



**IF YOU WERE TO ASK ME WHY I BEGAN USING DRUGS AND ALCOHOL, MY FIRST RESPONSE WOULD BE "THEY FELT GOOD."**

When I was high, nothing else really mattered; my obsessive thoughts were turned down a notch, and my self-loathing was on the back burner. At a very early age I knew I didn't fit in. My family moved a lot. Every year I was the new kid on the playground. I looked different. I talked different. When I discovered alcohol and cannabis at around age eleven, I was able to alter my reality. A reality I wasn't a big fan of in the first place—like my dysfunctional family, learning useless crap in school that held no bearing on my life, or navigating the complexities of existing when my parents were so self-absorbed they didn't have the time or inclination to share a little knowledge of how to deal with it all.

It's a "solution" a lot of us opted for. I could do drugs and all that noise in my head subsided. I got to breathe a little easier. Until the drugs stopped working. They just didn't take away the pain and insecurity like they used to. Then all the shit I was avoiding and not dealing with magically reappeared. Turns out I'd just kicked the can down the road and I was knee deep in my own internalized garbage.

I know I'm not alone in all this. There's a shit ton of people out there getting loaded. Last year, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health announced that 48.4 million Americans aged twelve or older had a "substance use disorder" with drugs and/or alcohol, which is about seventeen percent of the population. Of course, these figures are from a government agency, and we all know how notorious they are for lying, meaning it's probably a lot more. (Like who the hell is telling the government, "Hey, I use drugs"?) But the point is, even with their skewed figures, that's still a lot of people. The majority surveyed were labeled as "young adults," aged eighteen to twenty-five, who also have the "highest rate of use," meaning they're getting high a lot more often than others. Last year sixty-four million Americans admitted to smoking marijuana, and nearly 87,000 died from drug overdoses (primarily opiates).

Now, not everyone who says they use has a "problem" with drugs and alcohol. There are a bunch of people out there that can have a couple of drinks, smoke weed on occasion, or do a little molly on the weekends. I wasn't one of "those people." From the very beginning I couldn't stop and had cravings to use more. Didn't matter the substance. I was snorting a line while thinking about how to get another one. I drank everything in sight until I blacked out. I used drugs I didn't even like, just to get high and feel something other than what I was feeling.

I'm an addict. I'm prone to addictive behaviors. I can act out addictively with food, sex, exercise, caffeine—anything really—although most of those never really got me into trouble the way drugs and alcohol did. I gave up everything for drugs: my health, relationships, family, money, and, ultimately, my freedom. It wasn't a fast progression, but it was one I was fully aware of. If shooting dope felt good, why not do it every day? Years later, I realized the devastating loss of it all.

Now I'm not one of those people who thinks everyone is an addict or an alcoholic. As I already said, some folks just don't have an issue with drugs or alcohol. They can take it or leave it. Some don't even like how being high feels. But if you're thinking you may have a problem with drugs and/or alcohol, then you probably do. Luckily there's a ton of help out there. You've just got to ask. You also have to make some serious changes in your life.

Which brings us to an interesting dilemma. Being punk isn't exactly "going along with the system." So, how do you "conform" into a program of abstinence, when your whole punk ethos is screaming to rebel? Well, hopefully I can help with this, as I was faced with the same predicament years ago.

When I was coming up in the '80s, being punk meant trashing the norms, rebelling against the status quo, and questioning authority. It was the Reagan era, similar in political discord as this Trump mess we're in, but a little more sinister, as none of them were saying the quiet parts out loud like today's fascists do. It was all behind the scenes and authoritarianism was the word of the day. Punk's anarchistic nihilism was the perfect foil to conjure up unrest, act out, and fuck some shit up.

In the punk scene I was in, getting loaded was the method of choice for living outside of society, thumbing our collective noses at the rules, and just saying no to authority. The nightly objective was to get as blitzed as possible and start some trouble. There was never a shortage of antagonists: the police, racist skinheads, equally drunk jocks, and street thugs. Our nihilistic view of the world made it easy to fall into the "us against them" mentality, and we played it for all it was worth.

Most of us—without jobs, on the dole, or scamming some government handout—were cohabitating in the shittier parts of the city, whose inhabitants were initially not so welcoming. The fact that our appearance made us stand out—we were loud, obnoxious, and utterly fearless with all that liquid/chemical courage—didn't help us to "fit in." The truth is we readily identified with the outsider status, fought our way to be recognized, and, over the years, became somewhat begrudgingly accepted.

But with this "acceptance," we were also allowed in to everything our shit-hole neighborhoods had to offer: drugs, crime, and a heavy police presence. Almost overnight my circle of punks discovered hard core drugs: heroin, meth, crack, and the wonderful world of pharmaceuticals. This kicked the nihilist level up a notch. Punks were dying. Overdoses were commonplace. Like all good drug addicts, we needed money to pay for more drugs. We started committing crimes. Selling drugs. Prostituting. Robbing. Shoplifting. Eventually, some of us ended up doing time.

I went from working in the clubs and touring with bands to running the streets. I joke that at the time, the only thing punk about me was I still wore a leather jacket. But really, I had just followed the natural progression of a junkie.

I had a huge heroin habit, needed money to pay for it, and had burned every bridge, connection, relationship, and situation I engaged in. I hadn't been to a show in years. I ran the streets with drug dealers, stick-up kids, and the criminally insane. At some point in all this, I graduated to armed robbery. Went from hold-ups to bank robberies. Told myself it was punk as fuck to walk into a financial institution and scream, "This is a hold-up!"

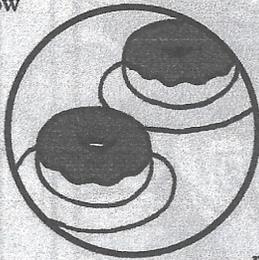
Of course, waving a gun around also got the attention of the cops. I got busted. I did time. I got out—and didn't know what the fuck to do. I was still that spiky-haired, leather-jacket-wearing punk, but I wasn't a kid anymore. I didn't know if I fit in with the scene. I didn't know if I fit in anywhere. All I knew is I didn't want to go back to prison. Shooting dope had led me there. All I really knew how to do was get loaded. I hadn't had a straight job in a million years. Every choice I had felt like conforming to normality and that felt like giving up.

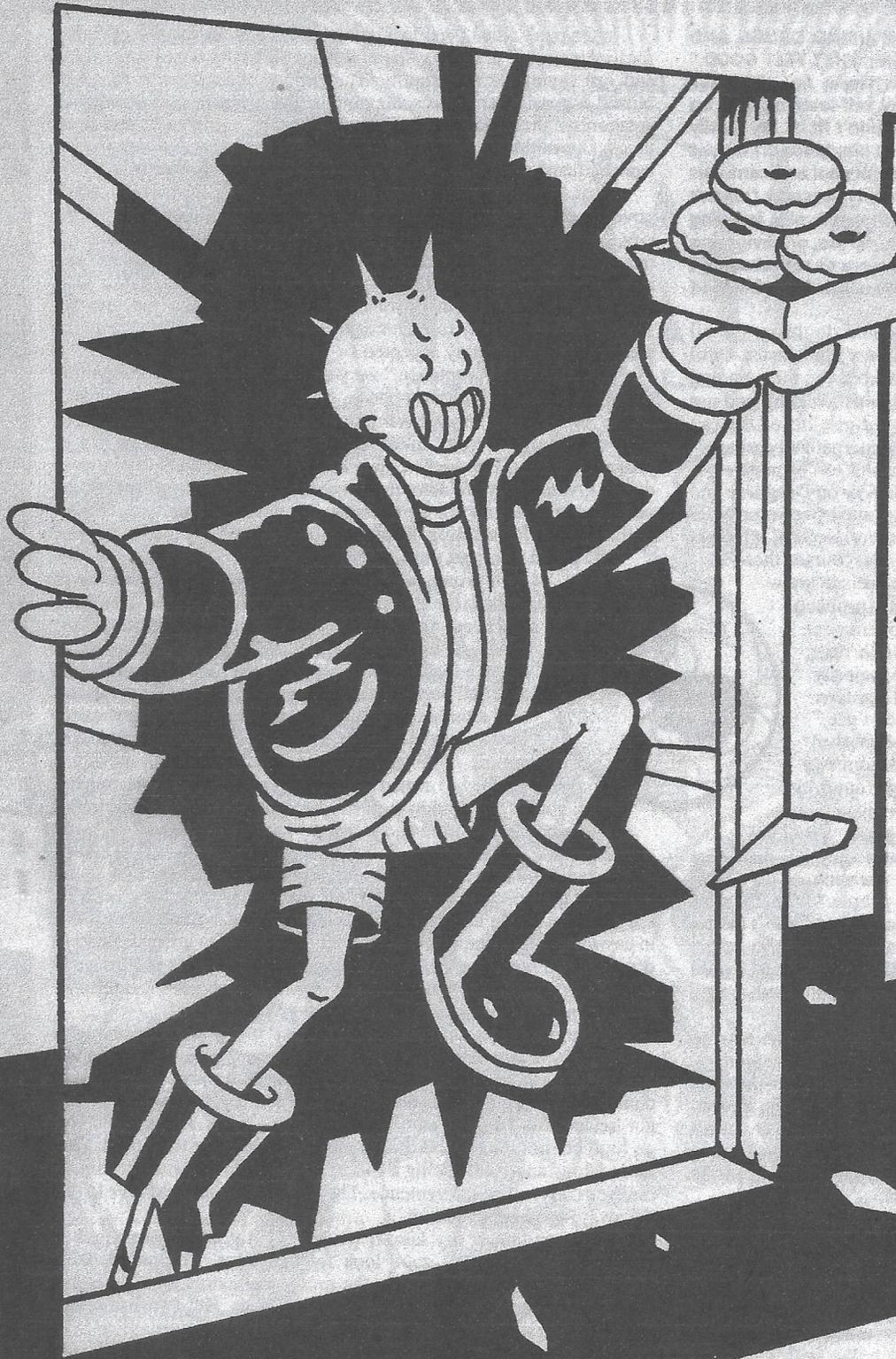
While I had been away, some friends had "gotten sober," although I didn't really understand what the fuck that meant. When I was coming up, we thought there was nothing un-cooler than those straight edge punks tweaking out on sugar and caffeine and judging everyone who got loaded. But I had to admit, my life was a mess. I was an ex-con on high control parole and the future wasn't looking too bright. One more felony and I'd be doing a twenty-five-to-life "habitual criminal" three-strikes-you're-out sentence. The local D.A. said he'd love to put me away, and I believed him.

In county jail, at my lawyer's urging, I'd gotten reclassified to the "program pod" as a good look for the judge. I'd gone to their A.A. meetings, got yelled at by the group facilitators, and generally stayed clean and off drugs in a jail full of drugs. But I wasn't really committed to staying sober once they let me out.

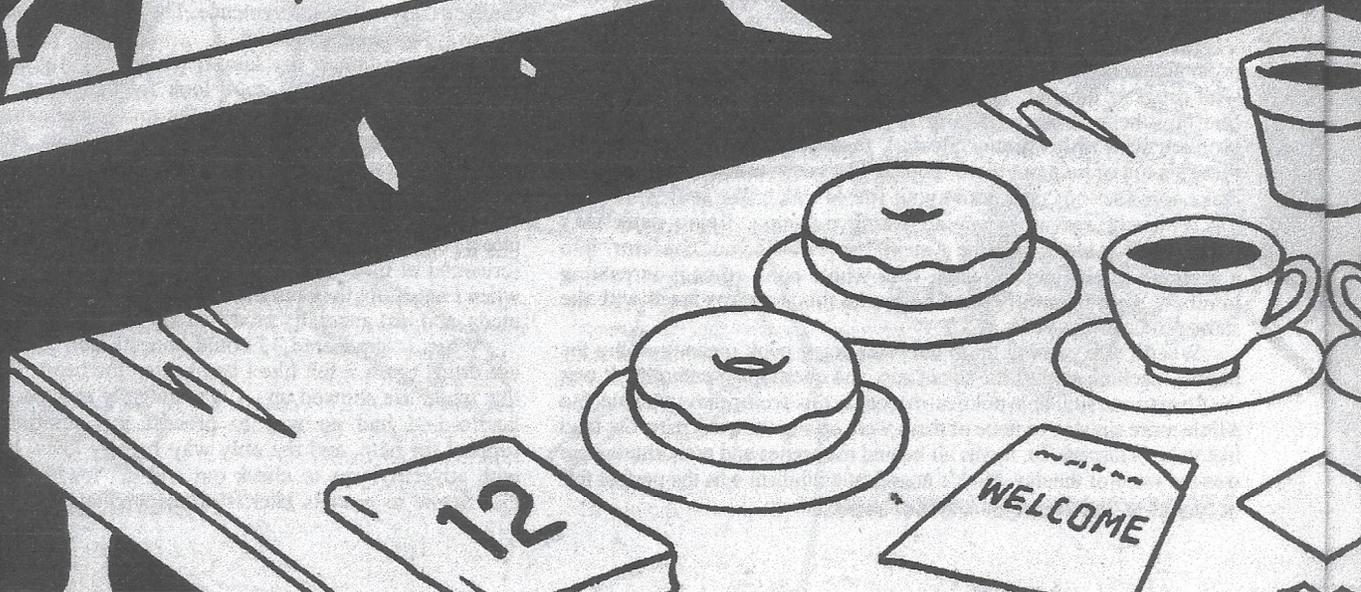
On my release, the state's two-hundred dollar "gate money" was burning a hole in my pocket and I knew I was in trouble. I checked into a "behavior modification" program for addiction. The counselors screamed at me, "You're a loser." (something I already knew) and when I acted up, they put me in anger management, prescribed psych meds, and just generally modified my behaviors.

When I "graduated," I could honestly tell you I wasn't going to use drugs again. I felt like I had beaten the beast. Only problem was that when life showed up—I was illegally evicted due to a scumbag landlord—I had no way to process my emotional reactions, no support for help, and the only way I really knew how to do to deal with adversity was to check out and get loaded. And that's what I did. Segue to months later; I'm absconding parole, strung-out, and





IT REALLY  
JUST COMES DOWN  
TO NOT HAVING A  
CLOSED MIND, BEING  
TEACHABLE,  
AND GIVING A SHIT  
ABOUT SOMEONE  
OTHER THAN  
YOURSELF



thoroughly demoralized. To avoid getting sent back to prison, I checked into a long-term residential rehab run by a global Christian organization. Was this my first choice? Hell no. But at this point I had very few options.

Besides being a Christian program, one of the main requirements was I had to go to 12 Step meetings, meaning Alcoholics Anonymous. I'd been to a few meetings in jail and in the other program, but I never liked A.A. The god thing really turned me off ("Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity"). I was intimidated by how cheerful the people at meetings were ("Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him"). It felt like a cult ("Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out"). I wasn't used to strangers trying to help me without having to return the favor, or owing them ("Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs"). With the circle of people I had run with, trust wasn't a big factor, and I felt awkward.

But a power greater than myself, the Department of Corrections, was waiting for me if I screwed this up and got kicked out of the program (my parole officer had given me a pass: "Stay in treatment and I won't violate you back to prison"). So I went to meetings, got a sponsor (another A.A.'er with more time in sobriety who'll help you work the 12 Steps), and sat in the back thinking about what a bunch of lames all these A.A.'ers were.

Outside of A.A., I'd made a deal with myself. In a year, if my life wasn't better, and I was off parole, I was getting loaded again. In the meantime, I'll do this A.A. shit and get through it all unscathed.

My sponsor was a nice guy. He admittedly had "drunk too much beer and smoked too much weed," which I of course thought was ridiculous. Like, get a real problem, dude. But he was kind and patient. We argued about god (a lot). He told me to read the "We Agnostics" chapter in A.A.'s Big Book, the original text that the program was built on. It's an annoying piece of writing that basically says, "You might not believe in god now, but you will, because we know better than you do."

I told him that and it didn't help. He told me to pray for "willingness." I said I would. But, of course, I never did. After reading him my Fourth Step ("Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves") he suggested I might want to look into N.A. (Narcotics Anonymous), as they were less "about god."

My first N.A. meeting felt like the visiting room at San Quentin: thugs, ex-cons, tweakers, bikers, and crackheads. I felt at home. And while there's still "god stuff"—referred to as a "higher power"—there is only one requirement for membership: "the desire to stop using drugs." I eventually fell in with a group of like-minded atheists: we don't do god, we stay clean off drugs, we work a program, sponsor others, and, "carry this message to addicts, and to practice these principles in all our affairs."

The key part here is the "practice these principles" part. Because, whether you're in a 12 Step program, staying clean on your own, utilizing another support group, or stuck in the habitual cycle of relapse from periods of abstinence, the glaringly obvious ideal that's tantamount for staying clean is you can't be the conniving scumbag you were as a drug addict. You have to clean up your act. Quit being a self-centered addict. You can't pull an armed robbery, or steal from unsuspecting folks, and then go about your business as if you're not a fucking leech on your community. A community that includes the punk scene you claim to be a part of.

If there's one thing that being in recovery has taught me, it's to be of service to others. "Help a brother out, why don't you?" What's punk-as-fuck is to help create a viable alternative to the society that we so readily do not want to be a part of. It's one thing to advocate smashing the state, but we have to offer a solution, rather than tearing it all down with no plan for what comes next. My problem with anarchy is it's big on fucking shit up, but then vague as to proposing what "self-governing" truly means. Now am I advocating we don't tear this motherfucker down? Hell no. What I am advocating is we work on becoming better people so we can run something not based on ego, power, and greed.

I also want to point out that 12 Step groups are not the only way to get sober. Back when I was coming up, there weren't a lot of alternatives. Nowadays, there are groups like Refuge Recovery (a Buddhist/meditation-based program), SMART Recovery (self-described as "an evidenced-informed recovery method grounded in Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy"), and a few other organizations I'm not aware of (or prefer not to endorse).

Whereas a byproduct of addiction is isolation, the opposite is community and connection. That's where the importance of a supportive community comes in. Getting clean by yourself is hard, as you only have yourself as counsel. It's the same brain that decided getting loaded was the answer to all your problems. If you stop using but still hang out with all your friends who are still using, it's a recipe for relapse. Find some supportive people who have your back and get some clean time under your belt.

The main reason I recommend support groups is it's "one-stop-shopping." You get everything in one package: community, support, activities, and a clearly defined path of change to follow. However, if support groups are not your thing, you can achieve the same results by putting together your own structure. Start seeing a therapist, join a sangha and meditate, find some social activities that don't revolve around substance use, look into volunteering at a food bank/soup kitchen or some other charitable organization you want to support.

Get involved with social change. What I'm saying here is become active in your recovery. This is what we have to do to make the internal changes in ourselves—when you're busy helping others, you're not thinking about yourself.

I also want to go on record that I'm not dogging A.A. Over the years I've met equally minded people in A.A. who challenge my initial perception and judgments. In my early recovery, A.A. wasn't working for me (mostly because I was in fear and judgmental of everything). Now that I've realized I don't have to pray to a god I don't believe in, I don't feel as threatened.

I hit an A.A. meeting every week as part of my meeting schedule. When I was once highly critical, I don't really care anymore. If you're doing recovery, then you're on the same page as I am. You don't have to have used the same drugs as I did. It doesn't matter how you got here. The point is we're all here and we're doing something about it.

The recovery community is such a huge swath of the population that you have to find your niche—get in where you fit in. People often describe this as finding your tribe. You may want god in your life (don't be swayed by my rejection of god. Think for yourself). You may not have a problem with authority and don't mind a little direction in being told what to do. It really just comes down to not having a closed mind, being teachable, and giving a shit about someone other than yourself.

Your program is your program. My program is my program. As long as I stay in my lane, be supportive, and not be judgmental, I'll be in a better place.

If you're thinking you might have a problem with drugs and alcohol and want to get sober, try to let go of your preconceived ideas around sobriety, be open to suggestions from people who are in recovery, and do what's hard—push past your fears and ask for help. This January I had twenty-five years clean off all drugs and alcohol. Much to my initial dismay, after that first year, my life was better, and even though there have been some difficult times in my sobriety, drugs and alcohol have never again seemed like a viable solution.

patrick-oneil.com

Patrick O'Neil is a former junkie bank robber, author of the memoirs *Anarchy at the Circle K and Gun, Needle, Spoon*, and the co-author of *The Sentences That Create Us: Crafting A Writer's Life in Prison from PEN America's Prison and Justice Writing Program*. In the early '80s he was the roadie and/or road manager for *Dead Kennedys, Flipper, T.S.O.L., and Subhumans*. O'Neil has taught writing workshops in numerous correctional facilities, universities, and institutions, and continues to work for prison reform.

