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# Falling in love with the universe

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Way out in the Nevada desert, among the stars and colorful characters, he found his sober crew



"Welcome to Canada!" A pleasant girl with a meager frame and dusty cheeks greeted me with an embrace. I could hardly believe it was true.

"Canada? Really?" I asked. "I'm finally on Canadian soil?" I dropped to the ground, flailed my limbs as if making a snow angel and kissed the fine dust floating around me. A small group of fellow Burning Man visitors looked at me with questioning faces. So I stood up and told my brief story, the sort of story that only an alcoholic might share.

"The last time I tried to enter Canada was a mess. There were no glimmering smiles from beautiful people like you. Instead, two Mounties stopped traffic and escorted me across the highway back to American soil. Canada does not look fondly upon people with two DUIs. I was denied entrance."

The girl came forward with a huge smile. "We're glad you finally made it," she said. "Why don't you take a suggestion from our 'direction device'?" She walked me over to a modified gumball machine, handed over a token and as I turned the dial, a small plastic container dropped into the waiting dish below. Inside I found a message with a secret direction. "Give Heather a foot rub."

"I don't know any Heather." I turned to my greeter but she had already moved on to other visitors. Of course, I wasn't actually in Canada. We were in the Nevada desert at an annual arts event called Burning Man in Black Rock City.

I had simply stumbled into one of the many art installations of Burning Man. It was my third journey to this place, so I knew not to worry too much about Heather. But with only seven years of sobriety at the time, I still did my best to listen to suggestions, wherever they came from.

So I took a deep breath and offered willingness. "OK, universe. I'm not spending any time looking for Heather. If you need me to give her a foot rub, I trust she will find me." I tucked the plastic container and piece of paper into the side pocket of my backpack, tossed a quick goodbye to the people nearby and skipped back into the dusty afternoon sun, wondering what other whimsies I might stumble across on my way back to camp.

It might have been the day I sang bass in a barbershop quartet at the Cartoon Cafe. It might have been the time I jumped on a passing magic carpet before taking a rest at the Pool Noodle Wind Chime Forest. Or perhaps this was the day I met six-year-old Captain Bluebeard at the World Harmony Hammock Shack.

"I kill women and children first! Arr!" the Captain snarled. Luckily, I convinced him to spare my life with the promise of telling the tale of his fearsome ways. If you're out there, Captain Bluebeard, you truly are a fierce pirate.

But I digress. I honestly don't remember the linear narrative of that day. It is quite difficult to distinguish one day from the next, or one year from the next, at Burning Man. This city is about being present, about saying, "Yes." The whole purpose is about being prepared and discovering an even better version of oneself. The experience nestles into itself as a dreamy scene of distractions, frustrations, beauty and delight. It is not an easy world, given conditions in the desert, but if you prepare wisely, the payoffs are amazing.

In fact, this is the sort of world that AA has trained me to embrace. This is a world where you say hello to everyone you meet. This is a world where you belong when you say you do. Here, in Black Rock City, one is offered a deeper practice of the heart. But you must prepare. This is not a place to take lightly.

Burning Man is a temporary community, erected for just one week each year. And most people have a very tenuous grasp of how expansive a trip to "the playa" can be. Is it full of drugs and alcohol? Sure, but that's not what I'm looking for. I'm looking for new ideas, a new vision, new experiences in spirituality and the arts. More than just a festival, Burning Man is a practice in immediacy, letting go and acceptance.

Do you have to ask if every gift of food and beverage is appropriate for a sober person? Pretty much. Do I say "no" just in case? More often than not. Do I thank the person just the same? I hug them!

Might Burning Man chew you up and spit you out? Definitely! Character defects are served up on a platter in this place. Every insecurity, every fear, every need for self-care is magnified. But I did my first open microphone event at Burning Man. I created an arts and crafts experience for 75 people and organized a writer's workshop at the Royal Safarians Typewriter Camp. These are the things I wasn't doing before I got sober. These are the things that I only dreamed about while drunkenly stumbling within my disease.

During my last visit to "The Burn" in 2014, there were three sober camps and one recovery village offering meetings, workshops and meditations morning, noon and night. The larger community understands and embraces the value of the Twelve Steps wholeheartedly. In fact, it is a magical moment when a gnarled, drunken, drugged-up burner accidentally stumbles into our sober camp after a night of too much consumption. We bring out a chair, hydrate this person with water or coffee, and ask about their night. We love to hear about their scene and gladly share a few of our own stories. Every so often the discussion even falls to powerlessness.

"This is the first time in eight Burns that I've tried it sober." These were the words I heard as I rolled up, just slightly late, to the evening AA meeting at Run Free Camp. A young woman was speaking her fears. "A few years back, my camp threw me out for being too antagonistic. Two years ago, I ended up in the medical tent. Last year, I took an ambulance to Reno. All that's left for me this year is a medevac to the hospital. I have 27 days sober and this is only my second AA meeting. I look at the Third Step and get confused, but the magic of Burning Man has me camping across from sober people."

After the meeting closed, I began chatting with two of my camp mates. "I'm really worried about Heather," one said.

"Heather? Which one is that?" I asked, knowing full well what the universe had just provided.

"The girl with 27 days. We need to go talk to her," said the other.

"Oh, that's Heather," I said. "I owe her a foot rub." Walking over to this dusty young newcomer, I introduced myself before getting down to business. "A group of Canadians told me to give you a foot massage. Would you like one?"

"Wait? What? I was giving foot rubs to Canadians all afternoon. How did you ... ?" She trailed off, slightly confused.

"This is Burning Man. Wait right here." I turned and walked to my nearby tent, picking up a small stool, three soap bottles—water, liquid castile soap and diluted vinegar—a few towels and some peppermint foot balm. Returning to perch in front of Heather, I sat at her feet and looked up with a smile.

"For the next 30 minutes, I will gladly answer any questions you have about the Third Step, or anything to do with AA. This is my third sober Burn." I unlaced her shoes and tugged them off, along with her socks. The fine playa dust flew everywhere.

"What's this thing about sponsorship?" she asked.

I sprayed some vinegar on her feet and fell in love with the universe just a bit more.