

I Traded the 12-Step Program for a Dog

The bond with my Australian cattle dog has been the most effective way for me to stay sober.
By Tyler Watamanuk



Most nights, my dog River sleeps in my bed. He is a red heeler, although his speckled coat is closer to an auburn-bronze than any shade that could be earnestly called “red.” Before I fall asleep, he jumps onto the comforter and curls up into a furry crescent moon next to me, nuzzling his rust-colored snout into my chest and wedging himself somewhere in between my limbs and heart.

When he rests beside me, I can feel my heartbeat slow down ever so slightly, and a woozy solace unknits my restless brain. For the two years we lived on a noisy Brooklyn street, the harsh sounds of the big city outside my window even seemed to soften. His presence feels more comforting than the slow euphoria of hydrocodone or the dizzying blackout of too many whiskey sodas — feelings I was well acquainted with before I got sober and welcomed this dog into my life.

This calming effect felt unmistakable and tangible, like the feeling of walking barefoot on freshly cut grass. I thought I might be imagining it, so I eventually looked it up: According to [Psychology Today](#), lying next to a dog’s rhythmic breathing can help lull you to sleep and also increase the flow of oxytocin, a hormone associated with affection and happiness. Speaking from experience, I believe both of these things to be true.

I got River when I was about six months sober and still sporadically attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. The program, full of kind souls and too-big personalities in equal measure, wasn’t for me. I found some aspects helpful, but it never fully clicked. Going to A.A. meetings and reading the Big Book is to learn a new vernacular, one that’s chock-full of clichéd slogans and coded religious themes. I also get anxious around new people and large groups; it was difficult for me to seek a sponsor or support circle outside of the weekly meetings.

I liked the feeling of togetherness, yet bristled at the program’s authoritative overtones. To belong to A.A. is to concede to this notion of singularity — everyone is the same and everyone’s addiction is the same — and to accept a higher power and follow each one of the 12 precise steps. As I struggled with these aspects of the process, I found myself wanting a different path to sobriety, one that was less prescriptive and felt more personal to me — I found all of that in River.

He's over 3 years old now, and I've had him for two and a half of those years, which means he's been with me about twice as long as he was without. I've lived much more of my 31 years without him, but he feels inseparable from my psyche. I worry about how attached I am to this dog, and worry if he is the pillar that props up my sobriety.

I don't know the exact details of his life before me, other than that he was surrendered as a puppy to Gordon County Animal Shelter in the state of Georgia and that he made his way up to New York thanks to an organization called In Our Hands Rescue. No one I talked to on the day of the adoption seemed to know much about him, either. The photocopy I have of his shelter intake form lists his arrival reason as "unwanted." That note appears next to a photo of him where you can clearly see his soft timid eyes and big goofy smile, the kind where his tongue is hanging out of his mouth like a cartoon dog lusting after a comically sized bone. How could anyone not want him?

Despite that smiling photo, I don't think he had a great life back in rural Georgia. He's very apprehensive around people, skittish around noises and movement and uncertain about things a dog shouldn't question — which made living in one of the world's busiest cities difficult. New York has been my home for the last nine years. Slowly, I felt myself starting to resent my city and neighborhood: the crackling skateboards and the loud people that ride them, the windows-down cars blasting music, the ambulances and sirens, the undisciplined kids who shout and run inches from him. These things all scare River and I grew to hate them.

For these reasons, I think my bond with my anxious dog grew fast and deep. I want to protect him from the things that make him uncomfortable in a way that I often don't look out for myself. I'm too forgiving of his bad behaviors. However, I'm not sure if I would have two years of sobriety without his presence in my life. Some of the energy and love I give this dog could be invested in myself, but I've learned you can't control unconditional love.

Over the years, I've tried many things to slow or stop my drinking. There have been phases of self-help books and rigorous exercise, early-morning meditation and smoldering sticks of palo santo, obsessions with buying houseplants and rearranging apartment décor. However, it was the bond with my Australian cattle dog that has been the most effective.

Quitting drinking made me restless, and a youthful herding dog that required a lot of my attention proved to be an unlikely remedy. (Seeing a therapist helped, too.) River subconsciously took on a new role in my life when I got sober: He gave me the structure that I had long failed to provide myself; he added a routine to my life and forced me to be present during days when I just wanted to float in space. He depends on me to take care of him, and I don't want to let him down. On our morning and evening walks to the park, the fresh air felt cathartic in my lungs, much like the feeling I got from sitting on folding chairs in those meetings.

My dog has earned his spot in my bed and every ounce of my energy I've ever given him. He showed me that I could find a path to sobriety outside of A.A. and the Big Book. The root of my drinking, I believe, was a lifelong feeling of being an outsider — like no one understood or saw me and I was inadequate or insignificant. On the hardest days, he's been an unmatched comfort to me, providing unrelenting love without hesitation or limit.

Some nights, I lay awake and think about the things I miss about drinking, allowing myself to feel the indescribable sense of loss that comes when an alcoholic gives up booze. However, when those thoughts jostle in my head, I can still feel River sleeping next to me, and I'm just happy that I'm no longer alone.

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