

43 SMOKING

It is 36 years, 10 months and 5 days since I stopped smoking. I mention that to get your attention, and to give the impression that each day that I have been without a cigarette has been a struggle, and that I still crave the nicotine and whatever other pleasure smoking provided. The fact is, that after the first couple weeks from the time I quit, I had absolutely no desire for a cigarette. But those couple weeks were murder.

I operated at half my usual output. Instead of a pack of cigarettes on my desk, I had hard candy and gum. I began to identify with alcoholics and drug addicts who quit “cold turkey.” I was irritable, twitchy, impatient, nitpicky. I couldn’t concentrate. Man, I really wanted a cigarette—when I saw someone smoking, when I was reading the paper, when I was writing a report, when I had finished a meal, when I was watching TV.

Then, those desires ended. I was cured. I no longer needed a cigarette. I was at parties where people were smoking, and it didn’t bother me one bit. On several occasions I would go over to a friend who was smoking and ask for a drag. I took a puff and handed the cigarette back to him, reassured that I really didn’t want it. And since 1971, I have been smoke-free. But how did smoking start?

I was an obedient teen-ager. I listened to my mother. I was not rebellious. I knew that if you were under 21 you should not smoke, and initially, I didn’t. However, I grew up at a time when it seemed that all grownups smoked. I have a vivid memory of going to Synagogue on Yom Kippur, as a child, and the only thing the men talked about was how hard it was to go without a cigarette, and when everyone left the Shul at the end of the Day of Atonement, the first thing they did was light up. There was a cloud of smoke on the steps of the Synagogue.

In high school, and then in college, there was a crowd that smoked, but I was not part of that crowd. Nevertheless, I was curious, and I had a few friends who smoked, so I tried it. After coughing through the first few cigarettes, I got the hang of it. It made me look more mature, even tough, having a butt dangling from my lip. But I hadn’t yet bought a pack. We were able to get single cigarettes from the candy store for a penny, then two cents, when they were selling for 15 or 20 cents a pack.

I knew my mother would be horrified if she knew I smoked, so I made sure she didn’t know. In college, my closest friends did not smoke, though a few experimented with pipes. They thought that really made them look sharp. But they always had trouble keeping them lit, and they didn’t have enough pockets for the pipe, tobacco, pipe cleaner, lighter and some funny looking tool to scrape out the bowl of the pipe.

When I was around people who smoked, I smoked. And there was an awful lot of smoking in the movies: Paul Henreid, Humphrey Bogart, Clark Gable, Frank Sinatra. I finally started buying packs of cigarettes. At first, I wasn’t sure which brand to get. I would buy Camels one week, then Lucky Strikes, then Philip Morris, and finally Chesterfields. (I didn’t buy Winstons or Salems because they were non-union.) I believe

it was in my senior year of college that I settled on Pall Mall, which some people pronounced Pell Mell. By 1953, my mother had died, I was married, working as an organizer and going to school full time, and I was reconciled to the fact that I was a smoker. I started buying cartons of Pall Mall. I developed a pack a day habit. There were friends who reached for a smoke on arising or with their first cup of coffee. I didn't have my first cigarette until I got to the office. I would sit back, open up a pack, tap the cigarette on my desk and light up. By the end of the day, the pack was gone. It was a time when everyone had ash trays on their desks, when you offered guests a cigarette.

And in June 1954, Jacob Schlitt, smoker, was drafted into the Army. I was one of an overwhelming majority of smokers in the service. During Basic Training everyone made sure to grab a pack of cigarettes when they fell out. The Sergeant would always say when we had a break. "Smoke if you've got em." And a classic story was told about the enterprising GI who bought a carton of cigarettes the first day in his new barracks, and gave a pack to everyone. He never carried a pack after that.

Before they made cardboard cigarette boxes, my cigarettes were being crushed in my pants pocket, and I started buying plastic boxes made for cigarettes, complete with an indentation for matches. For a while, I had a cigarette lighter, but I found it to be more trouble than it was worth, always needing fluid or flints. I used to tell the joke about the guy who invented a cigarette pack for which you didn't need matches, because it had only 19 cigarettes.—Each pack came with a cigarette lighter. Get it?

I suspect all smokers were aware that smoking was not good for you. But it seemed to fill a need. I don't remember when the AMA and the US Department of Health issued the definitive reports linking smoking to lung cancer, but we all knew, despite the effort of the tobacco companies, that it could kill you. Still, people kept smoking. Almost every winter, I developed a hacking cough, but I refused to associate it with smoking, though I smoked less when I had the cough. By the '60s, I had the feeling that fewer people were smoking. And my kids were on my back telling me to stop. (Thankfully, none of my children became smokers.) In December of 1970, I finally decided to give it up. The Seventh Day Adventists had a "14 day program" in my neighborhood in Washington DC to help you quit, so I signed up for it. They handed out lots of literature, had lots of lectures, showed movies featuring healthy and diseased lungs, and set up a buddy system, someone who would help you stay off cigarettes, if the going got tough. I didn't bother with the buddy system, but the going did get tough. So here we are: 36 years, 10 months and 5 days later.

I am shocked these days when I see people smoking, especially young people. From time to time, I go over to someone with a cigarette and tell them that they are killing themselves. They don't appreciate it. But our world has changed. There are a lot fewer ash trays around. I am amused when hotels ask me when I register if I want a smoking or non-smoking room. They are aware that the smell lingers, and many find it offensive. Smokers feel like an oppressed minority, huddling outside buildings. I imagine them getting pneumonia on top of the emphysema or lung cancer. I am glad I stopped. I wish more people would. Would you like a lifesaver?

As I write this, my wife is recovering from surgery that removed a cancerous nodule from the middle lobe of her right lung, and follow-up chemotherapy. Yes, she was a smoker. The fact is, there are lots of non-smokers who are victims of lung cancer, and lots of smokers who never got or will get lung cancer.