

A few years back, I took a new call in a new city. It was ministry that promised all sorts of new challenges, some even beyond my expertise and experience. But I was ready and excited. I had outgrown my old job and stayed too long. If I wasn't burned out, I had gotten crispy on the edges. I was ready to leave and start this new ministry. And it was what I was hoping for. It felt like *real* ministry—it felt right, and I felt happy. And this joy was met with praise and affirmation from people among whom I ministered. My family were happy. Everything was great. Or rather, everything seemed great.

You see, I was—I *am*—an alcoholic.

I don't have tales of woe to share, because that isn't my story. I was—I *am*—like a lot of alcoholics: the kind who look like everything is fine when everything is not fine. And that's how I managed things for a long time: keeping up the appearance that everything was great, that I was on top of it. I just needed a few drinks, six or seven maybe, to numb out that nagging, persistent feeling that I was not OK. Don't show them you're weak, and have another drink. That's how it went.

I wasn't in denial. I had known for a long while that I had a problem. I knew that I was an alcoholic. I had tried to cut back, to take a break, to dry out, to quit. But I just kept drinking. During that time I perceived a greater problem than my drinking: I was an alcoholic priest. And there was no way that I could, as a priest, be an alcoholic, much less admit to being one! I mean, if anyone found out... The people I pastored would surely lose all confidence in me. I'd probably lose my job. My clergy colleagues would surely tag me as a loser. And if my bishop ever found out? Well, if he only removed me from my position, I'd be lucky. More likely, I'd be inhibited, or worse.

It was this kind of thinking that kept me drinking.

I can remember days when I woke up the first thought I would have would be to figure out when I could have my first drink. There were afternoons where I knew, even as I told myself that I wasn't going to drink, that I did not want to drink—I knew, that once I had that first drink in me, those silly feelings would drift away.

I don't know what happened. It wasn't any kind of calamity. It didn't seem like the hitting of rock bottom that I had hitherto heard described. But I came to a point where I knew—priest or not—that if I didn't do something, it wasn't going to end well.

I was scared—of all the things I mentioned and then some. I called a friend, a priest I knew who was in recovery (Ironically, all the people I knew in recovery at the time were ordained clergy). My friend listened to me without judgment. He spoke to me with compassion. He was cheerful and honest. He suggested some things I might do. I went to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. I admitted that I was powerless over alcohol, that my life had become unmanageable. I began what has become a wonderful and surprising journey of recovery. And I continued in my ministry where I found new challenges and fulfillment.

For a good while, only my immediate family knew. I didn't even tell my parents for a while. Later I made the careful decision to privately disclose my alcoholism with a few close friends. After that, a few clergy colleagues. And after several years, I made the decision to tell my bishop that I was an alcoholic. The news was met with thanksgiving and encouragement. All of these people showed me great empathy and support for which I am deeply grateful. I didn't need to broadcast it widely. Like most recovering alcoholics, I don't wear it on my sleeve. I wasn't compelled to share it with anyone. I shared when I was ready, and only because I felt it was important to my ongoing recovery. And thankfully, none of the awful things I had imagined would come from admitting my alcoholism came to pass.

If you are a member of the clergy and you think you might have a drinking problem, I know what it's like. I know what you are going through, and I know where you are and where you've been because I've been there before. And I know that there is a way out. You can find healing and recovery.