

It was a few Sundays after Easter, and I was assisting a retired, part-time priest at a smaller family service. We had finished up serving communion when he gestured to the rather full chalice of consecrated wine sitting on the credence table. Of course, back when I was still drinking, I wouldn't have had a second thought about downing the leftover communion wine, reverently, of course. But this was something that I couldn't do anymore. Since getting sober this wasn't the sort of circumstance I had really given any thought to happening. I didn't know what to do or say.

I tried to do that thing where I held up both hands and politely shook my head, the way you do when someone insistently offers you a second piece of cake at a dinner party, "No, no. I simply couldn't," in non-verbal cues.

Well, he looked at me funny. It wasn't rude; it was more confusion, like he thought I had misunderstood him.

"I can't," I whispered. "I'm an alcoholic." It just came spilling out of my mouth. I think if I hadn't have exhibited some restraint I may have clapped my hands over my mouth. That was how much I couldn't believe that I had said it.

"Oh," there was a mild look of surprise followed by a reassuring smile. "Well, sobriety does make getting up in the morning easier," he whispered in my ear with a gentle pat on my shoulder.

And that is how I told the first person who wasn't my wife or a recovering alcoholic that I was an alcoholic. It wasn't how I expected it would have happened.

Before and since that encounter, I spent a lot of time wondering what it would be like for someone to find out I was an alcoholic. Would they be surprised or understanding? Would they treat me differently than they did before they found out my big secret? Would they tell anyone? Would they judge me?

Sometime later—it could have been weeks or months—I was out grocery shopping, when I caught a young woman eyeing me on the bread aisle. Her friendly smile was familiar.

"Aren't you...umm...a friend of... Bill's?" she asked. It's a way that recovering alcoholics sometimes ask another alcoholic about their recovery usually when it's outside of a meeting so as to safeguard their anonymity. The "Bill" in question is Bill Wilson, one of the founders of AA.

I told her I was. We determined that we were both semi-regular attendees of a particular meeting in town. We chatted for a while. She had more time in the program than I did and knew a lot more of the people at the meeting we attended.

"I never know if I should 'recognize' people outside of meetings," she said. "But it's always funny to recognize someone at a meeting that you know from the outside."

I spent a lot of time wondering how my life in recovery would fit into, well, my "regular" life, with my family, among my friends, in my work and ministry. (Especially in my work and ministry.) Accordingly, even though I hadn't suffered much misadventure because of my drinking, over time I discovered the

extent to which I had alienated myself from my family and friends, from my ministry, and even from a reasonable sense of my own identity. There have been other occasions where I would encounter folks—where my life “in the in the rooms” where I attended AA meetings and my life out in the real world would cross paths.

Over time, with guidance from the fellowship of AA, my sponsor and other recovering alcoholics (some of them clergy), I began to live a more integrated life. I grew less afraid of myself—of being a priest and in recovery. And the various aspects of my life found renewed connection.