

CATHARSIS

Hi. My name is Pat and I am an alcoholic. Okay, I figure about a third of you just horked coffee out of your nose at that little revelation. Another third of you who've spent time with me immediately thought, "Duh...I knew that." The final third of you are sitting there wondering, "Who is this guy and shouldn't he be writing something witty about Johnny Miller being a grain-head instead of this junk?" No matter which category you fall into, I ask you to bear with me as I indulge in a little catharsis.

First, allow me to state for the record that I was a damn fine professional drinker for nearly three decades. I was mostly a beer guy but I never turned away a Grey Goose on the rocks, a tumbler full of single-malt scotch or a pricey bottle of merlot if someone else was treating. Hell, I may be the only human on earth who actually grew to like the taste of Jaegermeister. Indeed, I was not picky as long as it created the desired buzz and did not cause blindness.

It's worth noting that I came to adulthood in the tail end of the three-martini lunch era. Work and drinking were inexorably intertwined. My first day at GCSAA back in the mid-'80s featured a welcome lunch with cocktails, beer and wine. And it was always 5 o'clock somewhere in that workplace and pretty much all the others I habituated over the years.

I'm not sure anyone's ever done a scientific study but I think I can say with some certainty that alcohol flows a bit more freely in our happy little industry than in others. Any time you mix turf, testosterone, stress, schmoozing and selling, booze is sure to be found. And I found it in glorious quantities at every trade show, conference and sales meeting I attended. Heck, it was part of my job, right? Just whip out the company credit card and keep that tab open until everyone's feeling no pain.

Surprisingly, I rarely got falling-down, Otis-from-Mayberry drunk. Like many alcoholics, I had both a unquenchable thirst and an equally tremendous capacity to consume. The same two cocktails that would put the average guy on the edge of goofy were just a pregame warm up for

me. I could usually go all night, appear to be relatively sober and most people would never have guessed I'd had 13 Heinekens or nine Ketel Ones or whatever. I maintained, as they say.

I knew for years – deep down in my soul – that I drank too much and I was dependent on it. But, thanks to an amazing, almost superhuman ability to rationalize, I decided I was a "high-functioning drinker." In short, I convinced myself I could do anything while drunk and generally do it well. For example, if I had to guess, I'd say 30 percent of what you've read from me over the years was probably written when I was half in the bag. Seriously, I sometimes go back and reread columns and have absolutely no recollection of writing them. God only knows how many important conversations and events are missing from my brain because the Bud Light molecules were having a party in my memory synapses.

Booze hastened my planned departure from my previous publisher/editor gig. It also helped to destroy my marriage to a good and patient woman who I'd known and loved since junior high. Mostly, I think it kept me from achieving the personal and professional potential I had that day in 1978 when I

was handed my first beer (a warm Coors tall-boy, as I recall). If I'd croaked along the way, "Didn't live up to expectations" would have been a fitting epitaph for Poor Drunken Pat.

Things really started to deteriorate for me about six years ago. I left/got kicked out of my old job and started a consulting firm. It actually went fairly well at first and I found I could get a lot accomplished in a relatively short time working solo in my home office. The downside was that 5 o'clock came early nearly every day. Some days, it started shortly after breakfast.

I isolated myself – another common tendency for alcoholics – and increasingly drank alone. A cheap-ass bottle of vodka became my best friend and confidant. I went to amazingly creative lengths to hide my drinking and I lied constantly about it to my ex-wife, my kids, my friends, my colleagues and myself. I was

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GOLF COURSE INDUSTRY

Serving the Business of Golf Course Management

Vol. 22 No. 8

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depressed, my marriage was over, I was broke and I really didn't see a way to fix any of it. Intellectually, I knew virtually all of it was because I was a drunk, but I simply couldn't imagine living life without a buzz.

The worst and best day of my life happened when the owner of this magazine asked to meet with me last fall. I'd been a columnist for GCI for five years and, although I was essentially a freelancer, he had always treated me like a valued member of the staff. Part of me knew that my increasingly erratic behavior and the nearly constant smell of booze on my breath was more than enough for him to end the relationship and send me off into the cold dark night of bankruptcy and serious personal misery. I was shaking as I walked into the meeting and it wasn't just from the booze.

But, instead of simply firing me that day like almost anyone in his position would have done, he surprised me and said: "Let's get you some help." I left the meeting, got in my car and cried like a baby in relief and gratitude.

The company got me into an outpatient counseling program offered through the famed Cleveland Clinic. Admittedly, I went into it thinking that it would help me manage my drinking better but I could still have a pop or two to relax occasionally.

That wishful but idiotic notion lasted exactly two hours into my first group counseling session. I instantly realized that I was the poster boy for alcoholism: genetic predisposition (my father and other relatives); an unmanageable life; daily consumption (sometimes straight out of the bottle, thank you very much); secret, daytime drinking; depression; and self-hatred by the bucketload. I made a lame attempt to defend myself by giving one of the counselors my "I'm a high-functioning drunk" speech. Her response was, "Oh yeah? How's that working out for you?"

So, that very day, I quit swilling hooch and drank the abstinence Kool-Aid instead. I absolutely fell in love with the idea of being sober. And, miraculously, it was relatively easy for me

to not drink. Something simply clicked within me and I didn't have the cravings or DTs that plague many quitters. I've since met tons of other alcoholics and addicts who struggle every moment of every day to stay away from booze, pills and needles. I thank God, Buddha, Allah and my lucky stars that I haven't felt their pain.

That month of counseling was the most amazing experience of my life. Not only because of what it taught me about myself and my addiction, but because of what I saw in others – people from every walk of life – who were going through the same thing.

Sitting in that group was like being on the world's most interesting reality TV show that aired for three hours a day, four days a week. There was drama, intensity, weirdness and humor. I was in a room with cops, hippies, executives, nurses and ex-cons, each of whom had

open mind and really liked what I found. There are lots of people just like me who have hit bottom, stumbled into AA and built new and rewarding lives. Yes, there is an emphasis on faith – believing in a higher power – but it's up to you to define it. Me? I believe in karma. Do good things and good things will happen in return.

And they have. My life has changed dramatically for the better in the nine months or so since my lips last touched liquor. I'm calm. I'm happy. I'm productive as hell. I don't have to lie to others or myself... which is an enormous relief. I have a warm, honest relationship with my sons. The remarkable man who saved my life by getting me into treatment rolled the dice again and offered me a chance to run this magazine. And, to top it off, I met and fell madly in love with a fabulous woman – a soulmate with whom I intend to spend the rest

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a unique and often astounding story of self-destruction. There was a mortgage broker who had been crushing and snorting a dozen Oxycontin pills a day. There was a kid only a little older than my son who'd been a heroin addict since the age of 15. And there was a galaxy of fellow drunks ranging from suburban soccer-mom winos to craggy-faced steelworkers to tweedy retired teachers. The group was as diverse as America because addiction doesn't give a damn about socio-economics, gender, race or religion. Addiction simply wants to own your ass no matter who you are. It is an equal opportunity destroyer.

As part of the program, I started going to AA meetings. I had always thought cynically that AA was a bit cultish and primarily designed to hand out donuts, bad coffee and religion to toothless hobos. But, I tried to go into it with an

of my days. It sounds crazy, but there is magic in my life.

In short, sobriety does not suck.

So why, gentle reader, have I filled several perfectly good pages of a trade magazine for golf course superintendents with this self-indulgent tale of the boozy rise, fall and rise of Pat Jones? Because, according to the doctors who study such things, the odds are that – of the thousands of my friends who read this – about 8 percent of you probably suffer from the same malady. And, I suspect, that number might be a tad higher in the crazy, mixed-up business of golf course management.

If you recognize yourself in my words, I hope you're as lucky as I am and you find some help.

Life's too short and too beautiful to be viewed through the bottom of a bottle. **GCI**