

George

Loaves & Fishes is a Sacramento charity dedicated to feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless and any person who comes for such assistance is called a “guest”. In the mid-90’s George was a guest. He was also an alcoholic and had been for many years, probably for more than a decade. Tall and broad shouldered with brown hair, he could have been in his late 40s or early 50s – a youngish looking man.

Alcoholism comes in many sizes, but George wore the largest size available. On many days the police paddy wagon would find him collapsed face down in a vacant lot or alley or even in a downtown gutter – George was one of their regulars.

Much to my surprise, everyone liked George, especially the staff of Loaves & Fishes who knew him the best. A nice guy, friendly and considerate, genuine, a warm human being with a good sense of humor, they would say. And yet, at the end of the day, he was a drop-dead drunk.

Whether measured in months or years, alcohol would certainly kill George unless he stopped drinking. Everyone knew what needed to be done and of course, he knew it too. Staff members talked with him about the need to stop drinking and pledged their help if he would agree. He listened politely, but it was to no avail. Life trudged on, George continued to pass out, and he was still very much liked when he was sober enough to communicate.

No one knows why, but one day he said he wanted to sober up and needed some help to do so. Months later George undertook the life of a recovering alcoholic and he looked terrific! New clothes, well groomed and with a professional haircut, his transformation was amazing, in fact, those of us who saw him only occasionally barely recognized him. What happened? What was so powerful in George’s life that would cause him to cast off a decade of alcoholism and begin a life of sobriety? If he knew, he didn’t say.

Shortly thereafter, he announced that his sister had invited him to a family reunion and he had agreed to go. This would be the first time in many years his siblings would see him sober. He looked forward to the occasion and to the approval and support he was sure to receive. After his return, all went well until he began to drink again. This time the staff actively intervened and convinced George he should enter a highly touted rehab program in Oregon open only to veterans. He agreed to do so, arrangements were made. He stayed for a week, walked away and returned home. He continued to drink but many said it wasn’t as bad as before, that he was trying, and there was good reason to hope he would recover again. After all, he had done it once already.

Some weeks later, George collapsed face down in a vacant lot and when found was pronounced dead. The cause of death was intoxication.

I don't know what to make of this true story. Is there any lesson to be learned? Could anything have been done to bring about a better result? Or is this story only about George and the personal cross he was unable to bear?

What I know about alcoholism wouldn't fill a thimble but I do know this much: in New York City alone more than 25,000 people are hospitalized and 1,500 people die every year from alcohol-related injuries and illnesses. Our country is filled with Georges.