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0:00:16 John S.: Hello and welcome to AA Beyond Belief the podcast. I'm your host, John S. Last week, Ben interviewed me as I shared my story with you, and this week we're gonna turn the tables and I will interview Ben. I think you'll enjoy this. Without further ado, my friend from Lincoln, Nebraska, Ben B. Hello, Ben, how are you doing?

0:00:47 Ben B.: You know, I'm pretty good, John. How've you been?

0:00:49 John S.: I'm doing excellent and looking forward to this. It's kind of fun that we get to tell our stories, and I didn't realize all this time that you and I've been talking that I never actually heard your entire story. So I'm looking forward to learning more about you today. I don't know if I'm gonna do as good a job as you did with interviewing me, but I'm gonna give it a shot.

0:01:09 Ben B.: Oh, I don't know about that. You always do a good job.

0:01:11 John S.: Why don't we go ahead and start with some of the background information. Why don't you tell us about how you grew up, your early life and your first introduction to alcohol?

0:01:21 Ben B.: Yeah. All righty. I was born in a really small town in North Central Nebraska called Lynch, Nebraska. It was about, gosh, well, now it's about 250 people, but it was about 300 or 350 people back then. And lived there until I was about four years old. My dad was the only doctor in about a 45 mile radius up there and helped start the hospital up there and whatnot. So we left there when I was about four and we moved to a town called Norfolk, Nebraska. It's spelled like Norfolk, Virginia, but it's pronounced "Norfork." And I pretty much grew up there until I graduated high school and then went to Lincoln here for college and have pretty much been here since then. But growing up in smaller town Nebraska I guess... Well, my dad was an alcoholic as well, fairly functional from the outside to most people I would say. And for as long as I knew I never didn't think my dad had a drinking problem. Like, it wasn't ever a doubt in my mind.

0:02:28 Ben B.: So I think that's where some of my co-dependent tendencies come on too. To give a little bit more background I think my dad had some mental illness things too and like in many of our dysfunctional families, nobody really talked about that. I know for a period of time, I can't remember what war it was, it might have been Vietnam or the Korean conflict or something, they went to Leonard Wood, Missouri. Fort Leonard Wood. And he was in the army down there, and I know he had some kinda nervous breakdown or something like that. I don't know if it was related to drinking at that time either, but my mom won't really talk about it.

0:03:04 John S.: Interesting.

0:03:04 Ben B.: Yeah. Being into psychology and things like that, I was always curious about it 'cause a lot of that mental health stuff is genetic on some level. So yeah, I just kinda wanted to know for family history. But my mom has always been really guarded about it. My brother was born down there. I'm one of five kids. I'm the youngest of five, and there are only three of us living now. So this is part of the back story too. Living in that small town, Lynch, in the middle of nowhere, about nine months before I was born, I had a brother pass away. He was driving home from a small town about 15 miles away late at night. Most of us think he was probably drinking. He was 16. He was waiting for his girlfriend to get home from some trip she was on. I think she was a cheerleader for the basketball team or football team and it was a long ways away, so she wasn't gonna get home 'til late. So he had been partying in that nearby town and drove home and either

passed out, fell asleep, whatever. My mom likes to think he had a stroke. And drove off the road and hit where the gravel road meets up with the highway, like a culvert, and died on impact.

0:04:16 John S.: That's devastating for your family.

0:04:17 Ben B.: Yeah, yeah. And then, yeah, I think it was tough. And then I was born about, gosh, six, seven, eight, nine months later. And then after that, the next fall, which would've been 11 months after my brother had passed away, my sister, who was 15, died as well.

0:04:39 John S.: Wow.

0:04:40 Ben B.: Yeah. My dad had a little office in town and had one of those old farm tanks. Sorry, this is for people that have suffered trauma, I don't always like the whole trigger warning thing, but you might wanna be prepared. He had a gas tank behind his office that he would just keep full of gas to fill up his own car. And those old farm gas tanks have a glass filament that hangs from the hose, and they had left her friend's car running because it didn't start very well. Well, I guess that glass filter hit the metal part of the thing on the pump, and it spilled over her and the exhaust of the car ignited the gas. And my sister was burnt really badly. This might be an over exaggeration, 85% to 90% of her body I think was really burnt. And they took her down to San Antonio, the Burn Unit and all that stuff, and I think she lived six to seven days and then passed away. So within an 11-month span, well, 18 months span, I'll even stretch it to that, my mom lost two kids, gave birth to another kid, and then her mom passed away right after that too.

0:05:47 Ben B.: So this little town of 300 people that's quite a lot of tragedy for one family to go through, losing two kids.

0:05:55 John S.: So you were too young to be aware of that, is that right? How old were you when they passed away? You were born after your brother died.

0:06:04 Ben B.: Yeah.

0:06:05 John S.: Were you born when your sister died?

0:06:07 Ben B.: Yeah, I would've been... It happened in September, I think, so I would've been about six months old when she died.

0:06:14 John S.: Do you have any idea how that impacted your parents and your father's drinking?

0:06:21 Ben B.: Oh man, I think I do. You kind of alluded to this, it was weird because I feel like I grew up in a different family than the rest of my siblings. I have a sister who's 20 years older than I am and then I have a brother who is 10 years older than I am, so he was 10 when all this happened and my sister was 20, kind of a young adult. We kinda grew up in way different families, just because of the age difference. This is more my perception, but again, I wasn't there, I think my dad always... His drinking was always pretty bad, but obviously those things are progressive and gets worse. But he had always kind of... They bought a ranch while we lived up there too, and he always had a trailer house out at the ranch, so he was always going there on his evenings off so that he wouldn't be bothered, like that was his evenings off. Knowing what I know now, he was going out there and getting shit-faced, I think.

0:07:17 Ben B.: So my parents always kind of had separate, I wouldn't say separate homes at that

time, but he would go out there and spend plenty of time. He'd isolate out there and drink quite a bit, I think, and then my mom was just raising the kids and doing whatever. How it affected him, I think it probably... I don't know that he ever really dealt with it, to be honest. I'm sure his drinking did accelerate. He was kind of like a local celebrity around there. That's grandiose, but he was the only doctor for a long ways, and people really worshipped him and thought he was the greatest thing ever. People tend to do that to doctors anyway. But I think he really liked being a head honcho in small... Big fish in a small pond.

0:08:04 John S.: Yeah, I know, small town doctors are pretty important in rural areas. Was he one of those old fashioned doctors that would make house calls and stuff like that?

0:08:12 Ben B.: Oh yeah, he definitely did that. My dad was a pilot. So sometimes there's stories of him flying 20 miles and dropping medications out of the airplane to people at their farm. [laughter] Who knows if that's completely true or not. My dad was kind of a character. As I know doctors now, he was not a typical doctor. He was just very down to earth I guess but insane too really, I mean, just kind of a dirty old man, kind of raunchy. And I think people appreciated that about him there too. He'd be the guy that'd go have a beer with you at the bar and that kinda stuff. So I think partly my family moved to Norfolk to get away from all the tragedy up there, and also I think my dad never had any time off when he was a doctor in that small town.

0:09:04 John S.: Yeah.

0:09:05 Ben B.: And I think how it affected my mom, those tragedies, I think she probably... Well, she told me this... The first death, my brother, she said she was just so depressed after that, which makes sense. And then the second death, I think she realized that she had to wake up and live. She would tell me that she thought the worst thing that could happen to her had already happened. Her words would be The Lord told her, "No, that's not the worst it could get and that you need to wake up and live your life still." I think she had a lot of guilt, and maybe still does, about not being there or being present for my sister that passed away in those months. My sister was really close to my brother who passed away too. I think everybody was just really depressed and nobody was really there emotionally for each other, 'cause the family was so dysfunctional to begin with. It's like everybody was their own little island. And I think the way it played out to my brother that's still alive, he just didn't have anybody to guide him through that. He's 10 years old and probably didn't know what the heck was going on. It's interesting how the family dynamics play out along with birth order and all those. I'm kind of detached from it. It's sad when I think about it, but I don't get sad about it because I didn't know them. It's like the whole family experienced this whole thing that I didn't necessarily experience.

0:10:30 John S.: Right, that is interesting. And your older siblings, they might actually have that memory of before and after and have noticed some change or something. That is interesting.

0:10:44 Ben B.: My sister, she says, I don't know if she thinks my dad changed much through that either. But I don't know. Of course, everything just got worse and worse, and my dad was never a very emotionally healthy person to begin with. And my parents not being close, they've always had a really dysfunctional relationship. The whole time after we lived in Norfolk, I think my dad lived with us for maybe four or five years. They had a little home on a lake too and basically he just moved out there. My parents were separated pretty much my whole time growing up. It was very strange. I'd have friends who would ask me, "Isn't that weird that your parents don't live together?" But my dad would come up for supper once or twice a week. It didn't seem weird to me just because it's what I grew up with, but I knew it was not normal. I didn't have any doubt in my mind that my

parents didn't have a good relationship.

0:11:38 John S.: Did you notice his drinking? Were there hospitalizations and things like that that you had to witness when you were growing up?

0:11:47 Ben B.: Not growing up. I think my dad mostly drank beer and that was his excuse for not having a problem. "Because real alcoholics drink hard alcohol, right?" You know, that whole lie. But I know growing up my dad would... He would wake up in the middle of the night, and come downstairs, and grab a beer too, and go back up to bed. And then inevitably... We had a time where we had a water pipe break at the house of my mom where I were living at, so we moved in with my dad at the other house for a while. And that's probably when I was around to see more of it. Like I said, he'd sleep for three or four hours at a time and wake up and drink, and then go back to sleep. Basically, his body was waking him up to get more alcohol.

0:12:31 Ben B.: And he'd come downstairs, and he would... I remember one time he pissed in the stove, another time he went in the bathroom and I could just tell he was not peeing in the toilet at all, he was just peeing all over the floor, and I would have to clean that up. I never looked at my dad's drinking as normal, never. And he was an ultra-nervous anxious person. I don't know if he was that way before he drank this much too. I think he probably was, but obviously drinking exacerbates that too. I'm sure he was going through acute withdrawal at different times in the mornings and whatnot. But, I mean, I don't think he had DTs at that time.

0:13:10 Ben B.: The interesting thing with... I'm talking about everybody but myself here, but when I started having signs of having a problem was when my dad's health really took a downturn. And he was forced to look at his drinking. And my dad went to treatment at that time for two months. And yeah, so that was an interesting experience because here I was...

0:13:30 John S.: And how old were you when that happened?

0:13:34 Ben B.: Let's see... I would have been about 25, 26 at that time.

0:13:38 John S.: Okay. And were you drinking at all before your 20s?

0:13:45 Ben B.: Oh, yeah. I'll go into that a little bit. I think I grew up, and I was... I don't know. I always felt alone. We hear this a lot. I felt kind of like solo. I think I had a lot of friends, but I never really felt connected to a lot of people. Fairly co-dependent. I think I didn't have a lot of leadership from my family, and I think I didn't have a lot of closeness to them. So I sought that out in other people and sought validation in other people, so that eventually led to me drinking. I started drinking at 16. I can remember... Now, this will be different than your story because I remember thinking it when you shared the other week when we talked, but I can remember the first time I got drunk. I got super sick, but I don't ever once remember saying to myself, "I'm never doing this again." It was like, "I've got to figure out how to do this, and do this, be able to do it."

0:14:37 Ben B.: And I felt like I was invited to the party then, like I was accepted, I was part of the cool group. That was the first payback I got from partying and drinking. And throughout high school, I didn't drink a ton in high school, and maybe my memory is not great, but I think maybe once a month. My mom was fairly strict. She didn't... I was always at home on time, and things like that. I couldn't stay out super late, but... I had a serious girlfriend all throughout high school and that was part of my co-dependence too. That relationship was a nightmare. But definitely, my drinking accelerated after I graduated high school. That summer I would say, I was drinking four or five

nights a week, coming home super late every night, just doing what I thought everybody did at that age. My drinking even then wasn't very healthy. I mean, bad things didn't always happen, but if something happened that I felt bad about, you'd be sure that I was drinking. And just a lot of it would be treating people poorly, saying things to people that wasn't kind at all. That's what alcohol does. It removes that filter.

0:15:48 Ben B.: And I think for me, at least my inner turmoil was turned outwards towards other people when I drank because I didn't have that filter, so everything that I hadn't processed or worked on inside just shot out at everybody outside of me. And I don't know that I was always the mess... Like my friends wouldn't have been like, "Oh my God, watch out for him." But there were times where it was like that, but a lot of times it was me trying to take care of other people too. I was always the one who drove everybody home. I'd pick everybody up. I'd drive everybody home. Some of that I think was a control issue too. I think if I picked you up and we went out, well, I had control as to how late we were staying out that night. And it's also that grandiosity of thinking... Well, it was a combo of grandiosity thinking, "I'm a safe drunk driver," and it was also a combination of... I think I felt so little and so small and didn't think much of myself that I thought if I got in trouble that was better than somebody else getting in trouble, for like a DUI or something. You know, very co-dependent crap.

0:16:58 John S.: Yeah. I guess that just comes from growing up in an alcoholic family, doesn't it? That co-dependency?

0:17:06 Ben B.: I've gone to therapy. I've talked about this and I've worked on it on my own. Yeah, I definitely think so. I think I couldn't ever get any validation from either of my parents, not just my dad, so I sought it out in other people. I didn't have anybody to nurture me through figuring out how to be an adult. I didn't get much... There wasn't much frank discussion about any of that stuff. And frankly, I don't know that my parents knew how to do that. They were too wrapped up in their own stuff. And I won't even say selfish and self-centered, although that's kind of what it is. I'd see it more as people that hadn't processed their own crap, so they didn't... At least especially in my dad's case, I don't think he felt comfortable directing anyone else because I don't think he felt very good about himself either.

0:17:55 John S.: Yeah. So did you go straight to college after high school?

0:18:00 Ben B.: I didn't. I worked at Hy-Vee in Norfolk and I didn't go to college right away. And I remember my mom was freaking out thinking I would never go to college, but I didn't know what the heck I wanted to do with my life and wanna waste any money going. I partied a lot at that time, and I had a friend who came back that semester, I think he'd failed out of going to school down here in Lincoln, and he said, "Hey, I'm gonna sign up for classes at the community college on Monday, you wanna come with me?" and I said, "Yep." [chuckle] I signed up for classes at the community college in Norfolk, and that was super easy, and I partied my way through that as well. And then I came down to Lincoln that next semester after that.

0:18:37 John S.: And Lincoln's an excellent school, I mean, the University of Nebraska.

0:18:40 Ben B.: Yeah, yeah. I don't think it's exactly Kansas University, but it's decent. It is decent. I did really well right when I came down here 'cause I think I wanted to do well and I knew it was gonna be a step up from community college for sure. I did really well my first semester and was on the Dean's List. And then after that, I think I was just like, "Oh, this isn't going to be too tough," and I partied more and my drinking caught up to me. I'd either like a class and I would go all the time

and I would do well, or I would barely go because it was gonna be too much work in my mind. I'd either withdraw or I'd just not show up and get a bad grade. It was feast or famine. I either aced a class or I'd get a D and need to retake it or I withdrew or... Yeah.

0:19:27 John S.: Isn't that interesting?

0:19:28 Ben B.: And I can see it now, I couldn't have told you then, but my life revolved around drinking. And it doesn't mean I was drinking all the time, but if something had to fall by the wayside, it was never my party life. That was always a priority. If I had a class and the only time it was offered at 8:30 in the morning, I'd be like, "Well, obviously I can't take that class because I'm not gonna be able to get up for that."

0:19:51 John S.: Yeah, I know, and that's how I did my life too up until my last drink. Everything centered around alcohol and that next drink and somehow keeping it going.

0:20:06 Ben B.: When it gets to a first step conversation at a meeting, I tend to talk about that more in detail, about the earlier stages of drinking problems, because it's a lot easier for people to see that we have a problem when your entire life falls apart. But like I said, I can look back and those are the little things that showed I had a problem because it was my priority. Whether I was drinking all the time or not. Even if I was just drinking on the weekends at that time, by the time I felt better on Tuesday or Wednesday from a long, hard hangover, I was starting to think about what I was going to do the next weekend or when was going to be the next legitimate time to go out because I'm not gonna drink by myself because that's what alcoholics do. I had all these rules set up, and for the most part I followed them. I had a lot of friends because of that, and that's not to say I was some... I mean, I do think people liked me in general, but I kind of had to have a lot of friends because I had to have a lot of excuses to go out because I had these things in my mind that said, "Don't drink alone or else you've got a problem."

0:21:08 John S.: And just having that concept is enough, that I know now, is that, "Yeah, you had a problem." Anytime that we start thinking that we have a problem, I think we have a problem. But alcoholism is so insidious because it just gradually gets you, and then once it grabs you, it just tears you down really, really fast and just takes you to places you never thought you would go. It is, in the very early stages, when you look back at it, you can see how you were already having a problem. It's just that it's a progressive thing, and it really gets you. It really does.

0:21:50 Ben B.: Oh, for sure. You've probably heard the analogy, but people talk about it being like a boa constrictor or something, or a python. You'd exhale just a little bit, and it squeezes just a little bit tighter, and so slowly that you don't recognize it, and then all of a sudden your ribcage is compressed and you can't exhale, and you're done.

0:22:06 John S.: Wow. I've never heard that but that's very, very true.

0:22:09 Ben B.: That's the subtle sneakiness. And it's psychological, in the early going too, before it's physical. I can remember when I was 22, 23 thinking like, "I think I got something to take a look at." Or I'd have times where I told myself, "I need to not drink." I knew I was somebody who couldn't drink very well. And I knew that it needed to be abstinence, but it was always in my mind like, "Well, what in the hell am I gonna do for fun? Who in the hell is gonna wanna date somebody who's sober? How the heck am I gonna have any friends?" Now these are like delusional thoughts that I look back on because even though a lot of people drink in their early 20s, not everybody was drinking like I was. And there was lots of people who didn't drink and we're focused on lots of

things. But the delusional thinking in my brain was that... And that's what alcohol did for me. It made me feel like somebody. It made me feel desirable. It made me feel like people wanted to be friends with me. And to me that's the... I hate this phrase when I hear it 'cause it's... "Cunning, baffling, and powerful." That's why this thing is so sneaky, because it's so ingrained. Everything about me was based around the fact I drank or not.

0:23:22 John S.: Yeah. Were you able to get through school okay?

0:23:26 Ben B.: I was. It took me a little longer than it should have. I think it took me five-and-a-half years with withdrawing or doing this or doing that. I look back at that, I have no idea how I did because school was not my focus. I did what I had to do to get done. I think my grade point average was a 3.2 so it wasn't awful. But I even...

0:23:45 John S.: That's pretty good.

0:23:47 Ben B.: Yeah, it was pretty good, but all through my history I was always in gifted classes and accelerated math. And when things got difficult, I think I would back away like I didn't like the challenge. Maybe I was lazy, maybe I was insecure, but I could have done much better. And when I think about the effort I put into school, there was little to no effort put into school at all. So it was kind of disappointing, I guess, when I look back at it, but here we are.

0:24:18 John S.: So when did you start having life problems associated with your drinking?

0:24:23 Ben B.: I would say those school things are life problems right there. I think I grew up in a family of means. And I think my dad was still sick, so I think I was financially enabled for quite a long time too. So that allowed me to delay a lot of things, like a lot of things that went on with the state planning. I had access to income that allowed me to continue to deny that I had an issue, I think. And basically, I was stuck in neutral. I wasn't moving forward. So I see that as a sign of a life problem too. It wasn't like I had a job and got fired. It was at times I didn't need to have an outside job. I did at times, but... Yeah. And that's part of that whole dysfunctional family web. I think my dad kept a thumb on most of us with money on some level so that we wouldn't say anything about his drinking or couldn't say anything about his drinking. 'Cause I can remember saying to my dad, "Maybe you would feel better if you didn't drink all the time," and he'd say, "Oh, yeah. Well, who's paying for your college?" And it was denial of a problem. And so that enabled me to not have to make any decisions.

0:25:36 Ben B.: Now, this is getting dangerously close to not taking any ownership. I was just stuck in neutral. I had no forward momentum in my life. I had none. And I think all my friends would be like, "Well, what the heck is Ben ever gonna do?"

0:25:48 John S.: So when you got out of college, what was your life like? What was going on?

0:25:53 Ben B.: There was tons of inner turmoil. I tried writing for a while. These grandiose delusions of, "I'm gonna write this book, and it's gonna be a hit, and I'm not gonna have to go get a real job." Again, still partying probably three nights a week at least, pretty hard. You know to be honest, I even ask myself, "What the heck did I do with my time at that time?" I got into film a lot. I went to lots of films. I did some pro-bono work. I don't... I partied a lot.

0:26:27 John S.: I hear you. I had kind of a lost period of time after when I left KU. And there was a period of time when I was living at home and that was kind of a loss. I don't know what the hell I

was doing. It was a time of drinking and just kind of wandering, then from going from job to job. Actually, I always tell people that, and this is really kinda true, the 1980s for the most part was kind of a lost decade. I don't really... I didn't... I can't... It's hard. My wife will sometimes talk about some television program or some movie that came out in the 1980s, and it's like, "I don't know. I didn't watch television. I didn't go to movies [chuckle] in the 1980s."

0:27:13 Ben B.: Yeah, I just don't know. All I remember about those periods were I had enough money to go out and party plenty. I lived an okay life. I had jobs off and on. I was an electrician's apprentice for a while, got that job through a friend's dad. But off and on I wouldn't have jobs, and I could make that work with my income at the time from what my dad had done with his life, to be honest.

0:27:39 John S.: So what caused you to finally hit bottom and realize that you had a problem and needed help?

0:27:44 Ben B.: Well, like I said, there were all these things along the way that were little signs. And it was constantly deferring, like, "Well, things aren't bad enough yet," or "I'm too young to quit drinking," or... I'll give this spiel in meetings sometimes, it would be like something bad would happen, I'd hate myself for it. Usually it was saying something awful to somebody, and then it'd be like, "Well, shit, the holidays are coming up. I'm not gonna stay sober over the holidays. That's when everybody gets together to party." And then it'd be like, "Well, I'll quit after the new year." And then it'd be like, "Well, shit," if I wasn't in a relationship, "Valentine's Day is coming up. I don't wanna be sober and single on Valentine's Day." And then the next thing was every year I went up to some St. Patrick's Day celebration, so it's like, "Well, shit, I'd hate to miss that St. Patrick's Day celebration." There's just all these excuses over and over and over as to why to keep putting it off. And then it was summer time, I golfed a lot. So there was a great rationalization there. I drank and golfed all the time. "But I'm golfing, I'm not drinking, right?"

0:28:50 John S.: Right.

0:28:50 Ben B.: But, really, it was... And how many times did I make a complete ass of myself on the golf course? And then roll that into college football season. Around here college football is a huge deal.

0:29:00 John S.: Oh yeah. Huge.

0:29:00 Ben B.: And again, there are legitimate excuses to party every single Saturday, Friday, whatever. 'Cause around here it's a whole weekend deal for college foot...

0:29:10 John S.: Right. And you still like football, don't yeah?

0:29:11 Ben B.: Yeah, yeah, I do.

0:29:12 John S.: Poor Huskers.

0:29:13 Ben B.: Oh yeah. I don't know if you can grow up around here or not.

[laughter]

0:29:16 Ben B.: It's a religion basically, right?



0:29:19 John S.: Oh yeah. Yeah.

0:29:20 Ben B.: But it was just constantly delaying that, all the time. And then, let's see... I was, let's see... It would have been 2000, so I was 25 and I went down to the country stampede. Oh wait, first I got a public urination ticket. I was peeing in a parking garage.

0:29:36 John S.: Oh, no!

[chuckle]

0:29:38 Ben B.: Yeah, peeing in a parking garage in front of my car, and I remember I just got a ticket for that. So that was nothing. But those were the first legal things. I know some people don't see that as a big thing, but shit, I don't know... I suppose I coulda got charged with indecent exposure or something.

0:29:52 John S.: Sure. Yeah, god. Oh boy.

0:29:54 Ben B.: Yeah. And then let's see, 2003 I believe it was, I went to the Country Stampede in Manhattan, Kansas. Again, this is one of those times I look back... And I went down there with some people that I normally would not have hung out with, and I look back at it and the only thing I had in common with them was that we all liked to get shit-faced. The Country Stampede is like an all day country music fest. I don't even like country music.

[chuckle]

0:30:21 John S.: I was wondering what it was. I was like, "Is it a rodeo or something?"

0:30:24 Ben B.: No, it's like you have bands all day long, and it's 90 degrees in the summer, so it's a great excuse to get completely shit-faced all day long. People hook up with people and everybody's acting poorly. I mean, you'd walk through the campgrounds there and there's people just having sex behind the campers and in the grass, and people are running around naked. I mean, it was just debaucherous.

0:30:44 John S.: Right.

0:30:45 Ben B.: So I went down there, but the problem was the next day we were going golfing all day with some friends for a bachelor party, but I didn't want to miss this chance to go down to the Country Stampede, that I don't even like the country music for.

0:31:00 John S.: Sounds like the country music was kind of secondary for everybody.

0:31:03 Ben B.: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, it for sure was. But I mean there's a ton of people that go to this thing, and everybody always knew you do not drink and drive at this event. You just don't do it. So I went down there on my own, separate from the people I went with, because of course I had to get back for this bachelor party the next day. So I drank all day. All day. Like drunk, drunk, drunk all day, all day. At the end of the night, I climbed in my car and I was going to sleep 'til the morning and then turn around and drive home. A cop came up and knocked on my window and said, "You can't park here overnight." So of course I pull my car to where I could park it overnight, and then in my great, grandiose drunk thinking I think, "Well, I don't feel that tired. I'm gonna drive

home." Two and a half hours from Manhattan, Kansas to Lincoln, shit-bagged. Completely shit... And I got pulled over in Waterville, Kansas. I rolled through a stop sign, and I spent the night in Marysville, Kansas, the black squirrel city, I believe it is. Yeah, and I spent the night in jail there. Blew a 2.33 trying to drive two and a half hours home.

0:32:07 John S.: Wow.

0:32:08 Ben B.: Yeah, and I look back at that and it's like... That's ridiculous. And I hadn't drank for probably three or four hours when I got pulled over.

0:32:15 John S.: Wow, that's interesting.

0:32:16 Ben B.: Yeah, very insane.

0:32:19 John S.: So did they charge you with DUI?

0:32:22 Ben B.: Yep, I got DUI and at that point they didn't have aggravated or anything like that, and I look back and I got that lightest slap on the wrist. I think it cost me... I mean it cost me quite a bit of money. I think it was two grand in the long run, but I paid off my community service hours. I paid a fine. I got diversion for it. You don't get diversion for DUIs today. So it was off my record and that was it. I remember the short period of time after that I said to myself, "I need to not drink." I remember I had some sleazy bail bondsman came and bailed me out of jail. I didn't know what the hell I was doing. Like, I'm asking all the guys in the jail like, "What the Hell do I do? How do I get out of here?"

0:33:04 Ben B.: I didn't want to call my family because God forbid they know I have a problem, and here I am two hours away from Lincoln still. So this bail bondsman came and got me, and I think I would imagine he was a very evangelical Christian gentleman. He was like, "My son, do you think you have a drinking problem?" And I was like, "You know, I think I do." I think that was the first time I told somebody else that I did. Yeah, and I remember talking to my friends and saying, "You know, I'm not going to drink." They were all like, "Yeah? Cool, man. Whatever you gotta do." That lasted for about a month and then that became, "I'm not going to drink and drive." And then that became, "I'm not going to drink and drive legally drunk." Then sooner or later, I was just driving drunk all the time. And like you said in your story, John, I drove drunk all the time. If I went out there, I was going to drive home. Was I completely hammered all the time? No, but you could be sure as heck I was definitely over the legal limit.

0:34:01 John S.: That's what's so frightening about the drunk driving problem. People don't... I don't think they really understand that sometimes you'll hear in the news sometimes about somebody who's had like 15 or 20 DUIs, and even if they take their license away, they still drive drunk. People say, "What the Hell?" But you know what? You lose your mind. When I was drunk, I was blacked out. I couldn't make a sane decision. I'm not trying to give up responsibility, like you say. But you really do. You lose your inhibitions. You can't think soundly. You can't say, "Oh, yeah. I can't drive." It's not like that.

0:34:34 Ben B.: Yeah. I was... This sounds stupid, but I was a fairly moral person. If somebody was around me and I wasn't completely hammered and they tried to drive home, I would not let that person drive home. So it was kind of an arrogance, and it was kind of a, "I think I can drive better than other people drunk." But you're right. Past a certain point, just all logic goes out the window. I mean it makes sense as we talk about the brain science between drinking. And there's where I

would wake up and I would just feel so torn up because it's like it's you, but it's not you. You can't deny that it's not you anymore, but it's like why do I do this? I know not to do it. It's that Jekyll and Hyde feeling of being like, "I am making these decisions that I would never make in my right mind," but yet it is also a sign of what's going on internally that needs to get taken a look at.

0:35:26 John S.: It's frightening.

0:35:27 Ben B.: Yeah, so I mean that's why I have some empathy for people. Like my wife even, she gets it but she doesn't get it. It's like, "How can somebody have that many DUIs?" And I'm not trying to... Because it is about taking personal responsibility. After I ingested alcohol, past a certain point, it was like somewhere the switch got flipped and it was party on. There was no stopping these bad decisions it felt like.

0:35:52 John S.: Well, that's what finally got me, is I realized that there was no way... I mean I was just going to jail. There was no way I could control it. There was no way I could not drink and drive it seemed. I just couldn't control it, and that was what was so bad. And it still scares me. I've had nightmares where I'm driving drunk, just many, many, many years after being sober for many, many, many years.

0:36:24 Ben B.: Yeah. There's one of the stories in the back of the book, I don't remember what it is, but one of the people says, "Either I was controlling my drinking or I was enjoying my drinking, and I never did both." If I was trying to take it easy that night, I was deathly aware that I was taking it easy that night. Like I would say, "Okay Ben, don't drink too much tonight, have just four or five, six," and I was always hyper-aware that I was trying to take it easy that night. But if I wasn't doing that, who knows how many in the hell I was gonna have. And I did not enjoy controlling my drinking. That's not the way I wanna drink. It's balls to the wall or it is... And I even proved that at different times where I would stay sober for a while and then I would go out, and it would be like if it was a calm night, I just wouldn't drink. Like if everybody was gonna go out and everybody'd just have a few beers, I wouldn't have any. I'd be like, "No." And so most people would say, "Well, look, you can control your drinking," but actually it was a sign that I knew I couldn't control my drinking.

0:37:31 John S.: I know, and that's what I realized too. I did that too sometimes.

0:37:34 Ben B.: And I did the whole thing where I'd take a month break and a two month break, and then I got super active and was running 10 miles a day and got in really good shape, and then I'd be like, "Oh gosh." My thought pattern would be, "If only I could do this and drink, I'd be fine. I just need to exercise more." And then I'd add drinking back in and eventually everything would go to shit again, and I'd end up hating myself.

0:38:00 John S.: So it sounds like you had a series of bottoms. When did you finally get to AA? How'd that happen?

0:38:06 Ben B.: So in 2007 I got another DUI, which would have been my first offense aggravated up here in Lincoln. And again, this is the scary thing looking back, but that night I would have told you that I took it easy because I was driving. I told everybody, "You guys get hammered, I'll take it easy," and if you would have talked to me throughout the night and if you would have talked to my friends, they would have been like, "Ben's not drunk tonight." And I got pulled over and I blew a 0.18, and I hadn't drank for two hours. So that tells you something about how people drank that I hung out with. But when I got pulled over, I knew it. My friend was like, "Oh, you're fine, you're

not even drunk tonight." I'm like, "No, I'm going to jail." And I was speeding coming out of downtown. I think I was going 67 in a 60, and I had just said to him, I go, "Oh shoot, I'm speeding, I better slow down," and right then I went by a cop, so...

0:39:00 John S.: Wow.

0:39:00 Ben B.: But yeah, I spent the night in detox that night. A friend of mine came and got me, and he's like, "What the hell's the deal? You're not even drunk, what are you doing here?" And I'm like, "Well..." Told him the whole story. So there is a sign of progression and tolerance, that I'm aggravated and blowing a 0.18 and that was an easy night out.

0:39:20 John S.: Wow.

0:39:22 Ben B.: That was the thing that finally got me to go to AA, 'cause I'd had an eval, and of course I'd lied through my evals before. And that had coincided with my dad going to treatment too, so that was a real time where I was torn because I knew I was denying my own problem. And I think the degree of my dad's problem allowed me to deny my problem too because I'm like, "Well, I'm not as bad as my dad, so..." Knowing now what I know, "Well, no shit, Ben. He had 40 years' experience drinking on you. Of course his problem's going to be worse than you." And that's when I got introduced to AA. And I had a lot of emotional problems before that. I would always get involved in bad, bad, bad relationships where either I was the drunk and they were the one trying to take care of me, or interestingly that my co-dependence would kick in and I would date somebody who was a worse drunk than I was. And I think on some level that was my way of trying to control my drinking too. It's like, "Well, she needs my help. She's really a mess, so I have to take it easy."

0:40:23 John S.: So let's talk about your experience in Alcoholics Anonymous, and also how you dealt with the... How you've evolved over time in AA and how you've dealt with the dogmatism, because your experience is a little different than mine in that you were at one time a religious Christian person. And I don't know if you were when you were in AA, so can you kinda go through all of that? Your belief system? AA? How you've evolved?

0:40:52 Ben B.: Yeah, I'll try and be quick. I grew up going to church, my mom was, is, and still a big religious person. We went to Methodist church so that's pretty liberal, but I never really believed for myself. I guess if you asked me at that time, I'd say I did. But then I see it as a function of my alcoholism. In my mid-20s where I was... I'd just always been on this search for finding myself or whatever, finding purpose, and I delved into the Bible like crazy. Actually, I had moved home for like six months at that time, that was after... I went to grad school for a period to try and delay becoming an adult, I believe. And then after I quit that I just couldn't do it, I was just like, "This is not what I wanna do." And then I moved home with my mom in my mid-20s, that sounds so pathetic now, but I think I was between a lease and I didn't wanna to sign a new one 'cause I didn't know what I wanted to do. So all I did was I went to the library and I read the Bible every single day.

0:41:47 John S.: Wow.

0:41:48 Ben B.: And I think when you're that depressed and you're struggling with addiction... Well, I'll speak for myself. That was what it was for me. And there's a lot of truth in the Bible. I don't like the word "spiritual," but there's a lot of things that can be very convicting and inspiring in the Bible, and I latched onto that. And I was...

0:42:07 John S.: It's interesting that you and I both have that in common, 'cause I did the same damn thing. I read the Bible during that depressed period.

0:42:14 Ben B.: Oh, yeah. Yeah, well, I would say that there are a lot of mentally ill, depressed people that were writing that Bible, so it would make sense, right?

[laughter]

0:42:21 John S.: Yeah.

0:42:23 Ben B.: So anyway, my mom was, of course, super-excited about that, and it probably bought me some time in her good graces, but I never really had a time where I finally said, "This is all bullshit. I don't believe it." It was a slow coming out of it, and to be honest, I had a period of time where I was planning on becoming a pastor. I had filled out an application to Duke Divinity School. All of my friends thought I was crazy. It's like, "Oh, my God, you go from being this big party guy and now you're gonna be a pastor?" And I was still drinking off and on too. So again, absurd, but I would be drunk at the after-hours party debating theology with people, and just hammered off my ass. And I have a tendency towards being arrogant and judgmental to begin with, but when you put a little bit of fundamental Christian behind that, and some alcohol, holy shit. I mean, I was an asshole to a lot of people.

[laughter]

0:43:17 Ben B.: Big time. And yeah, so then it was just a slow falling away from that, really. I really got into film, like at depth. Like screen-writing, storytelling, the deeper meaning behind things, and that stuff was really inspiring for me. And then, when I got that last DUI and I went to AA, I don't know that... I mean, if you would've asked me if I believed in God then, I suppose I would've told you I maybe did. I don't... Maybe I wouldn't have. But the stuff about God in AA never really annoyed me until I really... I can't remember how you phrased it, but I realized I was an atheist.

0:43:55 John S.: Right.

0:43:56 Ben B.: I came to realize I was an atheist.

0:43:58 John S.: You accepted it.

0:43:58 Ben B.: Not like... Yeah, it wasn't like, "Fuck religion, this is all bullshit," although I do think that. But it wasn't like a decision I made. I just realized, this is my viewpoint. I think getting into AA at first, it made me feel important. I don't know if these are good things or bad things, but I'll just say what I'm realizing, looking back. You can come in there and you can parrot things and people can really, really think you know what you're talking about. And I think that was good for me on some level, 'cause it gave me confidence. But I also... This is going to sound arrogant, probably. But I mean, like, it can be not very difficult to impress people in AA. You know what I mean? And I think the arrogant side of me liked being... Okay, very much like my dad probably, liked being a big fish in a small pond in that small town, I think I got that from AA. That sounds very arrogant to say even as I say it, but that's where I was. And I fell in, for sure. And I definitely saw the value of staying sober. I found the value of having community with other people. I didn't really rock the boat much.

0:45:08 Ben B.: But of course, like so many people, after about two years sober, I got inspired to become a drug and alcohol counselor, and so I went to school for that. And my home meeting at that time was so laid back, like really anything went in that meeting, both good and bad. I would bring outside material to read for my counseling stuff for a topic. And I was so naïve to the fact that people were annoyed that I was bringing that in. Like, I was just like, "Well, shit, this makes sense." But now I look back, and people were looking at me like, "This ain't AA. Get it the fuck outta here, dude."

0:45:40 John S.: Oh, wow.

0:45:42 Ben B.: But yeah, so I just slowly kinda, I don't know, fell away from belief, and I'm a pretty impassioned atheist now. I don't try to push it on anybody, like I say, but I just started questioning. I never was a dogmatic AA person. I saw it as more of like an intersection of psychology and sociology and... Biopsychosocial is what you learn as a counselor. It's all those confluences that make us an alcoholic or a problem drinker. And I don't know... I probably went to four meetings a week, almost always. And when I was a counselor, I only went to that one meeting, because on some level, I didn't want to be all over the recovery community because that can be really awkward for your clients that go to AA.

0:46:28 John S.: Yeah.

0:46:29 Ben B.: So I don't know. After I stopped being a counselor, I went to more AA meetings around town, and I saw more of the dogma and fundamental, back-to-basics type thing, and I don't know. I didn't always like what I saw.

0:46:44 John S.: So did you start speaking out?

0:46:46 Ben B.: Yeah, I definitely did. Oftentimes, very diplomatically. Like to where... I like what Joe C says. He says, "I was hiding out in plain sight."

[laughter]

0:46:58 Ben B.: Like, you learn how to talk the right way, that you're saying what you're saying, but nobody explicitly knows that you don't believe, or this or that.

0:47:06 John S.: Yeah, yeah, I did that. Yeah.

0:47:08 Ben B.: That got more extreme over time. And I suppose there was an unhealthy period, where I just wanted to say, "Fuck this, this is stupid. I can't believe anybody believes this here." I didn't say that overtly, but I mean that was the undercurrent of what I was saying. And again, I think for me, the healthy part of that was I needed to authenticate my recovery. It was, "What do I really believe about this? What do I think is the truth? Am I just buying in?" 'Cause I definitely think I drank the Kool-Aid in AA for a while, which was good on some level. But I look at how I carried the message and how I sponsored people, and I look back at that, and I'm like, "That wasn't very good."

0:47:48 John S.: You know, it's kinda funny. I had a conversation with Dale last night, and we were talking about reading the Big Book and stuff in our early days. And he said something. He said, "You know, you got to know the rules before you can break them."

0:48:03 Ben B.: Right.

0:48:04 John S.: So maybe there is some value in having that period of time where you're drinking the Kool Aid or whatever, when you're really kind of learning about it, because then you know how to do it on your own. Your own way, I guess.

0:48:18 Ben B.: Yeah. Well, I found even just saying something that I found to be true in framing it even in the most polite way was starting to draw tons of feedback, passive-aggressive feedback, from people in meetings. Like if we read from "We Agnostics," I would say, "Well, no, personally, I don't really care for this chapter. I've read it many times. And it's just been important for me to realize that, it's just for me, non-belief is where I'm at. That's what I've found out about myself." And I wouldn't say anything that anybody else should think like I would, but man, it would really bring out the responses in people that would...

0:48:55 John S.: I can believe it. I can believe it. I can imagine. See, I would never say anything like that at my old home group. And when I finally did, I started getting the pushback, so I could imagine you were. People don't like hearing something bad about the Big Book.

[laughter]

0:49:08 Ben B.: Yeah. Well, it's interesting that I didn't even see it as bad. I just saw it as, "Okay, I read this part, and this part doesn't ring true for me."

0:49:12 John S.: Yeah. Right.

0:49:17 Ben B.: And their reaction is to think that I'm putting it down. And to me what I know now about psychology and family dynamics, it's a very dysfunctional family reaction. It's like, "Don't say anything bad about anything 'cause I can't handle it."

0:49:31 John S.: Yeah.

0:49:31 Ben B.: It's all or nothing. It's either AA is the absolute greatest thing as written, or else you are on a slippery slope to being on the way out. And I am so thankful for our community that we have because people told me, "No. It doesn't have to be an all or nothing thing. You can say..." And what I think about AA now might not be what I think about AA in five years from now.

0:49:56 John S.: Exactly. Exactly.

0:49:56 Ben B.: It doesn't have to be all or nothing. I can say, "I don't believe in the disease concept, but I can understand why that rings true for so many people." I can say that. Whereas I might believe something different at another time.

0:50:08 John S.: Absolutely. We do evolve as people. I heard something kinda interesting, Ben. I wonder if maybe I heard it from you, I don't know. I think I was reading something somewhere, where our personalities change. Like every seven years, we're a different person.

0:50:23 Ben B.: No. I didn't. That make sense, but that wasn't me.

0:50:26 John S.: But when I think about it, when I look at different phases of my life, I had a different belief system at one time and things that I absolutely believed then, I don't believe now. So

I kind of evolved and changed. Like Bill W did for example.

[chuckle]

0:50:40 Ben B.: Absolutely. How dare he?

0:50:45 John S.: And that's why I feel sorry for Bill W. 'cause the dogmatists like to put him back where he was. They like to lock him as one particular person that he was in one particular time. But he was like the rest of us, every seven years or so, he evolved and he changed. And his life went to different areas. But anyway.

0:51:06 Ben B.: And I think if you are growing and changing and evolving, in my snotty opinion, working through recovery, you're going to evolve and change. The people that don't evolve or change or have a mindset change, those people scare the hell out of me. And from a clinical standpoint, I would estimate that those people's lives aren't really working that great for them.

0:51:27 John S.: Yeah.

0:51:27 Ben B.: Now, again, it's complicated because as somebody who's a counselor and has been a counselor, it's kind of my job to judge people's recovery to help them get the most out of it. But as somebody in AA, that's not healthy or it's not what we're supposed to do. Focus on your own recovery. But, yes, it makes sense. I'm a new dad. So the things I'm thinking about in my life are framed differently now.

0:51:56 John S.: Absolutely.

0:51:57 Ben B.: And recovery makes sense to me in different ways than it did before. And there are absolutely things in AA and recovery that help me be a better parent.

0:52:04 John S.: Sure.

0:52:05 Ben B.: And I like meetings, and I like in AA talks about what's going on in our lives. Not that we come in and we just rambled about, "Oh, I had a tough day and this was this and that." But I like to reference what's going on in my life to relate it back to recovery principles because that way it always stays fresh. And maybe that's not helping the new comer. I think it is.

0:52:28 John S.: Yeah. I agree.

0:52:28 Ben B.: But some people would say it's not because we're not just preaching the same tired old whatever. But my genuine feeling deep down, and it's different for everyone, is that what has a chance to resonate with people in AA that are coming that are new, is not the words we say. It's how we carry them, it's the tone we use, it's the energy that we put off.

0:52:49 John S.: Yeah. I agree.

0:52:51 Ben B.: And I'm not saying that I don't hear things that I need to hear, but if somebody said the exact same thing in just a slightly different way or slightly different tone, it's not received the same way as it might be said slightly differently. And I think it's our grandiosity as alcoholics. And I'd been this way too, so I'm not calling just everybody else out, I'm calling what I hope is old me out too.



0:53:13 John S.: Sure.

0:53:14 Ben B.: It's our personality to think that here's the way it is, listen to me and... I don't know. I kinda lost my train of thought what I was gonna say there.

0:53:23 John S.: Well, tell me this, Ben. When did you discover Agnostic AA and the convention in Santa Monica and all of this online agnostic community that we've got?

0:53:36 Ben B.: It's all these things you ask me now. And I can't even remember some of them. What probably happened, I think I subscribed to "The Fix" on an email thing, and I would imagine that they had an article in there about it. And then I think I did a Google search and I saw it, and I said to my nephew who very much thinks like me... He's eight or nine years younger than I am, so we're more like brothers or friends than nephew and uncle. But I said, "Hey, what do you think about going to Santa Monica to this thing?" I go, "There might be 15 people there, but I think it'd be fun to go." To be honest, it was a great excuse to go to California.

0:54:11 John S.: Yeah. And what a beautiful place Santa Monica is.

0:54:13 Ben B.: Oh, yeah.

0:54:14 John S.: I wanna go back sometime.

0:54:15 Ben B.: I thought the setting was great too, and the church we were in.

0:54:19 John S.: Yeah, beautiful.

0:54:20 Ben B.: I just liked it all. The nice courtyard area there, and the fact we went off into those little rooms, off in those different little buildings outside the courtyard, and I loved the whole thing. But anyway, I think I probably just Google searched it, and then we decided to go. I really was thinking, "Okay, it's probably gonna be us and maybe 50 people in Southern California," but to see, I don't know, what was it, 300 people there?

0:54:46 John S.: They came from all over the world.

0:54:46 Ben B.: And I don't know if 300 was the total number of people, but I felt like I saw a lot more people there than that because, excuse me, there were people there one day. There were people there three days. There were people there that just came in the afternoon. But it felt like more than that there the whole time. It's all kind of a blur to me how I got into that really. Then I met RJ out there first 'cause she was so outgoing and came up to me and gave me a huge hug, and had her awesome Gaythiest T-shirt on.

0:55:13 John S.: Right.

0:55:15 Ben B.: And then I know I met you and some other people, and yeah, and then I think I got on the Facebook group from there, and then it's just kind of picked up from there. I'm so thankful for it because there's still moments where I will say to myself, "Why am I even bothering with this?" When I'm frustrated in a meeting or this or that. And you guys out there help keep me grounded and know that like, "No, this is a good place to be." This can be a very healthy part of recovery, ongoing, for your whole life if you want it to be. And it can be...

0:55:49 John S.: And you're pretty involved. I mean, you're pretty involved with the online community. You do these podcasts, and you're very involved with all the Facebook groups. Do you feel like in a way that that is part of your program that's helping you?

0:56:04 Ben B.: It is. But to be honest, I don't even like to refer to it as my program. And I'm not saying that to correct you, but it's like when I'm commenting on... And maybe this is the human service student and counselor in me, but when I'm commenting on things in the group or even talking about stuff like this, to me it's a human thing, and I know it is for you too. But I don't want to preach at somebody and tell them what they need to do. I just want to be there for other people and help them walk their own path through this thing. That's what I hope I do.

0:56:37 John S.: Yeah, 'cause I kinda feel that way.

0:56:38 Ben B.: Because I spend time not doing that, so...

0:56:40 John S.: I spend so much time... Like this conversation I've had with you, I don't really feel like I need to go to a meeting today. I feel like I've had a meeting. Working with Doris on the site, and Lynn, and Thomas, and everybody else. I just feel like I've got so much interaction with other AAs that this is pretty satisfying for my recovery, although I don't want to completely get away from my face to face meetings. It's kinda funny, I started the face to face meetings... I started going to those, and starting an agnostic meeting, I really believe in that and still do, but now I've gotten so busy with the online stuff that it's kind of taking me away from my face to face meetings. It's like everything, there's always that fight for balance.

0:57:28 Ben B.: For sure. I went to a meeting the other night, a friend of mine was getting an eight-year chip, and I was glad to go down and be there for that. I hadn't been at that meeting for a while, and gosh, like five different people were like, "Oh, it's nice to have you back" in kind of a snotty tone, and I'm just like... I don't know. I wrestle with all that back and forth. And being a little bit on the co-dependent side too, I'll feel guilty for not going to AA more, or not being more involved in this way or that. But those are the things that I work on in therapy, that I've got to work on letting go. Because...

0:58:00 John S.: You know I'm actually thinking about going to a regular meeting this weekend. A traditional meeting, 'cause I haven't been to one in a long time, just to see how I can deal with it. I don't know why I want to do that to myself.

[chuckle]

0:58:13 Ben B.: Sometimes the stinker in me just wants to go down there and see, "Well, let's see what all the dogmatists are saying," but I'm pleasantly surprised plenty of times too.

0:58:21 John S.: That's true. I mean, it's a lot of good people.

0:58:24 Ben B.: And there's a lot of people I know that are believers. They're more like the light believer, they aren't willing to say that they don't believe there's a God because they think it means you think there's no point to existence. But they're real laid back, and I know the meetings they go to and I know I would enjoy those and I have at times. I need to go to more evening meetings 'cause for a while there the way everything was working out I was going to a lot of noon meetings during the week, and that tends to get the 60 to 80 crowd. So you're gonna get a more conservative

mindset in those kind of meetings, and I think I would be well served to go to more evening meetings.

0:59:03 John S.: Did you say last weekend that you're gonna move?

0:59:05 Ben B.: Yes. Yeah. My wife and I are gonna move to Omaha. She teaches up there. She's got about a 40 minute drive each way, so since we've had our daughter, it's a little bit more important to be closer to her work.

0:59:17 John S.: Okay. Well, that will be interesting for you. I like Omaha. It's a nice city. They actually have, I think, a pretty nice community up there of people. I guess I don't know it as well like RJ does and everything, but I've always liked Omaha. I've always heard good things about it.

0:59:34 Ben B.: Yeah. There's a part of me that's excited to go up there and get an AA reboot. Like go up there and be in new meetings and meet new people and... Yeah, just be whoever I wanna be 'cause I have a history with people down here. I think in general I'm pretty well respected and liked around the rooms. I mean, there's some people who don't like me to say anything about not believing in God or being contrarian, 'cause I can play devil's advocate a lot, but in general I think people know that I'm educated about addiction and I think they think my heart's in the right place. Sometimes I don't share things the way I probably ideally should, but I feel like my motive is I want more people to be helped and to be able to be helped by AA. And maybe that's a bad motive, but I think there's a reason AA is shrinking.

1:00:24 John S.: Yeah, yeah.

1:00:27 Ben B.: And it's this unwillingness to evolve and grow and... I don't know. Around here, we're seeing those more fundamental meetings kinda slowly die off too.

1:00:37 John S.: Yeah, I find that interesting that that's happening. I don't think it's happening here so much. But like I say, I've kind of gotten out of the Kansas City AA scene, and I go more into the... Well, with my district in the service level I'm still active, but with the actual meetings and stuff, I'm not really into it. But they got some crazy groups here still.

1:01:03 Ben B.: Yeah. Well, and I've heard there are some pretty fundamental ones up around Omaha too, in the Bellevue area and whatnot, so we'll see how that goes out there. But yeah, I'm looking forward to it though. I know there's at least two free-thinking, agnostic-like meetings going on up there still, so...

1:01:20 John S.: We should do an undercover investigation in one of the crazy meetings or something, that would be kinda fun.

1:01:25 Ben B.: Yeah, yeah, it would. People would probably say that's not very principled, but there's once in a while where I'm thinking about writing an article for you, and I wanna go in and just take notes because it reminds me of what I don't... And I don't wanna be like I'm in there trying to be critical and tear the meeting apart, but sometimes it is nice when I go on Saturday mornings to this one meeting, it is just nice to sit in the back row and observe what goes on and... I don't know. Again, to me it's clarifying things. It's clarifying what I believe in, what I think works and doesn't work for myself. And it's the same thing I've been going through with questioning my upbringing and my parents and things like that lately. It's like I'm clarifying those things so that I can be a better parent for my daughter, I think.

1:02:09 John S.: Well, I've really enjoyed this conversation tonight. We've come up a little over an hour now. So it's really been good to hear your story and get to know you better. I've really enjoyed doing these podcasts with you.

1:02:21 Ben B.: Thanks, John. I've really, really enjoyed it too. It's been really fun. I feel like I kinda rambled around there, but...

1:02:27 John S.: No, you did fine.

1:02:27 Ben B.: Basically, I was a stuck-in-neutral person who was enabled by parents, who had some funds, and finally found a little bit of purpose in my life, and thanks to being sober and being an AA, it's definitely gotten a lot better.

1:02:40 John S.: You can sure see a lot of commonality in our stories. And in all alcoholics, there's always some kind of pain in our past. Maybe it's true for all human beings, but I kinda buy into that idea that there's something about alcohol that changes the way we feel, and we needed to have the way we feel changed, I guess. And we just kept chasing that until it took us under.

1:03:06 Ben B.: Well, I didn't say this earlier, but I feel like, now people get nervous when I say this, but I feel like alcohol allowed me to be myself for the first time in my life. That was the payoff that I got from it and that was a good thing, but it doesn't mean I should have used alcohol to do that. But that was the payoff. I needed to finally get to a point... And this is where I'm at now thanks to recovery: It's okay just to be me. And that's what alcohol did for me; it allowed me to be myself. Now, of course, that wasn't good long term. And I have to say that it's important for me to try and be what I thought alcohol allowed me to be, and just own it and be myself and be okay with that. That was the payoff. That was the payoff.

1:03:48 John S.: Alright, my friend. Well, thank you very much.

1:03:50 Ben B.: Yeah, thank you, John. I enjoyed it.

1:03:52 John S.: Well, that's it for another episode of AA Beyond Belief the podcast. Hope you enjoyed it. We'll be back soon enough with another episode for your listening pleasure. Until then, don't drink, go to meetings, and help others.

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