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00:29 Benn B: Hello, everyone and welcome to AA Beyond Belief-The Podcast. This is Benn B, your host for today, as I'm gonna be interviewing John as we get to hear a little bit more about the head honcho of this podcast.

[chuckle]

[music]

00:45 Benn B: How are you doin', John?

00:47 John S: I'm doing really good, thank you. And you're a real pro at this.

00:50 Benn B: Well, you know I like to put people on the spot, but I think we had some requests from some people who were like, "Oh, we never heard a lot of John's stories, so that would be good to hear." So here we are.

01:01 John S: That'll be fun.

01:02 Benn B: Anything new going on lately, John?

01:03 John S: No, other than what we were talkin' about last week a little bit. I've had a situation at work that's going on that's actually turning out pretty well for me. And I've been spending a lot of time at work, though. I'm gonna have to eventually find some kind of a balance between work and AA and life. That's kinda typical right now, it's I guess these companies, they have you work pretty much all the time. We've got the technology to check our emails at home, and do our work from home, and all this stuff. But it's goin' okay.

01:32 Benn B: Well, good. I know we talked a little bit before the podcast about how we wanted to do it, and maybe you can just start off by telling us a little bit about growing up and where you were born and that kind of stuff, if you feel comfortable doing that?

01:45 John S: Sure, okay. I grew up in a military family. My father was career army. And both of my parents came from a small town in Florida, New Smyrna Beach. And I was born in Fort Benning, Georgia. So growing up, we moved around a lot. So I lived in a lot of different places. But by the time I got to high school, we settled here in the Midwest, but I think I had a pretty... Kind of a mixed bag childhood. I remember... Some of my earliest memories are of my parents fighting, and I mean yelling and screaming. And there was always a lot of that growing up. That there was a lot of yelling and screaming, but nothing's all black and white. There was also a lot of laughter and love, and my parents were very affectionate towards each other. And there were times when we would gather as a family, and I'd feel very comfortable. But then there were other times when my father would come home, and just anything would set him off, and he would just be downright violent. So there was a lot of... Growing up, I know now that I had this really deep sense of insecurity and fear because of this unpredictability in my household. I never knew what I was gonna get: Happy father or mean father.

03:06 John S: My mother was mentally ill. She suffered from depression. So we're talking about, when I was growing up, would be the '60s and '70s. And during that time, they didn't really have the

Prozac, and the good types of I guess effective medications like they do now. So she was taking things that would make her very drowsy. And so she would spend a lot of time in her room. She'd spend a lot of time sleeping, and sometimes she would have these little bursts of anger. And every once in a while, by the time I got to high school, they would just take her away. And I think that they would have her in the mental ward, or something. But our family never really talked about it, so all that was going on in the background.

03:52 John S: I guess I know now, Benn, that this is what set me up for alcoholism. I joke sometimes that if my parents wanted to create an alcoholic, they did a really good job. [laughter] But they didn't mean to do it. But there was booze all over our house. I don't know if this is standard practice for people who are in the army, but my father used to have a lot of parties, where the army buds would come over and there'd be a lot of drinking. And so as a little kid, and I'm talking seven, eight years old, after these parties, I would go downstairs and I would drink the leftover bourbon, or whiskey, or wine or whatever was left over after the parties. And I was always attracted to alcohol. I loved it. It didn't register with me at the time what was going on. But I know now, looking back, that I was using it as a drug. I was using it to change the way I felt, and there was something about the alcohol that made me feel better. It did something for me. I just remember that as a little kid.

04:56 John S: And I remember my very first drink, that my mother allowed me to have. And again, I'm probably not even nine years old. Maybe I'm nine, I don't know, 10. And it was wine at Thanksgiving dinner, and she wanted to teach me to drink like a gentleman, and I couldn't. [laughter] I just loved the stuff. So that's kinda my background with how I got attracted to alcohol. But...

05:22 Benn B: Did you have any siblings, John?

05:23 John S: I did. I have two... I have actually three. I have an older brother and an older sister from my mother's previous marriage, and then my younger brother, who is from my mother's second marriage. We share the same father. My younger brother is... I've talked about him before, he's severely mentally ill. He has... Oh, it's Schizoaffective disorder, so he gets psychotic if he's not on medication. And right now he's not, so he's not communicating with us. And then I have an older brother who is very religious. And I get along with my family, but he's someone that... He's so religious, Benn, that I still haven't told him I'm an atheist. [laughter] It just is too much for him to handle. It's crazy, but he's convinced I'm gonna go to hell. And then I have a sister who lives actually here in Kansas, who seems to be the most normal of the bunch. The most more like me, put it that way.

06:32 Benn B: So your parents did divorce eventually, it sounded like.

06:34 John S: No, they didn't. They stayed together. My parents stayed together. My mother divorced. She got married right out of high school, so back in the 1950s. And so she divorced and married my father. They stayed married up until the time that my mother died.

06:50 Benn B: You said your mom was aware she had mental illness, right? It wasn't like she denied it.

06:55 John S: Right. She was aware. And during the 1970s, she was getting help. And I know she was. I remember as a kid, for whatever reason, being embarrassed that my mother was seeing a psychiatrist. Ain't that weird? And so our house was...

07:10 Benn B: I think that's pretty common, I would bet though...

07:13 John S: Yeah, we never talked about it.

07:14 Benn B: That people would feel that way.

07:15 John S: Yeah! It is something my family never talked about, and I didn't want anyone to know. It was weird. Looking back on it, it probably would have been good for that doctor to bring the family in for a session or something, to help us though. But this is a different era.

07:31 Benn B: For sure, for sure. I think about people who are in recovery who have been sober for a while, it's like people don't want people to know they're alcoholics because of the stigma. But it's like, you'd rather have somebody who's in recovery and taking care of their alcoholism working for you, than somebody who's still in denial and still drinking all the time, right?

07:48 John S: Absolutely. I think that the stigma is getting less and less with younger people at least, when it comes to addiction. I think that has to do with all the media and everything. There's more awareness of what addiction is and less shame attached to it, I think anyway. I get that sense.

08:10 Benn B: Yeah, I do too. I do too. So what was school like growing up? And I can imagine moving around a little bit, was it kinda tough? You'd make friends and then have to move, that whole type of thing?

08:19 John S: Yeah. Army brats are kinda unique. There's actually a book that I read sometime ago called "Brats," and it's all about army brats and how they... And the issues they come up with. And if you've ever seen the movie *The Great Santini*, that's a really good description of what it's like growing up in a military family. You can't paint them all with a broad brush, but... Yeah moving around, it was something I actually enjoyed. It was like a fresh start. I could create a new persona at whatever place I was gonna be moving to. And it's funny how different places, that people would treat you differently based upon how they perceive you, what kinda person they think you are, or where you're coming from, or whatever. But I really enjoyed it. In my family, there was always a sense of fun and adventure about it. Wherever we were gonna go, it was just, "Oh boy, this can be exciting to learn about this new place." And it was just always fun. And we camped. So wherever we were, we went out camping and we explored the country.

09:21 John S: I was born in Georgia. I lived in Florida when my father was in Vietnam. So this would have been like in 1968. This is a long time ago. Then I lived in Virginia, and then we moved to the Netherlands. And we were there for about four-and-a-half years, really. It was one of my father's longer assignments. What a great place to be a kid! I just loved it there. Then we moved over to... After that, we went to upstate New York, where I lived for two years. And at that time, I was like 12 and 13, 11 and 12, I think. 11 and 12. And I loved it there in New York. It was great. We lived in a suburb of Albany, and upstate New York is absolutely beautiful. We used to go camping in Lake George, and I had a lot of friends in the neighborhood. I could get on my bike, and we could just go anywhere we wanted to. I just loved it. We were there for two years. And then my father got an assignment to Leavenworth, Kansas to teach at the Command and General Staff College. And I have to tell you, of all the moves that we made, that last move we made from New York to Kansas was the most difficult. [chuckle]

10:29 Benn B: Yeah. It's quite a change.

10:30 John S: It was! It was harder than going to Europe or anything. But it was like... That was where I had the most difficult time. But of course I'm getting older, and... What happened, my parents decided they wanna live out in the country. So we lived out in the country, where there was nothing but cows, and there were no kids. And I would go to school. And at that time, the town that I lived in, it was really really a small town. I don't even know if there were 3,000 people there. And it was a lot different back then. It's grown a lot now. And there's a lot of modern amenities, and it's more of a bedroom community of Kansas City.

11:05 John S: But back then, it was just... The people I went to school with, it was a very small school. In my high school, there were like 400 people. And most of the time, like when I very first got there, most of the kids were either farm kids or their parents worked at the prison or Walmart. There weren't other military families, very many of them anyway. But that's all changed. Now it's really... That town, it was Lansing, now it's a bigger town, and there's a lot more military people that go there, and the school's a lot bigger. So I came from New York as a kid, and I was trying to fit in with these farm kids and stuff, and it just didn't work out too well. [chuckle]

11:46 Benn B: Yeah. And I suppose with the whole brat thing too and moving around, it tends to make people, I think, like hard to make attachments, like long-term attachments, to open up to people.

11:55 John S: Yeah. I still have that with me. I can move on. I can leave, and just go start afresh somewhere else. I don't really have any problem with that. That's very true, Benn. It's very interesting, but it's true.

12:07 Benn B: You know where I learned that, you were talking about that book, and I saw a documentary, I think it's called BRATS: Our Journey Home, or something like that. It was all about army brats, and all these people getting together and talking about the different psychological characteristics they had, and how similar it was. So kinda like getting together with a bunch of alcoholics too.

12:24 John S: Yeah.

12:24 Benn B: It was very... All the people that were involved in that documentary seemed really moved by the fact they were connecting with each other, and had learned something about themselves, and why they kind of were the way they were.

12:35 John S: Yeah. I remember from reading the book, one question that always throws those of us off that grew up in military families is, "Where are you from?" [chuckle] Because what do you say? Am I from where my parents grew up, and where there's history in my family? I didn't grow up there. But I've lived here for so long. And now Kansas City, I consider Kansas City home. Especially this is where I got sober, and I've got a lot of attachment to this community. If people ask me where I'm from, I'm from Kansas City.

13:11 Benn B: Walk us through the drinking history a little bit in there.

13:14 John S: Okay. Like I said, very early, I started sneaking drinks. I think the first time I got drunk, I was 12 years old maybe. It was when I was living in New York, and I just started drinking

some liquor that my parents had around the house, and I just couldn't stop. I just started, and I couldn't stop. That's the way I drink. And I got drunk, and my parents saw me, and they thought it was kinda funny. The next day, I was sick as a dog. I was hungover, and I couldn't go to school. I consider myself, this was the beginning of my alcoholism. I swore I would never drink again. I felt horrible, I felt disgusted with myself for what I did. I drank out of control, and I got drunk, and I didn't wanna do that again.

14:00 Benn B: But it sounds like there weren't really any consequences from your parents...

14:02 John S: No.

14:02 Benn B: They were just like "Oh funny."

14:04 John S: They thought it was funny. In fact, maybe the '70s was a permissive era, but my parents were totally okay with me drinking when I was in high school. Totally okay with it. As long as I wasn't doing drugs, we could drink. And even in the community, I'm talking now in high school, after that first drunk, I didn't drink again until I got into high school. But at that time, it was totally okay. My parents were fine with it. I could sit around the house and drink a beer, if I wanted to. We could take beer with us. It really wasn't hard to get alcohol. We could go to any number of stores that would sell to underage kids. And we would drive around town in whatever, someone's parent's car, drinking beer or whatever. And if the cops ever pulled us over or anything, we just had to pour it out and drive back home. That's just the way that it was.

14:56 John S: But yeah, during my years in high school when I was drinking, my drinking was a little bit different. The thing about it is, that I recognized was different, is that I was the kid that everyone else complained about because of my drunkenness. It was like even in college, when people were having fun at the party, I had to get locked up in my room because of my out-of-control drinking. Totally out-of-control drinking. [chuckle]

15:27 Benn B: Like everybody knew "Look out for John tonight, if he has too much."

15:30 John S: Yeah! Yeah. And maybe they would laugh about it, and maybe I would even laugh about it. But deep down, I didn't think it was very funny. By the time I was 19, I was really thinking I had a problem, and I was looking at the Lawrence Journal-World, thinking about going to AA. They had an advertisement for Alcoholics Anonymous in the Lawrence newspaper, and I thought about it, and I thought "No, I'm just too young." What was going on then is my drinking was out of control. Where the other kids could do your binge drinking party, whatever, I just didn't stop. So my grades suffered, and I was put on probation, and then eventually I didn't meet the probation, and I had to leave college. And it was just a really, really depressing time for me.

16:27 Benn B: Was this at KU?

16:28 John S: Yes, it was at KU. Yeah. So I left KU and I went to live with my parents, and this is where my drinking started ramping up. At this time, it's kinda interesting too, I think I told you before, I did not grow up in religious family at all. But during this time, after KU, my drinking was bad, my life was all screwed up. I didn't let my parents know what was going on, they just thought I was taking a break. And I was looking for answers, so I started looking at religion, and I didn't know anything about religion, so I read the bible. I read the Old testament, and the New Testament. [chuckle] I had a lot of time on my hands. I read it all. And I was watching these... At that time, this

was the 1980s, and these televangelists were really popular. Pat Robertson, The 700 Club, and all those kinda crap. And I'd listen to these people on television. Pat Robertson, in particular, he would say things like, "If you really believe, and if you pray like you believe, God will answer your prayers. You just have to... It's a matter of belief."

17:29 John S: So this kinda set me up. I was learning about religion and trying to find an answer for myself, drinking the entire time though. And this is when my mother died. This is when she committed suicide. I was living at home, and I knew there was something wrong with her. I would pass by her room and talk to her, and she was very drowsy. But this wasn't entirely unusual. I grew up with a mother who was very drowsy and drugged up. But I turned around and I left and I went up to my room, and my father called me down, and he said there's something wrong with my mother. And he was calling an ambulance, and I was to go wait out for the ambulance to bring them in. And I remember when the paramedics started working on her, she died from a drug overdose, and they were trying to pump her or whatever to keep her alive. And I remember as they were working on her, I was praying to God, as if I really believed, for her to live. Of course, she died. And I didn't pray again after that, that was it until I got to AA. That was my first experience with death, really.

18:48 Benn B: How did your dad handle it at that time?

18:51 John S: Not well, our entire family fell apart. My father, he just expected me to go and get my life together. He expected me to go back to school, and I did. I went back to KU at his order. And I was so ashamed. And I remember I was late getting back into school 'cause I came back from my mother's funeral, and straight from my mother's funeral, I was in this class, it was a literature class. And of all the damn things that the professor was talking about how in American literature, a literary technique, about the death of a young woman, and he was going on and on and on about how we were so young and we've never experienced death, and all this kinda crap. And instead of just raising my hand and saying, "Gosh, I just came back from my mother's funeral," I just kept quiet and I just didn't... I just couldn't do it. I couldn't go to school, and so I walked away. I just left. I didn't even unenroll, I just didn't go to classes. And they gave me all F's. [chuckle] I got F's at every single class because I didn't withdraw.

20:04 Benn B: Right. Yeah, that kinda speaks to the state of grief and depression you were into. It's like, "Yeah, I can't even be bothered to withdraw from these classes."

20:11 John S: Yeah, I just left and I got a job. And I drank, and I drank, and I drank, and I drank, and that's all I did. And I couldn't stop. And I drank in a way that didn't make sense because I would tell myself before I would drink, that I wouldn't get drunk, and I did every time. It was just insane. And going back to this though, what set this period off, right after my mother's funeral, I'll never forget this, somebody gave me a shot of whiskey to calm myself, and it was the best shot of whiskey, the best drink I've ever had in my life, Benn. I still can remember the way it felt, it completely soothed me, it made everything okay. And I was drunk for the next five years. [chuckle]

21:04 Benn B: So we're talkin' like, you had a job and just hitting it hard at night by yourself.

21:09 John S: Pretty much, yeah.

21:10 Benn B: Whatever.

21:11 John S: I bounced around from jobs, but I had a job, I was managing a pizza restaurant in Lawrence. And so after work, I'd go out and drink. But one day, I was drunk, I came into work, and I said, "I quit." And I left, and that was it. I just left. And eventually I got another job somewhere in Kansas City, Kansas, unloading trucks; and I just did what I could to survive, and keep my drinking going. But it started... The drinking really starts spilling over into my life, because I started having... I started getting arrested. I was a blackout drinker, and I would drive drunk and blacked out.

21:58 John S: And so I started getting arrested, and I started getting DWIs. I had three of them in a three-year period of time, and this is when I finally hit bottom. I was drunk a lot, Benn. I'm not gonna say I was drunk every day, but I was drunk a lot. And if I wasn't drunk, I was sick from being drunk. Or I was thinking about my next drink. And I didn't make a lot of money, and I was always blowing my paycheck, and I wasn't able to eat sometimes. It was all about getting the next drink. It was either thinking about drinking, or being sick from drinking, and hiding it from everybody.

22:40 Benn B: Right, right. How about socially, did you have friends? Were you more like a...

22:44 John S: No, I was a loner. I started out drinking with people, going out to drink with friends. But during that five-year period of time, no. I would go out to the bar by myself. I would... I finally got a job at a bank, and it was my very favorite job I ever had because now I'm finally working in an office. And I would just leave work, and I would tell myself I'm gonna have a few beers to relax. And I would close the bars down, and it's three o'clock in the morning. And that's just the way I drank. But I went to bars, I didn't drink at home, I went to bars.

23:23 John S: And I think part of the reason was I was telling myself that I'm just doing something normal, that I guess if I was drinking from home, I guess I felt like maybe that wasn't... I don't know. And I would try to control things. Like I would take a \$20 bill and I'd put it in my coat pocket at home before I went to the bar, so I would still have some money to eat on. But then I'd come back, and I'd pull that \$20 out and drink. But yeah, that was my life. And I got DWIs. And finally after my third one, I reached a point where it was either jump off a bridge or call AA. And I called AA, and then that started my journey into sobriety. I haven't had a drink since then.

24:08 Benn B: Yeah. And you mean that literally, you were thinking about, "Well, where can I go jump off a bridge at?"

24:13 John S: Yeah. My first day of sobriety I guess was when they let me out of jail, from the night... Keeping me for my last DWI arrest, they let me out of jail, and I had to walk to find my car. It was a real hot summer day, and I was just walking through the city, and I finally realized I had \$5 in my pocket. So I called a cab, and he took me to where I thought my car was in this area of Kansas City, they used to call the River Quay, it's over by the river. And at the time, it was kinda like a bombed-out area. The mafia had wars there in the 1970s, so it was kind of... They were trying to bring it back, but it was really kind of a... It was not a really nice part of town. But anyway, I was walking through there looking for my car, and I realized that it wasn't there, it was on the Westside. So I had to walk through downtown, and I had to cross a bridge over the highway. And I remember making this walk, and I was watching all these normal people just going to work and stuff, and I'm this disheveled guy. [chuckle]

25:17 Benn B: Just got out of jail.

25:18 John S: Just got out of jail, trying to figure out where my car was, and I was just watching

the rest of the world like I was watching a movie. I didn't even feel like I was connected to it. So I get to this bridge, overlooking the highway, and I stop and I think about jumping. But I'm looking at these cars passing by, and I guess there was a part of me that wanted to live more than die, and so I did. I crossed the bridge, and I got to my car, I went home, and I called Alcoholics Anonymous. And I remember very clearly saying, "I think I need help." And the person on the other end of the phone, they just were very, very respectful and quiet, and they said...

25:57 John S: And they were very good, and they told me where there was a meeting. And it took me two weeks to go to that first meeting, but I didn't drink. What happened, I don't wanna go into a lot of detail, but they finally found out at work about what happened, and I had been given many, many warnings at work, and finally they said enough and they fired me. And that's what finally got me to go to my first meeting. And what was going on though, during that time, I would go to where this meeting was, and I'd go to the door, but I'd walk away because I was afraid to go in. But finally after being fired... And they kinda confronted me about my drinking, about how they were trying to help me. Finally, I was able to open the door and walk into that first meeting.

26:36 Benn B: And what was your family's involvement at this time? Was everybody just distanced from each other, or...

26:42 John S: Yeah. The family, I was close to my siblings, but not so much to my father. And nobody knew, nobody knew. When I finally told my father that I was in AA, his reaction was he broke down in tears, and he started taking bottles of booze and pouring them down the sink.

27:04 Benn B: And you had been in AA for a little while at that point too, right?

27:09 John S: At that point, I was. I had been sober for a while, and I finally had the nerve to tell my family that I was going to AA. Now my sister knew because my sister was pretty supportive, I was living with her. She... I lost everything from drinking, I had no place to live, I had no job or anything; and so she took me in, and she also threw me out. [chuckle] But that was the best thing that she could do because it forced me to get a job. But during that time that I lived with her, I was just going to AA all the time.

27:39 Benn B: Yeah. Yeah it's kinda like that early period, it is good to kind of engross yourself in that. Wow, so walk us through some of your early experiences in AA, and what you remember thinking first going there, and things like that.

27:52 John S: At my very first meeting, it changed my life, and it was... They made me feel very welcome. I'm not a person who joins groups, so going there was really hard. I didn't say anything at my first meeting. And as you know, here in the Midwest, they give first-step meetings for newcomers. So they gave me a first-step meeting, where they go around the room and they tell their stories, and I could relate. And I didn't know if I was an alcoholic. Part of me said I was still too young, I was 25 at this time, and I probably was the youngest person in the room, but I could relate to everything that was being said. And not necessarily the specifics of the stories, but how they felt about their drinking, and what...

28:38 Benn B: Right. Yeah, that's what I always say. That's what I always say, it's about how we feel about our drinking.

28:40 John S: Yep. I could really relate. And they told me to come back, and I did. And I had to, it

was the only place I felt comfortable. I wanted to drink all the time, it was really hard in those early days to not drink, and so I went to... That's why I went to so many meetings. But I remember... Two things I remember, I remember the first step, we admitted we were powerless over alcohol and our lives became unmanageable. And I thought for sure that that was just the perfect description of where I was at, and then that third tradition that the only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. And I had that, and I knew that I was okay there. Because I didn't know if I could put the alcoholic label on me, I was kind of expecting someone would give me a test and determine I wasn't an alcoholic, and tell me I couldn't go there. That's seriously what I thought.

29:33 John S: So it was just a relief. And I went to a lot of meetings, and I got... Early on, I was kinda surprised by the religious nature of AA. Because again, like I say, I wasn't really a religious person; I gave up on the whole idea of religion after my mother died. But I fell in line. I just started doing what they told me to do. And so I prayed, and I did all that stuff. Whether or not I believed it, I don't know. I really took to heart the "Fake it till you make it" thing, and I worked the program the way that they had me work it in my group. And the group was really into the Big Book. We read the Big Book all the time then.

30:10 John S: My sponsor would have me read a chapter everyday for thirty days, and if I missed a day, I had to start all over again. I started my day on my knees, asking God for help, and I'd finish my day on my knees, thanking God for that day of sobriety, calling my sponsor in between. This is all... I did the "drill," they called it. And I've talked in it, and I started talking in AA. In the beginning, I think I was talking about what was going on in my life, all my fears and the problems and so forth. But after a while, after I started learning the books, I started talking from the books, and I started getting all these good vibes from the rest of the group. And I did that for a while. I sponsored people the way that I was sponsored, through the books, studying the books, reading the books. Some... It says on the books, that self-knowledge is not the answer, yet we were spending so much time trying to get knowledge. It's weird when I look back on it.

31:01 John S: But I did that. And that was my life in AA for a long time, for about fifteen years, I guess. I was doing that hard-core stuff. And then in 1999, my father died. And when he died, my life changed a lot because I realized that there was still a lot that I hadn't gotten done, and I still had these regrets of not finishing school. So I went back to school. I went to UMKC, and I eventually got my degree, and I started dating. And dating got to be really easy because of the internet. You'd go on, and that's how I eventually met my wife and started dating. And I started doing things outside of AA. Prior to that, all of my life was inside of AA. Everything I did was AA. But now I started having a life outside of AA, and it was really nice. I got involved in a relationship with a young woman for like a couple of years, and she really opened my mind to a lotta different things. And it was a good period, but I wasn't going to as many meetings. AA was still like the "foundation," and I was still going to meetings, but it wasn't my entire life like it was.

32:17 Benn B: Right. What's the number of meetings at that time? Like from...

32:21 John S: Oh, it's still probably at least three a week. But for the first... What? From '88 to '99, I was like every single day, and sometimes more than a few times a day. I always lived close to my home group, so it was always easy to get to meetings. And I loved it! It was just my whole social life and everything. But now it wasn't so much. But my life really... I really accomplished a lot. I finished school, I bought a house, I ended up getting married. And then this is when I started... I moved into another phase, where I started questioning my beliefs. And I accepted that I was an atheist. And this really wasn't that long ago. We're getting out now to fairly current times. It was

kind of a gradual thing for me though actually, my descent into atheism. I started questioning it more and more and more, but then I read *The God Delusion*, *God's Not Great*, I believe.

33:20 Benn B: Yeah, Hitchens.

33:20 John S: Mm-hmm. And these books, especially *The God Delusion*, really changed me. And I got interested in science, and I was amazed by it. All these years, I wasn't even paying attention to science. And now, all of a sudden, I'm really interested in it. And I started thinking about Alcoholics Anonymous as an atheist. And it scared me at first, Benn, because I'm thinking that I'm not gonna be accepted. I didn't want people to know that I was an atheist. I didn't want people to know that I was reading these books at my home group. But the very first thing I did is I said, "How am I gonna approach Alcoholics Anonymous?" And I started interpreting that secularly. I re-wrote the chapter, *The Agnostics*. [chuckle] I went through the Big Book line by line, and I tried to understand it as an atheist, and I was very comfortable with it. I actually found it wasn't that difficult because when you go through the Big Book, there'll be like a perfectly sensible paragraph that talks about something that we do. 'Cause this really is practical stuff that we do. But then it ends the paragraph by saying, "And it's all wonderful for God," or something like that...

34:33 Benn B: Right.

34:33 John S: And if you just cross out that last part about the attribution to God, and then you can still see the underlying action behind what was going on. Anyway, I started talking about this in meetings. I didn't say I was an atheist, but I started saying things different from what I was saying before. And I started getting some pushback from my group. So I was afraid to come out as an atheist! So I said to hell with it. I learned about these agnostic groups, and so I started our own meeting here in Kansas City. We *Agnostics Kansas City*. And the group's done amazing, and it changed AA for me forever. The program really came to life for me, Benn, when I stopped believing in God, and when I stopped looking at the beliefs, and started looking at the actions behind the steps.

35:21 John S: And then I got involved with the online community in AA, and I met Roger from Hamilton, Ontario. And God, all these people just totally changed my life, doing this podcast now, and the website *AA Beyond Belief*. And God, there's just people from all over the world that I know now, and I fell in love with AA again. I got involved with AA service work here locally in Missouri. And I'm very pro-Missouri. I love Missouri. [chuckle] And a lot of people outside that I'll talk to from the East Coast or whatever, they think that us here in the Midwest, that we're all... But we're not. [chuckle] There's actually a lot of smart people here. Anyway...

36:10 Benn B: Had you started your meeting before going to Santa Monica?

36:13 John S: Yes I did, actually. I started it in... We started it in July of 2014. Is that right? Yeah. And then the Santa Monica conference was in November of 2014.

36:28 Benn B: Yeah. For those who don't know, we're talking about the first conference of all, this *Heathens in AA* out in Santa Monica.

36:35 John S: That's where I met you.

36:36 Benn B: Yeah. Yeah, and I met you, but I don't know if I remembered meeting you. I know

we talked, and then we kinda reconnected later through our friend RJ in Omaha.

36:43 John S: That's right, that's right. And RJ was the big deal, 'cause she's like really close. She was like the first atheist I... The first atheist I knew was a guy I served the group with, but he wasn't a big deal about AA. But RJ was. And RJ, I would go up to Omaha, and I would have coffee with RJ, and we would sit for hours and talk about how the Big Book needs to be re-written. [chuckle]

37:07 Benn B: Yeah, that still does. I love RJ, she's good. I have not talked to her for a while, I need to get a hold of her.

37:15 John S: She got busy. She got married. And then she got involved with her career, and everything like that.

37:19 Benn B: Mmhmm. So John, you talked about when your dad passed, and how that was like a factor that propelled you to wanna get more things done. What do you think that was? Or what were you feeling at that time? 'Cause it sounds like your dad... I want to ask you, was there any alcoholism in your family that you recognize? It sounds like maybe your mom was dependent on her pills possibly, but...

37:41 John S: My mom might have been. She may have been using even alcohol, but probably more so drugs. But my father, he wasn't. He was the type of... He was a party drinker. If there is any alcoholism in my family, it would go back to my grandfather on my father's side, and my great grandfather. And my great grandfather, there were stories about him, because he was kind of a colorful character. He was a bootlegger. He used to run rum from the islands and to Florida. He's a rum runner. But anyway, no real history. But the thing about when my dad died, I never really felt like I had approval from my father. And it was really weird. As long as he was alive, I just... I don't know. After he died, I felt like I had something to prove. I had to... It was really weird, 'cause I was accomplishing so much during that time. And I remember even missing that my father wasn't there to acknowledge it, to say "I'm proud of you." But I was almost doing it in a reaction to his death.

38:45 Benn B: I don't know if this rings true for you, but I found that it was almost like... Well, I think my dad's relationship with me was, he was always kind of trying to sabotage whatever I decided to do. And that sounds like not taking personal responsibility. But I think the brat inside of me didn't wanna give him the pleasure of doing what he wanted me to do. And then after he passed, it was easier for me to live my own life and not worry about getting his approval. But yet, I still find myself doing things, seeking his approval. Like, in my own mind.

39:16 John S: Yeah. That's how it was for me. I think so too. Yeah. I was just so fucked up, for my father. During my drinking years, he was tired of me. I mean, he loved me. There's so much contradiction. He was a complicated character. I loved my father, but my father could be abusive. He wasn't a real supportive guy sometimes. And sometimes, he could be. I mean...

39:43 Benn B: Unpredictable.

39:44 John S: Yeah. Yeah.

39:46 Benn B: And that's what I think about when we talk about alcoholism being a family disease and all this and that. I do believe there's an inherited part of it. But the thing about alcohol in a family that causes problems is, it's a distraction. It's like a self-centering thing. It is something that...

Like if... My dad was an alcoholic. And it's like, it made him not be able to be present for everybody else and their own emotions. Well, there are other ways that people aren't present for people that don't have anything to do with alcohol, too. If you're a narcissist, or if you're too into yourself. So the goal is like, when we're raising kids, I think to be able to be open and aware of how they might be feeling at any given time and give credence to that. So the characteristics of people that grow up in families where that's going on and alcohol is going on are similar because of the distraction, or because of the lack of emotional awareness. Does that make sense?

40:39 John S: Yeah. Absolutely, it does.

40:40 Benn B: Yeah. So when you can't nurture somebody else, or be present with them, or be aware of what's going on with them, it's a very isolating feeling. And then that sets us up to turn to alcohol, or turn to friends, which leads to turning to alcohol, and all that stuff. So it kinda just rolls on from there. John, what were some of the challenges with leaving your home group when you decided to start your own meeting, and maybe even leading up to that as your... I like to call it authenticating your recovery. Like you kind of realize you're kind of going along to get along, and then it's like, "What do I really believe about this stuff? What do I think's good? What do I think's bad?"

41:14 John S: Yeah. The group... My old group read from the Daily Reflections for most of their readings. I've always hated that book when it came out. And they came out with it... Well, I don't know when they came up with it. Maybe a long time ago, 15 years ago. But I hated that book always, because it was just dripping with God. And you had to read the same damn step every meeting for a whole month. I just hated that book. But they would read that. But I got to the point where the religiosity of the book was so bad, it made me feel so uncomfortable, that I would start contradicting it. And I would just start saying, "No, that's not how it is for me." But I would stick to the program, and I really felt like I was being true to myself. But this is when I started getting the crosstalk. At that time, I didn't even know what crosstalk was. But people started sharing at me, quoting the book like I've never read the damn thing, or I wasn't understanding it right, or something like that. [chuckle]

42:12 Benn B: Right.

42:13 John S: And so yeah, I started feeling really uncomfortable. I started feeling where it was like every meeting I went to, it was like I had to... It took all this great effort to somehow not step on someone's toes, and still be honest. I just felt like I had to be honest, and it was hard to be honest anymore, because people didn't like to hear what I was saying. And I guess it would have been okay if they didn't like it, but they had to come back at me. It's like, "Goddamn! I would say something, and then every single person..." Like the biggest... The one thing I remember was, "Oh there will be times when no human power could help you." There's someone in our literature that says that, that there will be times in our lives where absolutely no human power... I said, "Well, for me, that's all there is, is human power. That's all there is. And I've never yet had a time where there was not a human being available to help me." People just went frickin' nuts!

43:16 Benn B: Right.

43:17 John S: They went absolutely nuts. That, "No! You've got to have God! You've got to have something more than human power!" And I said, "There isn't anything for me more than human power." That was really, for me, that was the time where I needed to have a divorce, I think.

Because they wouldn't accept that from me. I'm clear there is no God. There is no supernatural stuff. Just all we have are people, but people are pretty incredible, and you can look around the rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous, and you can see the magic of people helping each other. Besides, in the technology that we have today on the internet, I'm never far away from someone. I don't know when I'm not gonna be around human resources. I guess I'll be on some desert island, or something. I have no idea what they're talking about.

44:08 John S: But yeah, that's when I needed to get out. But I didn't make a big deal out of it. I didn't tell anybody that I started a new group. I went to the one guy I knew who was an atheist, and I told him, "Hey, would you like to start a group for agnostics and atheists?" And we just went and did it, and we left. I didn't say a damn thing. I just stopped going to meetings there, and I was quite happy. And I started meeting people, other atheists in AA, and they started coming to our group. We have this website and everything, so people were finding us and coming to our meetings, and the group started growing by leaps and bounds. It still is growing. We started getting a lot of newcomers. At my old group, P3, I guess I'll mention their name, at my old group, I don't remember us getting a whole lot of newcomers anymore. It was the same old guys.

44:52 John S: Well, at the new group, at We Agnostics, almost every meeting. Of course, we're a new group, but... I mean people who were brand new to AA, and people were coming because they said, "Thank you for creating this group 'cause I would not go to AA because it's so damn religious." They didn't want to pray. They didn't wanna stand around and pray, and hold hands and pray. So they were really glad for the group, and it's just amazing. It's still growing. And what I'm happy to see now, the growth that we're getting now, is we're getting more women in the group. For me, that was a big deal because the group I went to for 25 years was a men's group. So I was never getting the input of women in AA. And so I really value that. I'm happy to see that. Also, the women have a whole other set of issues in Alcoholics Anonymous that I was not aware of.

45:42 John S: So I like that there's a good safe place for their meeting, and I see a lot of good stuff happening. But anyway, that's another subject. But it's really good to see the group. It just got me really active in AA again. But yeah, I stayed away from my home group. I never heard a damn thing from 'em. I stayed away, and then like a year later, I went back. I told them, I said, "You haven't seen me around, and this is why." I said, "I stopped coming to meetings here because I'm an atheist, so I didn't feel comfortable here anymore, so I started a new group for agnostics and atheists." I told them that. I said, "But I'm not saying goodbye, but I'm just gonna say see you around." People, for the most part, were pretty nice. But as we went around the room, there are a lot of people who had to lay on the religion crap really heavy.

46:30 Benn B: Oh, yeah.

46:31 John S: But other people were okay. But then the telling moment that really got me was at the end of the meeting, when they were doing the Lord's prayer, I was very respectful. I stood up, but I didn't say the prayer. I stopped saying the prayer a long time ago. BUt I just stood there and I watched them. Out of the corner of my eye, I could feel somebody staring me down. I looked at him, and he was frickin' giving me the meanest, nastiest look, like the look that said, "You are not welcome here."

47:03 Benn B: Right. "Conform, or get the hell outta here!"

47:06 John S: Yeah. He gave me the meanest, nastiest look. I really regret not saying something to

that SOB. But I just thought myself, he's an idiot. He's an idiot. He just is an ignorant fool and I just didn't mess with it. But this happens in AA. That happened to me. That was harassment. That was harassment because of my world view. So to hell with it. So I didn't go. I have not been back to that group since. I honestly, Benn... I'm like you. I have conflicted feelings about AA. I love it and I hate it. I still have a hard time in regular meetings. And I don't go to 'em, I only go to agnostic meetings. When I do go to a regular meeting, it's really hard. It's just really tough. I still have a hard time with it.

47:57 John S: And there's a lot of people in the agnostic world who think it's important that we go to regular meetings, so that we can be an example. And I can understand that point, but I still have a hard time with it. So my involvement with AA is through the service structure, it's going to the western area of Missouri, which I love, and working with my district, which I love, and all the AA people. Because when I get involved with the service work, we're doing actual stuff, that we're not having to talk about God or anything. Now they do pray and stuff, but we're gonna be able to change that too. I think we have a chance of ending the Lord's prayer at our area assembly, we'll see what happens with that.

48:39 Benn B: Yeah. I feel like my beef, I went to a meeting yesterday, and I sat out the Lord's prayer. Or I didn't sit it out, I just stood outside the circle, and I got a couple of those glares like you got. I really, honestly hope and I think that my beef with the Lord's prayer is less about the fact that I don't believe in God, and more about the fact that I believe it violates the idea of spiritual, not religious.

49:00 John S: It sure does.

49:00 Benn B: Because when people walk in and they hear "Be Christian" prayer, it is the Lord's prayer, to me, that's just... I almost wanna say, "Well, if you don't like us, calling our groups atheists and agnostics, maybe you should be forced to call yourself a Christian group."

49:15 John S: Absolutely.

49:16 Benn B: I don't know.

49:17 John S: Why don't they read a prayer from the Koran?

49:20 Benn B: Right, right yeah. And has there been any difficulties along the way with having an agnostic atheist group, or the growing pains of having a new group?

49:30 John S: No. No, not really. We've actually grown by leaps and bounds, and we have no problem with our central office. I later learned that there were some debates about listing us when we very first started. But our central office says, "No." They're an AA group if they say they are, and we have to follow the traditions, and we list them. And so anyway, we've always been real involved with the AA community here and with our central office, so we've never had any problems. We're very integrated into the AA community, our group is.

50:00 John S: And the group itself, yeah, we've had situations, like every group goes to this period of time when it's new, where there's a lot of AA-bashing and God-bashing and stuff that goes on during the meetings. But people just need to get that off their system. Because there are people that come to our groups who are going there specifically to recover from AA in a certain extent.

Because they've been abused. And there are some people who have been abused by religion too, and they come to our meetings and they have to get that out. So we went through a period of time where there was a lot of that. But now I think that we focus mostly on our own recovery, and there's always a lot of fun and laughter in our meetings. So just very nice meetings. But...

50:41 Benn B: Yeah. Good. And yeah, I love hearing that and I'm so glad that you guys started that meeting, and then it went on before Santa Monica. You guys are some of the pioneers to start it. I need to get motivated to start one here. We're moving shortly, but I am one of those people who still goes to traditional meetings. I don't go as often, but even yesterday, sitting in the meeting, and it's... The thing I like about the agnostic atheist meetings I've gone to, it feels very genuine. It doesn't feel like there's a lot of posturing. And the meeting I went to yesterday, it was just all posturing and it just felt not very real at all.

51:22 Benn B: And I know we're kind of trying to sell it to the newcomer, about how much our life has changed and how great it is now. And I don't want everybody to feel like they have to make everything sound like there's awful times all the time. But it feels like it sets people up for something that's not always real. It's like, yeah, there's still struggles even though I'm sober. It's about working through stuff. And I don't know, I do struggle in going to traditional meetings still. But in the past, regressive crosstalk is, yeah, frustrating at times.

51:55 John S: Yeah, it's hard if you're gonna go against the grain. But as long as everybody says is on the same page I guess, and you connect. 'Cause I did that for a long time, as you know. I just talk to the clock, and...

52:06 Benn B: Yeah. I had the urge to speak yesterday, and I didn't. And then I talked to one of my understanding friends after the meeting, and she said, "You should have said that." 'Cause I said I wanted to say that, yes, it was about the tall step in helping people, and how much it helps people to get out of themselves. And that is true, and I said but I was ready to say, there was a certain point in my sobriety where I was trying to help everybody else, and my motive was to ignore taking a look at what I needed to take a look at. And I do think there is that period of time, and I think AA is a good place to hide from your problems on some level 'cause you can always get out of yourself and go help someone else. And everyone is going to give you great, great kudos for being the person who's always willing to take on a newcomer and sponsor someone and this and that. But there were times I had seven or eight people I sponsored, and that's not good for anyone. It's not good for me, it's not good for anybody I sponsor. And what I was doing was I was running from looking at what I needed to look at.

53:06 John S: Yeah. You can hide out in AA. And I did probably to a certain extent. And there's probably a period of time, like in early recovery, where it's a good idea to go to a lot of meetings, but at a certain point, they're probably different for everybody, but you start doing a little bit more outside of the rooms. The whole point I think of our recovery is to get involved with the world, and be citizens of the world, and get there and do things. Go back to college. When you go back to college, you're gonna have to read and study. You're not gonna have time for a lot of meetings. So we have to understand that in AA, if you don't see somebody at a meeting, maybe they're doing something good. Maybe they're... [chuckle]

53:41 Benn B: Right. Right. I'm too sensitive about things 'cause there's a couple of people I ran into, and they were people I've texted with off and on always throughout my sobriety, and I've sent a couple of texts and didn't really get a response. And then I see 'em in a meeting, and they're like,

"Oh I've really been wondering about you. How are you doing?" I think to myself like, "Well, you could text me and see how I'm doing." And I know the phone works both ways, but it's interesting. It makes me think of Scientology, how you get marked as somebody on the way out, and people don't want to reach out and connect with you. I know people that I know that are still drinking that left AA that I had sponsored before, and I'll shoot them a text every so often and be like, "Man, how you doing? How's life?" And if they say things are going well, I just say, "Oh good. I'm glad to hear that." I don't...

54:30 John S: AA's weird too because we're cult-ish, but were not. Like some cults would track you down if you're not going to the meetings. But in AA, it's like attraction rather than promotion. So it's like you're almost afraid to tell someone, "Hey, where have you been?" or "How you doing?" or whatever. So there's part of that dynamic that's going on.

54:55 John S: And then also, something I learned from Joe C, and we were talking about this yesterday by texting, anyway. He posted, when I wrote something about leaving my home group, he wrote something and he says, "There's a false sense of intimacy in AA, where we kinda get this feeling that we're really closer to these people than we really are because we're so honest and open with each other." And that was going on in my home group. I was with these guys for 25 years, and I thought of them as family, but they really weren't. I wasn't as close to them as I imagined that I was. Kind of an unsettling thing to realize, but it's a healthy thing to realize. And when Joe wrote that, it was really good that he did that, wrote that, because it got me thinking a little bit differently about my relationship with AA.

55:46 Benn B: Absolutely. It's very good, sobering info too 'cause it is true. It's just like if you know people... All different aspects of life, but especially in AA, you're right, there is that sense of intimacy you have when it seems like it's gone after you're not going as often. It's like, "Oh, was that real or not?" But then to just understand it's kind of a human nature. It's not personal, so...

56:09 John S: And our relationships are so compartmentalized in a way. I know people at work, and I relate to them through work. And then I know people in AA, and I relate to them with AA. And then I might know people if I'm going to school that are in my study groups or something. You know what I'm saying? So you have these compartments of different friends that you know through these different things that you do, or whatever.

56:33 Benn B: Well John, I suppose we probably want to keep this at a decent time. I really appreciate you sharing this story. It was nice to get all the details, and I always am interested in the background of the family and what it was like growing up. I liked how you said that some of these things kind of set us up to get a relief from alcohol. You said that really well.

56:56 John S: Well thank you, Benn. I really enjoyed this. I didn't know what to think. You do a really good job at this, by the way. [chuckle]

57:03 Benn B: Well, good. I'm glad.

57:03 John S: So you're a good interviewer. It's not an easy skill. It's really... You really did a good job.

57:09 Benn B: Well, I suppose I should know how. Like I said, I was a counselor for a while, so if there's anything I should be good at, it is listening and getting people to open up and talk more.

57:17 John S: So next week, I'll have to talk to you and you'll have to share your story.

57:21 Benn B: Well, that'd be great. That'd be great. Well thanks, John. I really appreciate you joining us for this episode of AA Beyond Belief-The Podcast. As John said, sometime here in the future, maybe you'll hear my story. I don't know if we'll bank it and share it soon or later, but again, thanks everybody for joining us this week on AA Beyond Belief-The Podcast.

[music]