

INTERVIEW WITH AN ALCOHOLIC

David: When did your drinking behavior begin?

Gordon: I started drinking in my late teens, actually. Up until then I had been in athletics in prep school, and I just wasn't into alcohol. It didn't happen. But then after prep school, you get into college, and you get freedom, so to speak. I just got into it. Everyone did it.

David: Was there a point at which you feel your drinking behavior began to change?

Gordon: Yes. A change in quantity more than anything else. When I first started drinking, I hated the taste, and that never changed. But I began to like more what it did. It's like anything. A little salt is good, and then you put on a lot of salt. I did that with drinking. That occurred fairly soon after I began, within a couple of years, and actually continued right until the end of my drinking, I suppose, as my tolerance level became higher.

David: Looking back, when would you say you first became an alcoholic?

Gordon: From my own estimates, I think that there's a high probability that I was an alcoholic from the first time I picked up a drink. The first time I drank anything more than a glass of champagne at a family function or something of that nature, I went out on a date with a group of people, and we drank. I don't remember how many drinks I had in this night club in Boston. I don't remember driving the car back to Andover. I was in prep school at the time. And I was smashed. Right from the beginning. Whether I was an alcoholic per se at that point, I don't know, but my behavior certainly looked as if I was a prime candidate.

David: And that was very soon after you'd started?

Gordon: Very soon after I'd started.

David: I guess that would be a blackout.

Gordon: It was complete. I woke up in the morning and did not know how I got back to school. I looked out the window to see if the car was there.

David: And you were about 17 then?

Gordon: Yes. 17.

David: When eventually did you stop drinking?

Gordon: Oh, about 10 years ago. So I was about 33.

David: So that you drank for about 16 years?

Gordon: Yes. About that.

David: Did your behavior change toward the end of that 16-year period?

Gordon: Not any more so than it changed at any other point. My behavior was that of an addict. I drank because I'm alcoholic, and as my tolerance level increased and I had to have more to get to the level that I wanted, my behavior would change accordingly.

David: Did you have more and more blackouts?

Gordon: I'd say yes. I'm not really sure. I do know that the duration of the blackouts began to lengthen. For instance, when I was the national sales manager of a mattress company and flying all over the country, border to border, coast to coast, I'd take off and then two weeks later come home and really have no conscious memory of where I'd been and what I'd done. I could look back at the American Express bills as they flowed in, and the bank's checks as they came in, and reconstruct where I had been, and sometimes jog the memory a bit. But it became part of my behavior pattern to be able to go into a blackout for many weeks at a time.

David: Did there ever come a point where it began to interfere with your job?

Gordon: Well, sure. As a matter of fact, the more I drank, the more I got promoted and the more money I made.

David: Because you were drinking more?

Gordon: Not because I was drinking, but it happened that way. I went from salesman to regional sales manager to national sales manager to product manager and director of new products development. I went up the line in company size and in income, and did the same things that other people do. Of course, businessmen, you see, are evaluated only on profit. That's the sole criterion. And as long as you're turning in the profit, nobody really cares what you're doing, other than that.

David: For most of this time, when you were at college and when you started in your career, did you see that you had a problem?

Gordon: As a matter of fact, within a year after I first drank, some of my friends in college wisely tried to counsel me and say, "Hey, you have a problem. You behave differently when you drink than other people do." And, of course, I rejected it. I accepted that they had told me this, and I also realized that they were

well meaning. But of course, they were wrong. And up until the last couple of years of my drinking, I refused to accept the fact that I had a problem. The last couple of years of my drinking, I realized intellectually that I was an alcoholic, because, after all, you don't have to be stupid to be an alcoholic. If you read enough and match the symptoms of the disease with your own behavior, you have to come to this intellectual conclusion. "Okay, I'm an alcoholic." And then you say simply, "All right. An alcoholic is either completely wet or completely dry, and I chose to be completely wet." That's what I liked!

David: Did anything special happen? Did your career begin to flounder? What made you begin to accept it?

Gordon: No. I think it was a question of a general deterioration of everything all at once. The fabric of life is held together with threads and a little glue and so forth. The fairly strong ropes that I had once had become filament silken threads. And the heavy epoxy glue that I had once, had become flour paste. My interpersonal relationships were beginning to get hairy in certain cases. I found that I had to alter my behavior in order to start covering up for the drinking. For example, in the last few years of my drinking, I couldn't afford to have a drink at lunch because I knew, if I had one at lunch, that was all she wrote. I would continue to drink and be useless for the rest of the day.

David: And you were able to control that?

Gordon: Oh yes. Absolutely. If necessary, I could abstain for several days, a week, whatever was necessary. If I had to abstain for a four-day sales conference, for example, I could abstain for four days. But what I couldn't do would be to have one drink during that period.

David: Why did you then take a drink at the end of the four days?

Gordon: Because the motivation for my not drinking was over. I had to be able to perform. For example, at a national sales conference, when we had stockholders and salesmen and sales managers coming in, and I might be presenting a whole new advertising layout that was going to be costing 16 million dollars, and giving all of the information to the salesmen as to what they could do with the various things, I had to be sharp. I had to run the show, and I knew that I couldn't do it if I were drinking.

David: What did you get out of drinking? What was attractive?

Gordon: Nothing, except that I was addicted to alcohol. Why does an alcoholic drink? Because he's addicted to alcohol.

David: Was there anything about the state when you were sober that was unpleasant?

Gordon: Not particularly.

David: Were you running from anxieties?

Gordon: No. As far as my philosophy went, some people drank and some people didn't. I drank. It was part of my life-style.

David: Was it enjoyable, the state of drinking and being drunk?

Gordon: Oh no. No. Everyone of us has some fond remembrances of wild parties and the few times when you really got very gay and very high and it was lots of fun. But those were very few. Most of the time it was a bother. It really was because, for example, most states don't sell bottles of liquor on Sundays. So then you always have to remember to stock up on Saturday because, God knows, you can't be caught dry on Sunday.

David: You talked about having black-outs. Did you ever have any other symptoms of alcoholism?

Gordon: Oh, sure. I had hallucinations. Most of mine were auditory. I'd hear good music. I like good music and I'd be driving along in the car and be hearing a good Beethoven concerto. Or a fine rendition of a Chopin etude. I'd comment to others how great it was and, of course, they looked sort of blank because there wasn't anything. Or I'd hear organ music coming out of the walls. Towards the end a few visual hallucinations, but not very many. Most of them auditory. I didn't go into real alcohol convulsions. But I began to get a little bit of the uncontrolled shaking when removed from alcohol for a considerable period of time, like thirty minutes or so. Something like that.

David: Did those symptoms worry you? Did it worry you when you had hallucinations?

Gordon: Not really. By then, as I say, I knew I was an alcoholic. So I rather expected them. I felt as many alcoholics do – that, although these things might really interfere with someone else's life, as long as I knew what they were, they weren't going to interfere with mine.

David: So what determined you to change the behavior?

Gordon: Well, as I say, everything was falling apart. My interpersonal relationships in business were falling apart. My relationships with my wife, my children, all of my family, my social relationships. People with whom I had been very, very friendly and quite close, all of a sudden, no longer had any time for me at all. And, to me at least, this was terribly important, because my relationships with other people have always been the most important thing in my life. When I saw these

beginning to fall apart, then I recognized that something was wrong that I couldn't take care of. I could still take care of all my financial situations in a drinking mode. After all, I was spending at least thirty-five hundred dollars a year on my own personal booze. I could afford it. If I wrecked a car by driving it across railroad tracks (not at the crossing, but the real tracks) I could afford to buy a new one. So no problems there. As far as turning in a profit for my company, I was doing it very well. But I couldn't grasp why these interpersonal relationships were falling apart.

David: Before you decided to give up alcohol, was there any pressure on you from your colleagues or your friends either to keep drinking or to stop drinking?

Gordon: Not from my colleagues and friends. They were completely indifferent. Most of my friends, of course, were heavy drinkers too. I chose them that way. There was a slight bit of pressure from my family, but at that point I weighed about two hundred and eighty-five pounds. I'm large, and I've never been particularly gentle, and no one argues with a two hundred and eighty-five pound, six foot two drunk. They just don't tell you stop drinking. They're afraid of you.

David: But once you decided, they supported you in your attempts to stay dry?

Gordon: My family did of course, but my colleagues, a great many of them, did not like the fact that I was no longer drinking. They rather resented it, as a matter of fact.

David: Did they ever do things to try to encourage you to slip back?

Gordon: Oh yes. Particularly if it was someone who himself had a problem with drinking. One time I had a chap literally try to force a martini into my mouth. Fortunately a couple of my friends were there and were able to remove him before I pulverized him because, had he continued, I probably would have behaved rather badly to him.

David: Once you decided to try and get off alcohol, did you find it easy?

Gordon: Stopping drinking for short periods of time was fairly easy. I've talked to a lot of alcoholics who've said the same thing. It's the staying stopped that isn't easy. It's changing the whole behavior pattern to exclude from your life that substance which has become very important to you and your life-style. That was very difficult.

David: What kinds of things replaced alcohol?

Gordon: In the beginning a lot of sweets, a lot of candy and ice cream and this type of thing. Because the body is missing something, and the sugar is what it wants then. So that helps. But, outside of an initial period of that, nothing really replaced it. I

didn't smoke before and then suddenly turned to smoking to take its place or something of that nature.

David: It's not that alcohol was for you an escape and therefore you needed some other form of escape?

Gordon: Evidently not. I don't think of it in those terms in my own case.

David: Was it hard for you to stop then?

Gordon: Not really. The hard part for me was to accept the fact that I was going to become a non-drinking alcoholic, and I still sort of equated that with my stereotype of the reformed drunk, who is about as boring as an ex-Marine who went to Harvard. That's really quite awful. When they started with this sermonizing about booze all the time, that I didn't want to be. In my own mind, I'm allergic to alcohol. So I can't drink it. If I were allergic to cucumbers and they made me vomit every time I ate them, I wouldn't eat cucumbers. So I'm allergic to alcohol, and I don't drink it.

David: You view alcoholism as a disease?

Gordon: Yes. I view it as a disease that has both a physiological and a psychological component.

David: Thomas Szasz argues that to see alcoholism as a disease is a way of avoiding responsibility for it, a way of chickening out and saying, "It's not my fault, it's a disease I have."

Gordon: I think in some cases he may be completely correct. But we do know of cases of people who have become addicted to alcohol simply through their behavioral lifestyle, through habit-patterns, who have never had the need to use it as an escape mechanism or as a reward but, simply as a part of their social existence, drank what other people did, about the same quantities, and they become addicted. Now why should they have become addicted and not everyone in that whole social group. There must be some physiological difference. That is what I contend. Some people are able to slip into this addiction, and others are not.

David: I guess that's how most alcoholics feel about alcoholism. That it is that kind of disease?

Gordon: Yes.

David: Do you see yourself as responsible for what you did?

Gordon: I feel, of course, that every person is responsible for what they do. Do I feel guilt? No! Not at all. I wouldn't feel guilty if I had become a diabetic. So I don't feel guilty because I became an alcoholic. Even if I were to accept this idea that it's a self-induced thing, that people have the choice of drinking or not drinking, and so therefore alcoholism is self-induced, I would say that I couldn't feel any guilt because I've grown up in a society in which drinking is such a part of that society and in a society where a young man proves his masculinity by being able to go out and down a few drinks. With that kind of peer and social pressure on me to drink in my early days, how in the world could I feel guilty about having acquired this disease?

David: What were the attitudes towards alcohol in your home when you were a child?

Gordon: Alcohol was served on a daily basis in my home. It was served to adults only. Children were not expected to partake and, actually, when I began to drink, I encountered a certain amount of parental opposition to my drinking. But nonetheless, I come from a very long line of drunks. My mother (who is still living) is an alcoholic, and I wouldn't call anyone that who doesn't say so themselves, by the way. And, if my father wasn't an alcoholic, he'd do until one came along. Tracing back family history, there's been a very high percentage of people that drank a lot.

David: Did they forbid drink for the young children because of their own alcohol problems?

Gordon: I don't really know. It's just that this was part of the behavior of our family -- that youngsters didn't drink. But once you attained that mythical adulthood, why then one drank.

David: So you would never have been served alcohol in your home?

Gordon: No

David: About up to age when?

Gordon: Up to age seventeen, but certainly not as a young teenager.

David: Did you ever have any anxiety about whether you would follow in your relative's footsteps?

Gordon: Not particularly. I just accepted that as a way of life. Older people drank. Younger people didn't. Sometimes older people drank too much. And sometimes it was funny when they did.

David: The fact that you had relatives who were alcoholics, did that make it easier for you to accept that you might have the same problem?

Gordon: I didn't even consider it, at that point, as a problem. Again, in my way of thinking at that time, there were those who drank, and then there were a bunch of hymn-singing, sermonizing people, who didn't drink, who didn't really know how to lead the gracious life, so to speak. But alcohol and serving drinks were always just a part of my social life. I belonged to a society that drank.

David: But which didn't permit its children to drink. Did you used to drink illicitly?

Gordon: No. When I started to drink, this caused a certain degree of upset with my parents. They didn't like me beginning to drink. But on the other hand, once I had begun to drink and would have to be brought home because I had completely passed out, they accepted that. In some cases they would even think it was funny, because that is what people did when they drink, at least in the society in which I moved.

David: And in a way they provided the role model for you. This is how people behave.

Gordon? Yes. That's why I think it's so difficult to try to determine what portion of this disease is genetically inherited and what portion in environmentally induced. Or is it both? Is there some interaction? We don't know. Enough research has not been done yet. There are so many differences between groups who are into drinking that it's pretty hard to do the research. I've done some empirical research myself on the behavior of alcoholic executives and the differences between the behavior of that group as opposed to alcoholic blue collar workers, and there are considerable differences in their behavior patterns. We really don't know why yet. We're just beginning to develop some statistical base for realizing that there is a difference. Now we have to look at why.

David: How would you describe yourself as a child? What kind of person were you?

Gordon: Well, I had the benefit of a very good prep school education. I was physically in very good shape. Athletics, football, the whole route. Mentally advanced beyond what would be considered normal in our society. But because I was taken out of the family and put into that kind of mold, and possibly for other reasons too, emotionally retarded. So that, by the time I was through prep school, I was able to coast through my first year or so of college without cracking a book. Very well prepared at that level. Able to go right into playing college football. And have a gay old time with partying the rest of the time because I didn't have to study. But emotionally I hadn't been living with a family group. I'd been sort of sequestered with a bunch of boys since I was nine. And a little behind in that respect. Looking back, I don't think I was especially happy, or especially unhappy.

David: When you began drinking, was there a lot of peer pressure on you? Was it the thing that was done at prep school?

Gordon? Yes. It was. It was a lark to go into Boston, and go to a night-club, and be served. There's status in looking old enough to have someone serve you. But no particular pressures either way, that I can remember, of any great nature.

David: Skipping forward to when you decided to try and be dry, did you have any relapses?

Gordon: No. Once I decided to change my behavior and not drink, I stopped drinking. I said, "OK. This is it." If you define a relapse as picking up another drink, no. I haven't had a relapse. Have I ever begun to behave in the same type of mode as I would have behaved had I continued to drink? Yes. There has been that kind of psychological relapse. But not a physiological relapse.

David: Could you elaborate that?

Gordon: A lot of people refer to that as a dry drunk. The type of situation where, even though you're perfectly sober and haven't ingested any alcohol at all, the behavior is such that you have the same type of resentments against people that often build up when you're really into drinking heavily. The only way I know how to describe it is a dry drunk, and it occasionally happens. Of course, it's a lot easier to cope with it when you realize that it's happening and you haven't ingested the alcohol because you can simply say, "Hey, I'm behaving like a damn fool. I'm behaving as I would behave if I were drinking. Just stop this."

David: That was interesting what you said about resentments building up against other people. That used to happen when you drank?

Gordon: Oh sure. Because if people don't understand what an alcoholic is going through, they begin to behave as if he ought to know what he's doing - that he ought, for instance, to feel guilty. When they behave that way toward you, often you don't have any real way to get back at them. An alcoholic, when he's drinking, is a very weak person. Not powerful at all. He knows this because he's susceptible to all sorts of societal damnation. When he's coming home late at night and he manages to side-swipe his car into the garage and stumble twice going up the stairs, he knows that people are saying things behind his back. Yet he's defenseless. He can't get back at them, so he builds up resentments against them.

David: Has there been much stigma attached to you for being an alcoholic?

Gordon: Not really. Partly because of the society in which I moved, which has been at the business executive level and now in the academic area, with people who understand more about alcoholism than perhaps other segments of society would.

And partly because, just laying it out frankly, my size. Nobody is really going to get down on me about something like that. They don't want to challenge me that way. So no real problems.

David: You're quite happy to admit that you're an alcohol. You talk about it. You don't find any stigma attached?

Gordon: Not really. Sure, there are a few people who think in medieval terms, who like to talk about things like that behind someone's back. They'll find something to talk about anyway, so it doesn't bother me. I think that it does a certain amount of good to bring this out in the open, as with any kind of behavior, and, for that reason, I do it.

David: You also are interested in helping other alcoholics. What motivates that?

Gordon: Selfishness. Pure selfishness. If I help other alcoholics, it reduces the possibility of my going back into a drinking mode.

David: How?

Gordon: Because that kind of behavior is so opposed to the kind of behavior of a drinking mode that it reinforces my desire to not drink. I have to constantly reinforce that desire to not drink because I've never lost the desire to drink. I'm an alcoholic. I will be until the day I die. That latent desire, that latent addiction is there. All that it will take to get it into full bloom again is a couple of ounces of alcohol into my system, and then I'd be off to the races. With that there, the only thing that I can do is to constantly reinforce a stronger desire to not drink, and overlay that on top of the addiction. One of the ways I can do it, of course, is by working with other alcoholics.

David: You also mentioned that you tend to the view that alcoholism runs in families, and that there is a genetic basis to it. Do you have any fears for your children?

Gordon: Certainly. If fear is the right word. I strongly suggest to my children that they not drink because, with the amount of alcoholism in their background, the statistical probability is that they are alcoholics. Even though we have proven no causative relationships, statistically my children have about a seventy-five percent probability of becoming alcoholics, if they drink. That's all I can tell them. I tell them that I can't forbid them not to drink. We live in a drinking society. If they choose to drink, that's what I think their odds are.

David: Do they drink?

Gordon: No. None of them are eighteen yet. Legally, they're not allowed to. So we'll have to wait and see.

