected credit card machines. When the transaction failed—the card was stolen—and they went out to the back of the shop to see the manager, I knew that I had to run! I had no money, no more cards, and I was sick.

As I was about to cross the dual carriageway outside the town and make my escape, I registered that there was a large truck coming towards me. For a brief moment, I thought that all I had to do was take one step and all my troubles would be over.

This thought really shocked me out of the autopilot that I was existing within, and caused some moments of deep introspection. It was like a moment of clarity within the fog. 'If I don't stop this behaviour, I'm going to die,' was the thought that rose out of this fog. I knew I didn't want to do that, but I really wanted all the shit I was in to end. I was in real trouble. People I owed money to were looking for me. The police were on my case. My family had finally worked out why I had become so difficult, and why so many things were going missing. I needed to pull myself together. I needed to get away…

Moments of clarity like this were rare, but they did occur, and often alongside moments of crisis. As my life, and my active drug use progressed, there were more and more moments of crisis—and clarity—like this.

That moment with the truck had shaken me, and I responded to that emotional jolt in my usual way, by using more drugs to mask my problems as best I could. My drug use, the main symptom of my addiction, had progressed to the point where there was rarely any real pleasure in my life anymore. I stumbled, or staggered, from one stressful situation to another, and resolved all my emotional discomfort with some kind of narcosis. I was drinking really consistently, rarely being without a small bottle of brandy in my pocket. Alcohol wasn't my problem, but it certainly took the sharp edges off my life.

It was clear to me that there was something seriously wrong with my situation, and that I needed to make some changes. I was as yet unable to make the connection between who I was and what I was doing. That insight was still clouded by denial.

4. The endgame

An opportunity presented itself to me, and I resolved to go back to school and become a Youth Worker. One of my many short-lived jobs had been in a youth centre, and it seemed possible that I might be able to make something out of this work. It actually didn't really feel like work, as it consisted mainly of just hanging out

and playing pool—and getting paid for it! Even though I was in my late-twenties, I was emotionally as mature as most of the teenagers who visited these centres.

I had done some acting for a small theatre group, performing in the back of a pub, and the director used his connections to steer me towards a degree in Sociology, with a combined qualification in youth work. I went for the interview and was successful in getting a place at University. I was fully funded by my LEA and I moved to student accommodation on campus.

I'm certain, on reflection, that there was a group of people, just outside the periphery of my consciousness, who were looking out for me—who were aware of what I was doing and were trying their best to keep me safe—throughout my active addiction. My family was in this group, but there were others too, and one of them was this director. I was pretty much out of control and grasping at things rather than deciding. 'Not waving, but drowning,' was what Sylvia Plath called it. I am humbled and ashamed when I think of their love for me. If 'grace' is an undeserved gift from God, then I was truly graced by this.

University felt like a new start, and I was excited about it. As a 'mature student', I brought a lot to the table, at least in terms of life experience, and the first couple of weeks were really stimulating.

As a result of my almost complete lack of self-awareness, it was a while before I realised that all the people I made connections with in those first weeks were just like me. I am a great believer in homophily—of like attracting like—and I immediately identified those who were using drugs, both in my year and throughout the university. I think this is one of the reasons that addiction is seen as a contagious condition. Addicts have an inbuilt radar that locates 'allies', not least as a way of reinforcing a behaviour.

The coursework quickly overtook my ability to complete it. All the reasons I'd struggled at my regular schools resurfaced, and I retreated to the student lounge, my denial, and the pool table, where there was always someone who would enable me to play another game or drink another beer. Half the academic year was spent on placement, and I took work at a youth club in Surrey. I think everyone expected me to find some local accommodation, but I had re-established contact with one of my old dealers and was sleeping on his couch.

It took all of my limited resources to survive this lifestyle. A typical day would consist of waking before Ken's wife and kids woke for school, stealing a bit of cereal and milk to eat, stowing my sleeping bag behind the sofa where I slept, and leaving for the bus stop. I took one bus to the local town, then a coach that passed close to the university. I would head for my lecture, or the bar if I couldn't face a lecture, and hang out until it was time to travel to the youth club. I would hang out there and play pool, or staff the small food shop there.

The real issue of importance for me was the next part of my day. The club would wind up at about 8.00 pm, and there was a final bus from the airport to the town near to Ken's house at 9.00. I had to persuade a parent of one of the kids to drive me to the airport so I could get this bus to where my drugs would be. It was a

complicated process of manipulating one of the kids into asking their parents to take me. This usually worked, at least until I'd worked my way through all the kids and was asking people again and again. I'd finally get a ride and would get this final airport bus. I was sick by this time and would almost always sleep through my stop.

I then had to phone Ken from a phone box to ask him to come and collect me. This was another complicated negotiation and would almost always result in my begging him to come. We would eventually get to his house—it was usually after midnight by this time—and the long process of negotiating drugs for no money, or the promise of money in the future, would ensue. He would always use first, and I'd then have to wait for him to come around enough to cut me in.

My whole life revolved around this moment—everything else was just a side-show. This was the main event. I had expended a huge amount of both physical and emotional energy to cause this event to happen. My determination was extraordinary really. I often travelled on those buses with the same ticket for weeks, carefully erasing the date and forging a new one, day after day. The tension caused by constantly having to get past such obstacles was exhausting, and it completely consumed me. There is a paragraph in the NA Basic Text that describes this condition very well:

> Our whole life and thinking were centred in drugs in one form or another – the getting and using and finding ways and means to get more. We lived to use and used to live. Very simply, an addict is a man or woman whose life is controlled by drugs.' Narcotics Anonymous, Basic Text, Page 3, "Who is an Addict?"

I'd really convinced myself that I was using in secret, and that I was successfully concealing this part of my life from those who were not a party to it. In reality, it must have been quite obvious to others, and I'm amazed that so few people ever challenged me, or spoke to me about it.

Spending some days at Anna's house—Anna was a tutor with whom I was having a relationship—gave me relief from this punishing schedule, but it was an impossible situation for her. She had a child who was terrified of me—this man who was either ranting, or the life and soul of the party. I was constantly on the hunt for money, and would take anything I could beg, borrow or steal.

I used up friends faster than the last chances they offered me. It became impossible to continue like this, but I struggled onwards, blind to the reality that stopping using drugs would change everything. They had become as much a part of my survival as air or food. It was as though I was underwater, and I was breathing air through a straw.

One day, I received a letter from the head of faculty, asking me to come to see him in his office. I'd stopped attending lectures and tutorials, and I was only attending university to collect giro cheques from my mailbox. I knew that my addiction had come out on top again, and that I'd need all my wits about me if everything was

not all going to fall down around me—my brittle facade of lies and last chances and denial that I would retreat into every time I was challenged.

I knocked on the door and entered the room. He was on the phone and gestured to me to sit. What happened next sits outside my rational understanding even now. I started to cry. He noticed my distress and ended his call. I uttered out loud something I hadn't consciously considered, 'I'm a heroin addict and I can't stop, and I don't know what to do.'

I believe that this was one of the most important moments in my life. It was certainly the first time I'd said this to someone else. It was also the first time I'd admitted this to myself, I think—making the connection between my behaviour and my condition.

As well as I can remember, and to his eternal credit, the head of faculty responded with immense calm. I think he probably knew about my problem, and may well have had several conversations with staff about me. He suggested that I go and seek help for my addiction, and that he'd sort out any problems with the university.

There was one woman on my course who was willing to be a friend to the rather desperate person I'd become. She offered to let me stay in her house for the time it took to find somewhere for me to go. She was already in contact with my family, who had found an agency called The Life Anew Trust, who could refer me to a Residential Rehab. This friend, Jo, collected a script for lots of DF118s (dihydrocodeine) from my doctor, and with them and half a bottle of brandy a day, I sat down to wait for my place in rehab.

I went to London for an assessment, and remember promising the man I met that I'd definitely go to NA meetings as a condition of the referral. Of course, lying came as easily to me as breathing, and I never attended any meetings.

The day came for me to travel to Wiltshire. We passed by my old dealer's house one more time, to spend my last £10.00 and say goodbye, and I was off into the unknown again…

5. Early recovery

The short time I spent in rehab was to have a profound effect on the rest of my life. I am one of the people who arrived at the doors of that 'big house on a hill' completely ready for what I was to experience. However, I had no idea that this was the case and spent the first week or so in a vain attempt to defend my behaviour.

I was, however, amongst experts, and it was soon clear to me that my behaviour didn't merit defending. I'd long ago run out of excuses and had been running on empty for a while. This didn't stop me from defending everything I'd become as best I could—in the face of all the evidence.

Things changed for me on the first Sunday evening. There was an in-house Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meeting—the first I'd attended—and it was to alter the way I viewed pretty much everything. I often refer to that first meeting as a pivotal moment, around which the direction and context of my life turned.

What I most remember from that first meeting was a real sense of unease about the quasi-religious appearance of it. I have a sister who is a committed Christian and I had tried Christianity myself, but couldn't make any sense of it at all. On this Sunday evening, there was a poster on the wall with the 12-Steps on it. What I saw on it was the word God—capital G—and some other words. I was waiting for someone to pull a guitar out from under a chair and start singing. I remember feeling very defensive and nervous.

I often speak about that first meeting as an example of the idea that what I bring into a room affects what happens there. My sense of unease was based on my history, not on anything else. I had made a whole lot of assumptions about that meeting, and of the people in it, within seconds of arriving, and without any real evidence.

As I listened to people reading the pieces of NA literature that are read at the beginning of every meeting, something stirred inside me. I heard a description of an addict and realised that I was one. I heard how addiction, '… was an isolating, chronic, progressive condition, with the only outcomes being jails, institutions and death.' [Narcotics Anonymous, Basic Text].

I heard why everyone was gathered together, about how I was 'powerless over my addiction', and how the members of NA had turned 'in desperation' to each other, and had found a way to freedom from their addiction.

I also remember the man who gave the 'share' at the beginning. I'm pretty sure his name was Micky and that he's dead now. It was the first time in my life that I'd heard anyone speak about using drugs like I'd used drugs. It was also the first time I'd seen anyone who'd stopped using—actually chosen to stop, and who was at peace with their decision. I'd stopped using a lot, but always because I either had no money or no access to drugs.

The results of that first meeting, and the effect on my life, were immense. I'm certain that there is a small element of hope—or faith or some kind of spiritual flame—that burns inside us all. I believe it's never completely extinguished, but can become so dim that it's almost invisible to us. It was rather like that flame was fanned by my experiences at my first meetings, and I became aware again of hope. And the present, not just the past and the future.

There was a lot of group work in that place, and I was given the opportunity to almost see myself from the outside. I had been consumed by fear, and negativity. Everything was 'for' me, but 'about' others. There was a lot—and I mean a lot—of work to do!

What happened in the seven weeks or so that I was there is all a bit of a blur now, although I remember sitting up during the night for the first weeks around the large fireplace in the main room. I was a confirmed member of the 'wide-awake club', as were almost all of the new arrivals. Not sleeping is one of the main characteristics of withdrawals, and it took me perhaps three weeks to sleep during the night for more than an hour at a time.

While there, I was introduced to the idea that other people were affected by my actions, and that it was important for me to think seriously about the implications of my behaviour. I wrote the first version of a 'life story', that really helped me to see how interconnected everything is. I'd become totally isolated and inward-looking over the preceding months and years, and whilst I'm not convinced that my condition—my dis-ease of addiction—was self-actuated, I was certainly responsible for its development.

Another important realisation that had its genesis at that time was that I was not able to resolve this condition with an act of self-will. I had shown myself repeatedly that I was not able to control my use of drugs, including alcohol. I'd seen this as a weakness, that I'd not tried hard enough. What I came to realise, and over time accept, was that this was not something I was able to achieve in isolation. I needed to open my mind—and my heart—to the possibility that I was not alone, and that it was possible for others to help me—and for me to help them.

It was decided—I was certainly told, rather than asked about this—that I should spend the next six months in a half-way house. I was pretty happy to go along with this decision, as I had no real idea what I would do next. I'd spent the last years struggling to get through each day, and the prospect of half a year with some kind of structure was quite appealing. I was found a place at a house in Weston-Super-Mare, and arrived to find a four-bedroom house with five other recovering men, a counsellor during the day, and a family in an annex who provided meals. There was a group meeting every morning, and one-on-one sessions every week.

I'd survived eight years in a boys' boarding school by keeping my head down and learning to live an isolated existence, but this was somewhat different. Pretty much everything was 'brought to group', and whilst at the time that often felt really petty, it really helped me to see that everything I do has consequences. Everything is connected, and it really was possible for me to take simple responsibility for my own life and its direction. This was a big change for the person who blamed everything on someone else, and who took responsibility for nothing.

It was a requirement that we attended 12-Step meetings several times a week. A couple of the residents attended Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), as they saw their using careers as entirely based around alcohol, but I was clear that I'd sought the solution to my problem in many other substances as well.

There are many similarities between AA and NA, as there are between almost all of the '12-Step Fellowships'. There are also several differences, and whilst most of these are not too important to those

outside the organisations, it's important for many who attend meetings to find a place in which they feel comfortable.

The main feature of 12-Step Mutual Aid groups is the facility they offer for identification with others, and this works best when the individual experiences are similar—certainly in the earlier days and weeks of attendance. This is why I found it much easier to relate to, or identify with other drug users, even though I used alcohol as well. I think this is because my identification was as much cultural, as specifically behavioural. One of the reasons behind the formation of NA was the desire for specific experiences, often outside the experience of most drinkers, to be recognised and identified.

There were three NA meetings in town at that time, and they were heavily populated by those in and around the various treatment centres and half-way houses. I became a regular attendee and contributor, and became very involved with the local committees that were based in Bristol. A group of us started a monthly dance as a fundraiser. We started new meetings and instigated an annual convention, where members from other towns would gather together over a weekend and celebrate our mutual recovery, with meetings and parties.

It was a really enjoyable time in my life. I'd found some freedom from the chaos and pain of continuous drug use, and had found a lifestyle that was really rewarding. I started working and my first job in recovery was in a mushroom factory. It was hard work, but I was on a bonus scheme, so I worked obsessively hard to try to make extra money.

The time came for me to leave the relative safety of the house, and the consistent and public questioning of my behaviour and its motivation. I'd learned a lot, but was ready to have a go on my own.

I found a bedsit and moved in. It was the first time in my life I'd lived on my own whilst paying rent and providing for myself, but I was part of a community of recovering people and was rarely alone. I took and passed my driving test, even though I'd been driving for years, and I bought a car. This gave me a kind of independence I'd never had, and I enrolled in college to get some qualifications as a carpenter.

Having graduated with a distinction, I began my new career as a jobbing carpenter. I took any job that came along, from roofing for a large contractor to hanging doors for private clients. I loved my life and my new-found sense of freedom. I had money in my pocket and love in my heart. It felt good to be alive.

6. New patterns evolve

An important event in my first year of Recovery was the NA World Convention taking place in London. The convention was in its 16th year, and this was its first conference outside the USA. More than 2,000 people came together to celebrate their individual and collective recoveries. I'd never seen anything like this in my life, and it was a powerful experience to really feel a part of something so big. It really helped me to

understand that I was changing as a person. I also met some people from NA in other continents who would come to play a huge part in my life to come.

Probably the most noticeable change in my life was the growing awareness I had of the world around me. It's a bit of a cliché that people in the early stages of their recovery become aware of the most surprisingly obvious things—the beauty of clouds, the smell of a flower, hunger and thirst. It's my experience that clichés earn their status, and these awarenesses were a really exciting evidence that I was changing.

I had spent many years without any real hope or passion in my life. The broad horizon of my youth had narrowed to a point where my life had become a place of struggle, with no real pleasure, just relief from a gnawing, constant, self-centred fear. Where everything and everybody was an obstacle to overcome, by myself, and with little energy.

I was becoming much more aware of other people, their feelings and their responses to me, and I realised that I gained real pleasure and satisfaction from helping and being useful. A key feature of the NA programme is the principle of service to others, as a way out of self-centredness. This growing awareness was described to me as spiritual in nature. I liked this idea, as I did the idea that I was enjoying a spiritual awakening. It was becoming clear to me that this 12-Step programme, whilst appearing from the outside to be rather religious in tone and language, was a series of exercises that enabled the 'awakening of my spirit'.

Another realisation struck me about a year into my Recovery: I'd not thought about using drugs for ages! I really hadn't even considered it as an option for some months. It was as though I'd forgotten about them, and it fulfilled the promise that was made to me when I arrived at my first NA meeting—that I would lose the desire to use drugs and find a new way to live.

The Convention in London, and some of the people I met in meetings, had introduced me to the global nature of NA. There are communities of recovering addicts in every continent, many of whom also have regular Conventions, where they celebrate their collective achievements. I decided that I would travel to some of these. I'd always wanted to travel, and wanted to see the world for myself. I was working and saving money now, so I resolved to travel around the world.

I spent several weeks poring over maps and flight plans, and booked a round-trip to Australia, with lots of stops on the way. The first was India, and Delhi. I'd always wanted to go to India, but had never had the resources, neither financial nor emotional. I had a friend from rehab who lived in Calcutta, and had invited me to visit, so I began to prepare myself for the journey. I bought a backpack, got my jabs, gave my notice at work and for my flat, and set off. I had never been so excited to be alive!

During the next eight months, I travelled through India, to Thailand and Indonesia, and then to Australia and New Zealand. I had some amazing adventures and met many extraordinary people. Although I'd been alive

for almost thirty years, it was in many ways as though I'd just been born. There was a flame burning inside me that filled me with joy, and courage. It was as though I'd never been alive before.

I was really aware that there was a 'spiritual' part to me, and it was an awareness that was growing. I learned, and came to understand, that there was a difference between who I was and what I did. I can best describe this as an internal and an external consciousness. I was beginning to detect an internal voice, or energy, that I could connect to, that helped me to measure my reactions to external stimuli and choose responses. I was becoming able to align my responses to reason and rationale, rather than mere defensive, fear-based impulses.

I truly wanted to be a better person, and this internal dialogue helped me to make more moral and compassionate decisions. This to me is the 'Higher Power' that is referred to in the 12 Steps of the various Fellowships.

An abiding memory, and one that I regularly recount when I speak about my experiences in recovery, occurred when I was travelling in the south of Thailand. I'd been hanging out with a Swedish friend on the islands, and she'd had a minor accident on a motor scooter, in which she'd burned her leg on the exhaust. This necessitated staying in one place for a while and getting medical treatment to prevent the risk of infection, which is very real—especially for westerners in tropical climates.

I was due to meet some other people, so we decided that I'd leave, and that we'd meet a few weeks later in Bangkok. Arrangements like this didn't often work out, as circumstances overtook the best-laid plans, but we arranged a day to meet and off I went.

Now since the beginning of my recovery I've worn an NA symbol around my neck. It's a square inside a circle. I was in Bangkok on the arranged day, at the agreed restaurant. This restaurant was a popular place for travellers, and one of its walls was covered in messages—arranging meetings, looking for co-travellers, selling stuff, etc. I scanned the wall, really hoping for a message from my friend. Suddenly, I saw an NA symbol and my name! She's here! I was really excited and opened the note quickly. It was, however, not from her, but from an Irishman called Eamon.

It turns out that Eamon had been travelling in the south of Thailand and had relapsed. He'd been sitting on a bus, miserable, frightened and far from home, when a pretty Swedish girl points to the symbol on the chain around his neck and says, 'I know what that is!' He was also wearing an NA symbol…

She told him how she knew about it, and about me, and how we'd arranged to meet. He got off the bus and headed to Bangkok to find me. The note said he'd be in the bar at 6 o'clock, and when he arrived, I was there to meet him. We sat together and had an impromptu NA meeting, in the middle of a crowded bar. It was an extraordinary and moving experience for us both. To my knowledge, he's been clean since that day.

As I travelled and time passed, I was steadily growing in self-confidence, and was creating more opportunities for relationship with others every day.

Los Angeles was the final destination on my journey, and I arrived there pretty exhausted, and pretty broke too. I'd met up with an Australian from NA and we hit some meetings in the city. We very quickly hooked up with the fellowship there and were offered a place to stay. My plan had originally been to travel overland through the USA and into Central and South America. I realised, however, that I'd been a long time without being amidst recovering people and decided to stay for a while. The next day I was offered work as a carpenter, and my stay in LA ended up lasting almost two years. I got my own place, a truck and a California driver's license. I was set!

Narcotics Anonymous has an interesting history. It actually started on both the East and West coasts of the US at about the same time, but the first meetings of NA in its current form took place in California in 1953. I was living about 20 miles from there, close to NA's World Service Office, and it was here that I really started to get involved with serving the NA as an organisation, rather than just participating in meetings. Narcotics Anonymous was having a huge influence on my life, my way of thinking, and my attitudes—towards myself and others.

7. Long-term recovery

Upon my return to the UK in 1992, I soon got involved in the development of national and European structures. My main areas of interest were:

- Public Relations—how NA was seen by, and interacted with, non-members, especially those in professions who worked with addicts and addiction, and
- Fellowship Development—the creation of basic structures that support the growth of new communities of Recovering Addicts where previously there had been no obvious structure.

These two interests divided themselves pretty neatly into UK and Abroad.

I was living in North London, attending both Recovery and committee meetings several times a week and really enjoying my life. I was surrounded by others in Recovery, who were also abstinent and committed to personal growth and change. We learned from NA literature and from each other and I tried my best to practice the new way of living to which I was so attracted.

Within the 12-Step paradigm, addiction is often described as having three main characteristics:

- Obsession—the constant, churning preoccupation with an idea or a behaviour (or a drug);
- Compulsion—the inability to refrain from an action or behaviour (like using a drug);
- Self-centredness—the total pre-occupation with who I am and what I do.

These three elements can be simply described thus: I can't stop thinking about it, I can't stop doing it, it's your fault.

The three main elements of the process of change were simple: honesty, open-mindedness and willingness. Simple, but not easy, for me to put into action.

I'd arrived at this point in my life with some really embedded behaviours that I was coming to understand were not just fear-based, but almost completely self-defeating. As a self-absorbed, self-centred person, I was used to the idea that I was always right, and that nothing was my fault. As a newer member of NA, I was learning that it was not possible to resolve these conditions alone. I was now responsible for the direction of my life, but I needed external guidance. There was a wealth of experience for me to draw upon, not least within my own community.

There was a growing interest in 12-Step organisations as a means of sustaining longer-term recovery, and I helped to develop some planning tools so that members would be able to better use their limited resources to best effect. We began to exhibit and present at professional conferences, to raise the profile of the 12 Steps in the UK.

I'd also been elected Chair of Fellowship Development in Europe, and was regularly travelling abroad to conferences and running workshops, and offering advice and experience to new communities about developing their structures. Encouraging nascent communities of members to adopt some basic structural principles gave them the opportunity to retain any cultural associations that were important to them, whilst maintaining some fidelity to the basic tenets of the NA message: surrender, acknowledgement of a power greater than 'self', inventory, amends, consistent reappraisal, service to others.

One of the mainstays of any 12-Step organisation is the collective experience of its members. Groups reflect the character of the members of that group, and NA has always been committed to the diversity of its membership, seeing that very diversity as a strength. The breadth of experience at meetings is a real asset, not only to that group, but to NA as a whole. I really can't remember a time when I've been unable to find someone who can identify with an experience I've had.

One of the characteristics of NA is that its members tend to see themselves as 'In Recovery' as opposed to 'Recovered'. There is little doubt that—at least for the majority of members—their lives, and health, and outlook have dramatically improved. The latest survey conducted showed an improved quality of life for more than 95% of members [UKNA 2011 Membership Survey (cohort=589), www.ukna.org].

The reason I started to attend meetings was because of a problem with drugs, a problem I had shown myself that I was unable to control alone. At meetings, I met people like me, who used drugs like I did, had found a way to stop using, and were living useful, productive, happy lives. I continue to attend meetings because: a) I want those things too, and b) I want to help others find what I found.

8. Where I am—where I'm going

There is little dispute that 12-Step, abstinence-based organisations, such as AA and NA, are not well understood, or particularly well regarded by those who are not familiar with them. They tend to be characterised as prescriptive, religious, cultish, secretive and even predatory. My own experiences, and the subsequent changes in my life and outlook, were so different to this view, that I quickly became committed to informing those who I thought needed to have more, and better, information.

There is little doubt that the best way to raise the awareness of others about—for example NA—was to invite them to see it in action and attend a meeting. There are two main kinds of meeting: Closed, only for those who think they might have a problem with drugs, including alcohol, and Open, for anyone to attend.

I've spent almost half my life in drug-free, 12-Step Recovery. I arrived at my first meeting a pretty broken human being, full of fear and regret, and with an incredibly distorted view of the world and my place in it. As a result of working my way through the 12 Steps of NA, my spirit—my hope and my conscience—has been revived. I am no longer driven to run from myself, from who I am and what I do.

I have a sense of responsibility, both for myself, and for those around me, that I couldn't previously even entertain, let alone achieve. I have a connection—and a sense of that connection—with the world and with those I love. I have a real understanding of what it is to love—and be loved. I could go on, but suffice it to say that I feel truly alive in a way that I never imagined I could—or deserved to.

The last few years have brought real change to my life. I met a woman, who has also been in NA more than ten years ago, when I was helping to facilitate a conference in Poland. We lost touch, but found each other just over two years ago. I now have a flat in Krakow, where we live together with her daughter. I'm still commuting from the UK, but they will move to England next year. As a result of the constant travel, I have let go of a lot of the work I was doing for NA and started a consultancy with a friend. Our aim is to help those in the treatment sector—commissioners, providers, consumers—work better with Mutual Aid, specifically 12-Step organisations.

I am writing this whilst sitting in my—our—kitchen in Krakow. The sun is shining—summer is almost here—and I can hear birdsong and children playing outside. I've just returned from Munich, where I watched my beloved football team crowned Champions of Europe for the first time in their 107-year history. It felt miraculous to be a part of it, snatching victory from the jaws of defeat. The extraordinary feeling of joy was something I hope I never forget, but the overwhelming feeling was one of gratitude. Gratitude for the life I thought was over, and for the endless possibility it now offers me.

I wonder what's next…