

Right from my first drink I had a bad relationship with alcohol. Alcoholism in some way influenced and impacted my life from a young age. My Dad drank, my uncles drank, my grandad drank, my mum had periods where she drank, my mums boyfriends drank and these are just a few instances. My mum had 3 boyfriends and all 3 were alcoholics. One boyfriend would in occasions grab me by the throat when I was 10 year old after he had been to the pub and throw me up against the wall whilst screaming in my face. I have always said throughout my life that I would rather have took the beatings from boyfriend number 2 than the mental torture that boyfriend number 3 inflicted, he actually ended up becoming my mums husband so this torture from that man actually carried on well into my 20's even after I joined the army. This however was not the reason I picked up a drink but it was to be one of the many excuses that I would use to justify my drinking.

A lot of debate goes into whether our experiences and life choices are a result of nature or nurture. Looking at my alcoholism I have questioned many times whether it is in my DNA? There is evidence to suggest it could be just by looking at men life. my dad died of alcoholism, and excess alcohol use was always part my wider families lifestyle. This could easily suggest that it may very well be within my DNA. I am of the belief though that I am shaped from my environment.

I had learned from an early age that you drink to get drunk, when I got drunk for the very first time at around 13-14 I drank excess amounts as I believed the only reason to have any alcohol was to get drunk.

When I was 15 I started drinking with my mates on a Friday and Saturday night and it was always with the intention to get drunk. I remember one night at around 16 I drank a bottle of thunderbird and a bottle of merry down cider which subsequently knocked me ill. I was unable to walk properly and was throwing up everywhere, but this still did not deter me. At around 17 I remember another occasion where I drank a bottle of Buckfast, a bottle of QC cherry and a bottle of Tudor rose. Again, I was ill and throwing up, I was unable to walk and had to be carried home. This is not normal behaviour for a teenager to be partaking in, but this type of behaviour had been normalised when I was growing up from my family and family friends. These are only 2 instances and there are many more where I would drink to extreme measures getting myself in some very unsafe situations, I would continually knock myself ill and impact relationships, and eventually nearly destroying my closest relationships. My relationship with alcohol started off as a very bad toxic relationship and this progressed throughout my life.

I joined the army in 2001 and I found a whole new level of drinking. Alcohol was massively encouraged in the army, work hard play hard. During basic training though I was unable to drink, however when the opportunity did arise I went over the top and many times got myself into many stupid situations getting myself into all kinds of trouble. I inherited the nickname of the social hand grenade at times from several people in my early years due to my ability to flip at the drop of a hat.

For the majority of my 14 year army career I would drink the majority of nights. During the week I would have 12 cans of lager which I was then most of the time able to get up the next day and somewhat function. However when the weekends came all bets were off and I would drink crates of lager sometimes more than 30-40 cans over the weekend, with many times carrying on through the night and well into the next day. The army encouraged drinking, every function, every team bonding, every social event was done with alcohol involved. Very rarely was it a small amount, it was often to get completely wasted. One night out was planned and it was to play pub golf, I refer to this as a night out however like many functions this started in the early afternoon. Another group bonding planned function was a day at the races where we all started drinking at 0900hrs and carried on until the next day. When other activities such as adventure training were planned the emphasis was always on drinking and was highly encouraged. Usually adventure training included climbing up a mountain or kayaking somewhere with the intention of getting in the pub straight after to get plastered. Even on exercise going away for weeks at a time we would bring crates of lager along with us we would just hide them in the trucks. This level of drinking over the years got progressively worse.

I went on my first tour of Afghanistan in 2009 and when I returned the amount I was drinking increased. Before I went to Afghan I was drinking between 3-4 nights a week. When I got back it had increased to everyday. At some point during the tour every soldier is awarded R&R (rest and recuperation) which is awarded to every soldier with the aim to break up the tour to give them a break from war. This is rolled out on a staggered system to ensure everyone receives it. Mine was nearer the end of that tour and I was flown into Brize Norton and taken to Heathrow airport. The flight to Edinburgh was not for another 6 hours and the staff bumped me and my friend up to business class for the wait. This was probably due to us being in desert combats. We both in that 6 hours made a serious impact on the free beers in the fridge. I stumbled off of that plane at Edinburgh where my wife and kids were waiting to see there Dad, who they hadn't seen for 4 and a half months and there I was unable to walk in a straight line, the next 2 weeks of my R & R were spent in the exact same way.

This style of drinking had become my normal everyday life, get drunk at night, get up the next morning, do what I needed to do which often included P.E followed by a full days work then repeat the cycle again. As long as I had no more that 12-14 cans of lager on a working night then I was able to carry on the next day regardless of how ill I was. Every morning I would throw up but this still did not deter me. I completed 2 tours of Afghanistan and several other deployments to many other countries in a career spanning 14 years. My drinking got progressively worse and in the last 2 years of my career I was hitting levels of depression that I now know where seriously detrimental to my health and wellbeing, but at the time I did not know that this was what was happening to me. I left the army in 2016 and started working in garages as an HGV mechanic. My drinking did not change and even though I swore it would many a times,

where I would swear to myself once I move to this new place, or once I start this new job I will quit drinking during the week and only drink on weekends but this never happened and the same cycle that became my norm continued on and on.

Phoning in sick for work began to become a regular occurrence which subsequently resulted in me losing jobs. Even though this was all caused by the amount of alcohol I was consuming I was still in complete denial about my alcoholism. The strain on my relationship with my family was now at breaking point, my wife was hurting, my children were hurting, even my family up in Scotland were hurting. That is the power of addiction, the ripple effect does not just impact and consume the person who is using. It ripples out and affects everyone with ties to the afflicted addict going from family members to extended friends. It even has the power to disrupt the lives of people even when they live in other countries. I remember my wife once asking me the question why do you drink David? She asked this with complete despair, bewilderment and with a sense of exhaustion. The only answer I could give was that it does not feel like real life if I weren't drunk, and this sad to say had become my reality because that was the only truthful answer I could give.

My older brother who lived in Germany became involved at this point as my alcoholism was now impacting impacting him, he convinced me to make an appointment with the GP, as he was convinced I had undiagnosed PTSD. I made the appointment and when I seen the doctor she disregarded everything that was going on for me. She continued to tell me that PTSD symptoms do not show themselves years after an event takes place, symptoms only come months after, therefore according to her I did not have PTSD. This appointment very nearly killed me due to this doctor's obvious lack of education. I walked out of this appointment even more angry, bitter, and resentful than I already was. I had already been failed by the Army throughout the last 6 years of my career but here I was yet again getting failed and looked down upon but this time by a doctor. I was ready to give up at this point but again it was my brother in Germany who after hearing what this doctor had said found numbers for army mental health services and passed them onto me. I phoned them and got an appointment with one of them, this service put me in contact with Hartlepool mind services which is where I started receiving 1-1 counselling sessions. However these sessions did not last long and before I knew it I was hitting even more new lows.

In 2017 I had my first suicide attempt, my poor wife came downstairs at 3am one morning to find me with a large kitchen knife at my throat. The point of the blade was against my throat, and the handle was against the wall. I was ready to throw myself onto the knife with no thought of the fact of who may find me. My children could have found me but that thought did not enter my head, I just wanted this pain and suffering to be over. This was not an isolated incident and there were many others, including moments when the police had to be called to ensure my own safety after I had absconded in the

middle of the night. Looking back, I can see how selfish and self involved I was to think that I was the only one who was suffering. The pain and suffering were not only felt by me but by my family as well.

It was at this time of my life where I can identify to be the beginning of my recovery as this was the first time I accepted help. My mother-in-law who knew about my battle with my mental state but not the extent of my alcoholism came across a group that was being started in the willows for veterans by a man named Paul Reynolds. The willows was the drug and alcohol centre that was just off Raby road. Never would I have ever for any reason had have walked into a drug and alcohol centre, a feeling of false pride would never have let me but as this was a veteran group I decided to attend.

When I attended the first veterans' group there was myself, Paul and 2 other veterans in the room, I ended up sharing that I had been drinking excessively and Paul had then asked if me and him could have a chat. We talked and Paul offered to me to go under the services offered by the drug and alcohol team to which I accepted but only as a 1:1 basis. Eventually after several months of meetings with Paul I agreed to try out the groups that were being offered in the willows. Whilst attending these groups I found that my attitude towards drug addiction and alcoholism changed. Before this point I looked down my nose at drug addicts. I believed that I was better than a drug addict, I mean let's face it I only used alcohol, and I did not sponge or rob to get my alcohol. I now know this to be a very narrow minded and idiotic viewpoint. An addict is an addict and I was myself stooping to some low levels to get my fix. I would manipulate my wife to get money; I would manipulate my children to get their birthday money to which I would promise to give back but often I did not. I am not proud of these moments and they are very shameful but these was the low's my addiction took me to. It did not matter that I was not robbing shops, I was robbing my own family not just financially but emotionally as well and this to me was deplorable.

I began attending the programme at the willows and all the things that were laid on, this varied from lessons on topics such as dealing with addictions and how to cope, how to maintain and understand your feelings as well as cooking classes entitled good food, good mood. I also regularly attended meetings with my alcohol support worker, who continued supporting me. Paul had begun suggesting the possibility of looking at aid from veteran services with the possibility of gaining some funding for rehab.

One thing I have come to discover since I got sober is that the opposite of addiction is connection. Addiction isolates the user therefore the more connections a person has the greater chance they have of learning to live with addiction. The reason I say live with and not beat is because I have come to realise that my alcoholism is always going to be a part of me and a part of who I am, I have over the years found a way to make it work for me and not against me. It was such a huge part of my life for so long that it cant just disappear however with each passing day that has come since I put the drink down I

have learned more and more tools to implement it into my daily life and make it work for me and to my advantage.

In 2019 one of the veteran mental health teams visited me at my home, my mental health was at a complete low. The 2 men who came from the service were doing an assessment on me in my house for well over an hour and at the end of the assessment proceeded to tell me that they could and would not work with me as I was in active addiction. I tried to plead my case that I was drinking because of my head but they would not budge from this viewpoint and left me in my house even more demoralised than I already was. It was the next day that a nurse from that same service phoned me and apologised at the outcome from that meeting as they had received a call from Paul. She asked if she could come and see me which she did and she told me about Tom Harrison house, a veteran and blue light treatment centre in Liverpool, it is the only one in the whole country. She told me that she would get me in there and she was not going to rest until she does. That nurse kept her promise, and she even would go on to phone me from Australia when visiting her daughter to see how I was getting on.

In 2020 with funding from Hartlepool borough council, the royal British legion, and the army I was accepted into Tom Harrison house and given a date to start. When I was due to go however I was hospitalised with pancreatitis, this pain was the worst pain I had felt in my life and at this point I remember swearing off of alcohol forever as this was something I did not want to ever feel again, it was a horrible pain. I managed to stay off alcohol for a whole 2 days once I was discharged from hospital and it was not long after this that I was readmitted. I finally went into treatment in July of 2020 and ended up spending 18 weeks there. The same attitude that I always had, stayed with me throughout my 18 weeks of pointing the finger and blaming everyone else for my decisions, displaying the poor me attitude constantly and accepting no responsibilities for my actions. This type of mentality can only head in one direction, deeper into a dark place and that is the way it went, very quickly back to alcohol in November 2020.

This carried on until August 2021 when yet again Tom Harrison house agreed to take me back for a 6-week boot camp but on the understanding that it was not a revolving door and this was to be my last opportunity with them. In between sept 20 and Aug 21, I was diagnosed officially with complex PTSD from a psychologist as I had been under the care of the mental health community team in Hartlepool and had been attending appointments with a clinical psychiatric nurse. On the 31st of July 2021 I had my last drink and on the 02nd of August 2021 I went down to Tom Harrison to begin my bootcamp. I realised at this point that rock bottom was not where you break, it was where you stop pretending that your fine.

Something had to change but for some reason I was still not aware that it had to be me. The only thought in my head was I just needed some clean time. back then I was my own worst enemy, if I made plans or had a sudden burst of motivation to improve

myself, I would try it very briefly but would then find ways to counteract or discourage myself from continuing. Effort was too much and I was always looking for the easy route. This time however with only one thought in my head of getting some clean time I shut up and listened, for the first time in my life I closed my very judgemental and opinionated mouth and listened to what was being said. All the advice that was being offered by people who were sober began to finally make sense, as I was not questioning and arguing with them. I was finally allowing the version of me who wanted to live the chance to do so. The structure of my mind at that time had been constructed by myself over many years of negative thoughts and actions to inhibit any chance I had of sobriety and peace. The addict in me had been clinging to his alcoholic lifestyle with all the arguing and questioning but here I was listening and absorbing. The brain is a remarkable organ, and it is like plasticine the way habits, thoughts, character traits, interactions, and temperament can be moulded. My traits and habits become a part of who I was as a person because they were moulded over a vast period and to me, I did not see I was in the wrong, it was just who I had become as a person. I have come to realise that I am a product of my environment, my childhood experiences, my teenage experiences shaped me as well as my adult experiences, they all aided in developing my character.

During the treatment at THH one of the activities was once a week going into group and listening to people point out any negative behaviours you have displayed in the previous week, this helps in discovering your own character defects. This is an extremely challenging thing to hear and quite often in 2020 I would get very defensive and angry. This time however I listened and took note. Nothing can ever be changed if the person is not willing to change, I was now so broken with my alcoholism and life that I was willing to listen. I admitted some very horrible things about who I was and who I had become in that treatment centre during those 6 weeks and that is an extremely hard thing to do. Standing and looking at myself in the mirror and seeing who I had become and the character defects that came with the man staring back was not easy, but it was necessary if I wanted any chance at any sort of peace.

I finished in THH, and at this point me and my wife decided that I should stay down in Liverpool for 6 months in the supported accommodation that was on offer as the 2nd phase of the programme. The intention was to give myself the best possible chance of recovery. I was attending regular AA meetings, and I do believe that had I not attended and become a part of AA then I would not be sober today. Being around likeminded people is imperative to my journey and going through the steps of AA was also imperative at changing the way I thought and reacted. I used to believe that if I could not see it or hear it then it did not exist. I also had the ability to go from 0 – 60 in a split second with my reactions and temperament. I was not physically violent, but I could become verbally aggressive very easily. What was about to happen over the course of the next 4 years is something that even me myself cannot quite understand, I look back

at the person I was, and I am no longer shameful, resentful, and angry with him, I am grateful to him. If it had not been for that man, I would not be who I am today. My children would not have the father they have today, my mum would not have the son she has today, my friends would not have this version of who I am today. It has all been made possible from that intolerable, resentful, angry, bitter, broken, alcoholic man with whom I had so much disdain and hatred towards, but who I have now found love and compassion for. To get well and begin to recover I had to first begin to accept that the world and everything around me was not negative and against me. Me as the alcoholic version of myself was very apt at being the victim and especially happy when people were giving me sympathy, I had learned over the years to use this to my advantage in order to get my fix but this was a big character defect that had to change.

I had heard many people especially in AA talking about a higher power and how that power could be a god of your own understanding. I did not believe in anything that was spiritual in anyway whether it be God or anything else but here I was opening my mind to the slight possibility that there may be something bigger, potential forces that I do not understand. I noticed coincidences that were occurring in my life which normally I would disregard. For instance, the house I moved into when I went into supportive accommodation was house number 252. This caught my attention as 252 was the last 3 digits of my army number for 14 years of my life. This has been a significant number throughout my sobriety, and it has popped up consistently ever since. Some may say that this may be caused by my sub-conscious seeking it. I can only tell these people what happens for me when I do see it, each time a stronger sense of comfort grows and with it a peaceful serene feeling is left. If that is my sub conscious doing that then I would happily take that any day rather than pick up a drink. What has developed from this and many other occurrences which I will also share has been a faith that is so powerful and reassuring that it has brought me more peace and comfort than I have ever felt in my entire life.

Purpose is something that has also been missing from my life and THH gave me the opportunities to build some purpose in my life. I began volunteering as a graduate from THH and was then given a place on the peer mentors course completely funded by THH, the training was delivered by a therapist of THH, and it enabled me to become a mentor for the new clients coming into the treatment centre. I was being handed responsibilities something I had not had in many years and with this came a powerful sense of purpose. Somebody once told me the opposite of addiction is connection and that is so true. Being part of a community was imperative to my recovery as I had spent so many years of my life isolating away from regular people, that in order to begin recovery I needed to integrate with like minded people as well as help those also in sobriety and this was a necessity, regardless of how much I would tell myself it was not.

The graduate's group from THH are all veterans who had graduated the programme and had all stayed connected to THH through various means. There was a WhatsApp group which was monitored by THH staff, there were activities put on for the veteran community fully funded by charities, there was veteran meal nights, weekly art classes, and many other things that I was able to take part in. My experience's have proved to me that having a purpose and being part of a community are integral to any addict. For so long I was sitting in my living room alone on my couch drinking can after can of lager. I felt useless, inadequate, resentful, bitter, and worthless and these feelings were further intensified after I left the army. This new community and purpose that I had been welcomed into was revitalising, and I grabbed it with both hands. The coincidences I mentioned before were occurring a lot more. Once upon a time would have mocked others for sharing things like this, rather than see the hope and good that this was having and the good it was doing them, but this would have been the judgemental side of me. That is the thing about faith you cannot prove it's real or that it is happening you just believe it is, and that belief gave me hope and a sense of peace, I just did not know and I still do not know what the faith is or what I believe in I just know in my heart something is there and that gives me peace.

One instance I can recall was early on in my sobriety, I was about a week sober. One of the live in support workers from the treatment centre with whom I am now good friends asked me if I wanted to attend an AA meeting with him, I said yes, he came out of his way to pick me up and take me. It was in a beautiful big church called St Mary's, the only way I can describe walking into this church was like getting an internal hug from my gran. My gran was a devoted catholic woman and had such a strong deep rooted faith. I felt this beautiful hug like feeling in the pit of my stomach, I know that does not sound to appealing but it was one of the most comforting things I have ever felt. I shared this at the meeting that evening and one woman came up to me, gave me a cuddle, and said that is your higher power you just felt. At the time I did not know it, but she was right, that was my higher power, that feeling that sense of peace and comfort brewing inside of me. That feeling has throughout the 4 years presented itself to me on many occasions, I could not tell you what it is whether it's god, my gran, my grandad, my dad, the universe.... I do not feel a need to label it or question it I just know that there is something there and when it presents itself my faith in whatever it is grows stronger. This was all possible from just adjusting my attitude to the possibility of what if? Just by adjusting this thought process I have been able to re-adjust my mindset from a very cynical, judgemental, resentful, and angry person to the peaceful content man I am today.

The number one offender for any relapse is resentment, resentment kept me sick for so many years and is something that can creep its way back in again without hesitation but when it does, I have learned that to share it with someone is fighting half the battle. Years ago, I would never have even contemplated sharing my troubles with another

person, this was false pride and is something else I have had to change to keep any sort of sobriety. Speaking up about when I have been struggling instead of suffering in silence has saved me more times than I can count. When I look back the times before I got sober in 2021 to a time when I never shared when I was struggling with, all I was doing was giving into my addiction and keeping myself sick. At no point would I have ever admitted to another person that I was struggling and looking to drink. If I on this the I knew deep down that I might have gotten talked out of it and that would have ruined my chance of drinking so 10 times out of 10 I kept quiet.

I began working at THH as live in support and within the admissions team. This was all before I had gotten to 1 year sober and it was all happening because I became willing in many aspects of my life that I was previously closed off from. In sept 2021 I had applied to attend college to do a lvl 3 in mental health, but the course was fully occupied so was unsuccessful. I carried on with my recovery and all the other opportunities that were being presented to me in relation to THH, but around may 2022 I was beginning to get disjointed at not working, I was ready to go back to work in a garage, I was a truck mechanic for a lot of years after the army and worked for Mercedes. There was a Mercedes garage down in Liverpool where I was staying and due to how I was feeling I was ready to get my toolbox from my ex-wife's garage and apply for the job at the Mercedes garage. This plan was fixed in my head and the next day when I was about to leave, I checked my emails this is unusual as I never used to check my emails. I came across an email from the city of Liverpool college which said that I need to enrol on my college course. I phoned them up and it transpired that the course I had applied for in sept 2021 had carried on and I was being offered a place in the sept 22 intake. After speaking to the college on the phone the woman suggested that it might interest me to do an access to nursing course and go on to university to do a mental health nursing. Here I was at a crossroad, and I knew at that moment if I had said no and went back to a job that I detest in the garage, in 5 years time I would be looking back thinking what if as I would have been qualified. Regret is not something that I am willing to live with after many years of constant regret, so I accepted the offer and applied for that course. Within weeks I was enrolled on the access to nursing course. I passed this course with 42 distinctions out of a possible 45. It never occurred to me that I would be in any way academic so this was not only a surprise but also a massive confidence boost, I was finding myself achieving things that I believed to be impossible and with each awareness of each achievement I was realising how little self belief I actually had in myself for so many years. Here I was building myself up from my own personal rock bottom.

When I was applying for university to do mental health nursing it also transpired whilst on the interview that I had in fact applied for the wrong course. I had applied for a dual adult and mental health nursing course which was to be dual pinned as an adult nurse and mental health nurse with a master's degree. Whilst on the interview the interviewing

nurse asked me if I could explain the difference between the two different types of nursing that I had applied for. This confused me as I had thought I had only applied for mental health nursing, at this point I tried to blag my way through the interview but quickly realised that this was not working. I then apologised to the woman conducting the interview and said that I was sorry but I didn't know what I had applied for, she started laughing at this admission and said "I tell you what David, just tell me about yourself" so I did, I proceeded to tell her my story so far and spoke about my alcoholism and my sobriety. I passed the interview and was accepted onto the course to study a masters in adult and mental health nursing. During my first week at university, I emailed my course lead and asked if I could change to mental health and learning disability nursing as I had no interest in doing adult nursing, this was accepted and I was moved onto this course instead. My first placement was at a learning disability drop in-centre and I loved it, at no point had it ever occurred to me that I might enjoy working with people with learning disabilities. I began to train in health and social care back in 1997 where I attended a course at college, but my life took a different turn with cannabis and pills, then the army and alcoholism so I did not pursue this career. Here however I felt like I was finally on the path where I was supposed to be in life and everything that has happened previously from traumas and addiction to suicide attempts and several rock bottoms was meant to happen in that order in order for me to be ready to go into this line of work.

My children have all suffered at the hands of my alcoholism not physically but mentally. They had a responsibility thrust upon them that was not theirs to bear, they felt responsible to try and keep my alcoholism a secret from many people including family members, friends, and many others. This responsibility was impressed upon them from such an early age and that is the impact of anyone who is abusing any sort of substance. I believed firmly in my own head that I was the only one who was being affected by their alcohol as I was the one consuming it, however the ripple effect addiction is powerful and the deeper I got into my addiction the stronger the ripples became, they even became waves that proved strong enough to consume those close to me even if they were in a totally different country.

When I was a year sober whilst out walking my daughter, she asked me if I remembered one morning at around 2am when I came into her room that she shared with her younger sister and woke them up to get my youngest daughters birthday money. This was so I could go to Asda for more beers with the promise of paying it back when I got paid. My daughter went onto explain how she kept telling me to get out but I was persistent until I got my way and she gave me the money. I cannot remember this instance and when my daughter told me it ripped me in two. When she seen how much it impacted me, she got upset, this is yet more evidence of the power of alcoholism it can take many years for the ripples to die away but they will in time. I told my daughter that night that that was my shame to bear and not hers and the only way I can make

amends is if I know of these instances. My oldest son experienced fear worry, anxiety, anger because of my alcoholism. There was a period where I was suicidal and I would often disappear to the beach, my oldest son quite a few times when he realised, I was gone would come out to find me, sometimes as late as midnight as he was distraught with worry. On another occasion at the age of 16 he was ready to put a chair over my head after him and his mum came to get me out of a pub and I told them both to go away. These are just a few of the instances that the impact my alcoholism had specifically on my children.

Ripple effects are caused by every action in life and if you have consistent negative and chaotic actions then the ripple effect will be mirrored and sometimes even tenfold, because I have changed my attitude, behaviours, and been willing to hold myself accountable and admit some of the worst things a person could admit to I have been able to completely change everything. The ripple effects from my actions are more positive now and as such my recovery is affecting and impacting my children in such a positive way that is affecting them more than my alcoholism ever did. My daughters are always on FaceTime to me or phoning me, when I lived in the same house and was drinking they did not even want to be in the same room as me let alone talk to me. When my youngest daughter was admitted into hospital, I was able to get the train up and spend the week in hospital with her. My oldest son very recently came down to Liverpool on Father's Day, took me for a meal on the Friday, took me go karting on the Saturday and a meal straight after then took me for breakfast on the Sunday before driving back up the road. Over the past 4 years my relationship with my children has flourished and grew to something so beautiful. Because I continue with my sobriety and I continue to look at my own behaviours the ripple effect from that is my relationships in general continue to move forward in a positive manner.

Life in sobriety has been challenging and at times has felt quite consuming. I am only human and do make mistakes, but the difference is today I am willing to reflect and take learnings from them. There has also been instances where I have allowed other people's actions to affect me. Last year another person's alcoholism was affecting me, and it was taking me to a place of anger. I was becoming reactive with each instance that occurred. It felt to me like I was getting attacked constantly. It took me to a point where I did not know what to do. I was deflated and angry at the same time, it came to a head one evening and I knew I had to get away so I phoned my friend and asked to borrow his tent. The next day which was 2nd May 2024 I got in my car and drove north, I did not know where I was going I just pointed the car in a random direction and drove with no plans of a destination. What happened in the 4 days and nights I was up there was the most freeing experience that has ever happened to me, something deep inside of me sparked and I finally felt even more peace than I have ever felt. I drove up Scotland, and I was heading towards the highlands. On the way up I realised I was going to drive past where I grew up a place called Clydebank. My gran and grandad are buried

in a cemetery there, but I have not visited that cemetery in over a decade. I unexpectedly found myself at the front of the cemetery after accidentally turning off the main carriageway. I went in and managed to find my gran and grandad's grave, again this is after not being there for over a decade. I sat there and just vocalised everything that had been going on, everything that happened and everyone who I felt was attacking me to my gran and grandad's grave. As I was walking away down the path away from the grave, I got that feeling in the pit of my stomach that I described before what felt like my gran giving me a hug, however this time it was my grandad I could feel. I know that it is impossible for me to see my grandad but the image of my grandad standing there by his grave with his arm around my gran was powerful in my head and they were smiling at me as I walked away. This was the perfect start to my spontaneous trip away I left home feeling deflated and depressed and here I was experiencing this intense lovely feeling, and it filled me with hope and positivity.

That evening I got to Fort William, it was a stunning evening and I decided there and then that I was going to climb Ben Nevis to watch the sunset, I booked into a campsite and set up my tent. Afterwards I proceeded to race up Ben Nevis so that I could catch the sunset. I made it in time and experienced yet another magical moment that is etched in my memory. The sunset was spectacular, the picture I took on my phone was by far the best picture I have ever taken. It was mad but the day before I had been bitter and angry, upon reflection what I was feeling was pain and hurting. When you strip anger back often at the root it is pain, hurt and fear. As I was walking down the hill another special moment happened, I was about 45 minutes from the bottom when I came across an elderly woman on the path in the pitch black around 11:30pm wrapping an emergency silver rescue blanket around herself. I asked if she were ok and she started to tell me in a panicking way that she had lost the path, I told her she was on the path, and I would help her get off the mountain. It was around 3am when I finally got her off the mountain and in that time, I learned all about her and her life. She was in her 70's and was Australian, it was on her bucket list to climb Ben Nevis, and I had the privilege of being part of that. She shared with me the story of how she came over to do Ben Nevis, she told me about her family, and all of her achievements. Meeting this woman helped me to forget about what was going on in my own life. If I look at how I was feeling only 24 hours before compared to how I was feeling at this point it was a complete 180, I was elated I was lit up. The old me would not have even accepted any thought that these moments had been orchestrated in some way from a higher power of some sort to help me but that type of thinking only got me drinking myself to death. My faith that has built in me believes that these instances were placed in my path because I did the correct thing and removed myself from the situation instead of reacting further or maybe it was the ripple effect from my actions. What came about over the next few days as I travelled around the Scottish Highlands with a tent lit me up more each day. I came back from there with a new level of peace and understanding.

I continued to disappear up the highlands a further 4 times for 4-5 days at a time with my tent and each time I was lit up more. All this only became possible because 3 years earlier I made the decision to stop being so cynical and judgemental and open my mind to the possibility of something or someone helping me with beautiful coincidental moments that gave me peace and comfort. The more these occur and the more I stop closing myself off from experiences like these the more I feel a sense of connection, peace and healing.

These are only a few of the things that have happened to me and looking back at them and everything else that has happened this journey I have been on so far has been amazing. Right from the start I knew something had to change and that thing turned out to be me. My thoughts and all my thinking processes had to go, the narrow close minded judgmental person who I was had not served me for years and needed to change. By just noticing coincidences that were happening in my life I was able to change the way I viewed things and what happened from that was a feeling of peace that I have never felt before and that peace continues to grow. I will take that any day rather than the miserable angry tortured drunk I once was. A saying that I invented up the top of Ben Nevis and something that I fundamentally live my life by is

“If you fall in love with life, life will fall right back in love with you”