

AA STRENGTHENED MY IDENTITY AND SENSE OF BELONGING

I am a Wuthathi and Meriam woman. My people originally come from the eastern tip of Cape York Peninsula and Murray Island in the Torres Strait. I grew up in Cairns and later in Canberra when my family moved there as a young child in the 1970s. Both of my parents worked in Government.

I had a good education as the eldest of three children. Growing up was mostly a happy time. Although my parents drank, they were functioning and sociable people. I knew what alcohol was at a young age because my parents always had parties and people would come to our house and stay with us on many occasions. The childhood of both of my parents' had not been as fortunate. They were, in many respects, both orphans, reared up by white foster grand-parents and extended family/cousins.

I can't really remember my first drink. I suspect that when I was young, I had a sip of my parent's wine or beer. But I do remember being about 15 or 16 years old and feeling tipsy for the first time at one of my birthday parties. A group of girlfriends were sleeping over at our house and we had tipped alcohol in some punch and were giggly. I remember feeling the numbing or dizzy effect of alcohol from the get go.

I drank regularly from then on, mainly on weekends with my girlfriends, at parties – the usual teenage pattern and by the time I was 18, I had left school and went to study at university in Sydney. My drinking was in full-flight. I drank every weekend and some week nights, depending on my studies and finances, as I didn't have a lot of money back then. I remember often being sick, vomiting or dry-retching in the back of someone's car, going out with friends and ending up in strange places with people I didn't know. I thought that this behaviour was pretty normal for most girls my age. I had a boyfriend whilst at university and lived with my sister and one of my best friends at the time. We studied and drank together as students. My favourite drink was scotch and coke but I took to drinking beer at the uni bar by the schooner, often drinking late into the evenings and waking up having to go to uni with a horrific hangover. Again, I thought this was normal behaviour.

Somehow I graduated from university in my early 20s and I moved back to Cairns to work for a company and travelled often to communities in Cape York. I was drinking every night with colleagues and partying on weekends with my so-called friends. I was constantly hungover and often ended up in strange places, not knowing how or why I got there. Occasionally I would pass out. There was one occasion at university when someone spiked my drinks and I woke up two or three days later with no idea what had happened. It scared me and I lived in a lot of fear from then onwards, not knowing what I had done or what others thought about me and my drinking. I carried that shame for a long time.

By the time I was in my late 20s, I had had a few unsuccessful relationships which often ended in drunken fights in which I would awaken the next morning in more shame and guilt. I had moved from Cairns to Sydney to Canberra and back again, doing a number of 'geographicals', only to take me with me wherever I went. I seemed to attract drama. I was constantly struggling and broke and although it may have appeared that I dressed well and had it all together on the outside, I was tired and burnt out on the inside. I felt mentally exhausted. Alcohol was my fix – the one thing that kept me going; the one thing I looked forward to at the end of the day or week.

I started to lose friends and isolate from family. I certainly wasn't very happy. I was often fearful of being alone and didn't like other people very much. Yet, strangely you would have thought I was incredibly sociable and happy if you had have met me back then. It was all a

façade that would come crumbling down – the slow and progressive nature of alcoholism was well in train.

I had my first child when I was 30 years old. I'd met her father at a pub in Redfern and fell pregnant within a month of meeting him. We had a second child soon after. He was a chronic alcoholic, a fall-down drunk and needless to say, our relationship did not last long. I moved away again to Queensland (another geographical) only this time with 2 young babies and no support around me. My drinking got worse. I drank heavily daily. I was depressed and struggling, financially and emotionally.

At this point, I moved to the Gold Coast and we rented a small unit in a complex right next door to a community hall where I attended my very first AA meeting. I had literally walked past the hall every day and saw the AA sign outside. I had no idea what AA was. Although we had a family friend who had gone to AA many years ago so I must have known a bit about it. I certainly didn't know about the 12 step program or that I would have maintain total abstinence if I was to stop drinking.

I remember that people were very friendly at my first meeting. They kept offering me tea and coffee, neither of which I drank at that stage. I felt as though everyone was 'white' and different to me. I felt as though I had walked into a religious cult or country hall meeting. But I stayed for about 3 months and didn't drink which was a miracle. I also met some good people who I thought were quite mad but subsequently have turned out to be long-standing members of AA and I consider them my friends today.

But I eventually left AA and then I did what seemed like the only sensible thing for an alcoholic to do at that point - I married another alcoholic. Although this time, my marriage lasted several years. We had some happy times and I could drink to oblivion most nights. We partied hard and the kids could do whatever they wanted. We always had people staying at our house or other people's kids sleeping over. I wasn't always completely drunk, but soon the fighting began and I would frequently leave the house and take the kids to a motel in the middle of the night. My husband was abusive and mean. Still, because of my upbringing, I believed that I had to stay in the marriage until death – which ironically was what I did when I look back at it. Things got so bad that everyone could see that I was drinking myself to death. I was frequently crying and depressed, always broke and I couldn't see a way out of my despair. I tried to leave my husband on a few occasions only to return and repeat the cycle over again.

Several years later, finally in October 2008, I got so sick that I reached out for help and rang the Alcohol and Other Drugs Helpline at the local hospital. They asked me to come in for an appointment. I was drunk. I can't remember what my blood alcohol reading was at the time but it was quite high. They had suggested that I go to detox at the hospital in Brisbane and made arrangements for me to be admitted the next day. I spent 5 days in hospital. I was shivering and shaking but by the end of the week, I was willing to go back to AA and give it another shot. I was exhausted, lost and physically, emotionally and spiritually bankrupt.

I eventually left my husband and moved out with the kids and went back to AA. He had been drinking one night and threatened to burn the house down. I was about 3 months sober. I ran next door to my neighbour's house and contacted the local women's helpline. The next day the girls and I went to a women's refuge. We stayed there for a few weeks while I attended meetings, went back to work and soon got a place of our own close to the girls' school. We had left the house with nothing but the clothes on our back and I had to start all over again. But this time I was determined not to go back – to my failed marriage or to the grog.

I went to AA meetings, sometimes 2 or 3 meetings a day. I worked full-time. I went back to study at university. The girls were doing well at school and they were happy. We didn't have much money but I was taking on service positions in AA and with the unconditional love and support of my sponsor, I started to get well in recovery.

I am 10 years sober now. I have had many service positions in AA and have sponsored many other women in the program. My life has completely changed. My kids are now grown up and proud of who I am. They have grown up with AA and met many of my AA friends. I have genuine friendships today. I have a job that I love where I get to help others who are struggling, often with alcohol as well. I work in a profession where I am actively involved in the healing journey of our people. I am widely-known and well-respected in my community. I can give back today. I have so many tools and principles that I use in my life on a daily basis to help navigate life. I have a close relationship with God, my Higher Power.

But most of all, I have peace and serenity. By learning about the AA's Steps and Traditions, I have been able to practice these principles in my daily life, one day at a time. I have renewed enthusiasm and passion for life in general. Each day is a day when I wake up and ask God to help me help others. My life is full and rich. I rarely think about drinking. I know it is poison for me and for my kids, my family and our communities. I want everyone to have what I have been given. I want every Aboriginal person who struggles with the grog to find AA and to find this life beyond our wildest dreams in the fourth dimension. It is an amazing spiritual journey. When I first came to AA I thought it was so counter-cultural and foreign to me and my identity as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander woman. Today, I know that AA is the best thing that ever happened to me and that AA is a deeply spiritual program that works for anyone who wants it – regardless of who we are or where we come from. Ironically, AA has strengthened my identity and sense of belonging as a proud Indigenous woman and member of a phenomenal worldwide fellowship.

Toni J