

Sermon on Alcoholism and AA

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Every Thursday night throughout the year, I attend a 6PM meeting in Marshfield and when I raise my hand to speak, I say 'my name is George and I'm an alcoholic'. Yes, I am an alcoholic and have been for a long time although this may be of no surprise to many of you in this congregation who have known me for the better part of 30 years. There is more than a bit of irony here because, at least in my case, when you have an addiction, it is the 'secret' that you don't want anyone to know about. Of course, everybody knew. Like many children of alcoholics, I should have known better. I was the last of 5 children and I was young at the time, but 'I was there'. I was standing right there when my mother was crying, begging my father to pour the rest of a bottle of scotch down the drain of the kitchen sink. I was there when my father, with no alcohol left in the house, drank from a bottle of after shave lotion. This was the late 50's and my mother felt a lot of shame attached to these horrendous recurring events and so my father's alcoholism became our family secret: The family secret that everybody in the neighborhood already knew anyway. And then there was the shame. I grew up in a family knowing shame and guilt very well. So how in the world could I grow up in this environment, seeing the things that I saw and feeling the things that I so deeply felt at the time, and still grow up to be an alcoholic'

Most people can have a drink or two, enjoy themselves, and control it, instead of it controlling them. They can take it or leave it. The problem, for me, is that I have the gene. My father was an alcoholic, his father was an alcoholic and who knows how far back it goes! I had my first drink at age 16 but alcohol really kicked into my life in the college years. And then, for a very long period of time, I became a 'High Functioning Alcoholic'.

Estimates are that there are approximately 17.6 Million adults with an alcohol problem in this country, with 20% being HFAs, High Functioning Alcoholics. From the outside looking in, the High Functioning Alcoholic looks great. He or she is successful, has friends, has all the American Dream trappings of a nice house, cars, a boat perhaps, a second home, a time-share. But the HFA is very good at compartmentalizing his or her closeted drinking patterns such as:

- When they have one drink, they experience a craving to have more and cannot predict what their real alcohol intake will be
- They obsess about the next time they will be able to drink alcohol

- They surround themselves socially with Good Time Charlie's, heavy drinkers
- They drink before actually arriving at social engagements
- They set drinking limits (e.g., only having three drinks, only drinking three days per week) and not being able to adhere to them
- They always have to finish an alcoholic beverage or even another person's unfinished beverage!
- They use alcohol as a reward for themselves
- They have memory lapses due to excessive drinking (blackouts)
- They take breaks from drinking, a month say, and then increase alcohol consumption when they resume drinking after a period of time
- They can't imagine their life without alcohol in it
- They avoid recovery help
- They can maintain a social life and intimate relationships.
- Appear to the outside world to be managing life well
- Skilled at living a compartmentalized life (i.e., separating professional, personal and drinking lives):

But, over time:

- Experience tangible losses and consequences from their drinking
- And most times not recognize clearly what it means.

So, many HFAs are not viewed by society as alcoholics simply because they do not fit the common alcoholic stereotype. Unlike the stereotypical alcoholic, HFAs have either succeeded or over-achieved through their lifetimes and accumulated a lot of material things. They typically are well respected for job/academic performance and accomplishments. This can lead to denial of alcoholism by not only the HFA, but also co-workers, family members and friends. It also fosters a feeling of false 'self-respect' in the HFA providing a 'built-in' rationalization for continued drinking behavior.

I despise alcohol. It was/is the elephant in the living room of my life. It is misery. It is a formidable opponent, an insidious adversary to me. Especially in how evilly subtle it was in the gradual process of controlling, taking over my life. Alcohol is patient, as patient as the ocean at Humarock Beach with an approaching Nor-easter during a full moon, high tide. The ocean builds and builds and builds until in one quick instant, it takes the road destroying everything in its path. Alcohol is patient.

Alcohol is also quite the romancer, providing its own emotional & intellectual anesthetic, that insulation of well-being while, day by day dominating more and more of my life until the alcohol was in complete control and was seamlessly tearing my life apart, creating distance from 'who and what really mattered' in my life. At times, I was not being able to 'BE THERE' for my own family! It was compromising or destroying relationships while I was pulled over in my happy little 'Rest Area on the Highway of Life'. Alcohol indeed can create an aura of fun & euphoria while it is slowly but surely and painlessly eroding who you really are, eroding your real life away. This was all quite transparent to me as the alcoholic. The cliché that comes to mind is: 'It's hard to see the picture when you're the one inside the frame.'

It is estimated that 23 million Americans are addicted to drugs and alcohol. This equals about 7.3 % of our population of 314 million. So, just how many families are affected by the physical, emotional and spiritual pain of addiction? The answer is over 65%! Think of it, just 7% of Americans affect 65% of all American families. This is a widespread problem that is uncomfortable for families to face, to talk about. And so, today, there are countless elephants in family living rooms in our country.

If you can imagine for a moment, a mobile, the kind that might hang over a newborn's crib- Many colorful objects hanging down in perfect balance and harmony with each other. Now imagine that one of these objects was suddenly yanked very hard. All of the other objects would immediately spin wildly out of control, no longer in balance, no longer in harmony, in complete chaos. This is what addiction does to a family. This is what addiction did to my family. My family then, my family now.

I was lucky. Through my wonderful wife Colleen's strength, love and compassion, I had that epiphany, that moment of clarity, as we call it, in addiction recovery circles, to be able to see what alcohol had done to me. Alcohol is the great robber. It had robbed me of my self-respect, confidence, ambition, relationships, peace of mind, love, happiness and turned every day's plans into an unending series of carefully crafted ulterior motives to fulfill my craving. Carrying my burden of depression, anxiety, self-loathing, anger and isolation, I turned to Alcoholics Anonymous.

Aside from the members of this wonderful Church, AA is the most beautiful, spiritual

group of people I have ever met in my life. Not unlike our country and our congregation, it is a melting pot of people, men and women, of diverse nationalities and spiritual beliefs coming from all different walks of life: landscapers, teachers, bankers, lawyers, painters, doctors, elevator mechanics, stockbrokers, business owners, architects, programmers, construction workers, and even a CEO or two. An army of very different people who share one common bond: the burning desire to free themselves from the chains of alcohol and drugs toward the goal of reclaiming their lives.

From my very first meeting I was so impressed with who was in the room and conceptually 'where they came from' as everyone that I was with was not necessarily an alcoholic. There were people recovering from many different addictions: from Amphetamines (Speed, Crystals Meth), Barbituates (Xanax, Valium, Seconal), Opiates (Heroin, Morphine, Oxycodone, Codeine), Hallucinogens (LSD, Ecstasy), PCP (Angel Dust), and Cocaine and Marijuana to name more than a few. I learned very quickly that there was no pecking order or 'degree of difficulty' attached to recovery from any particular addiction. There existed an 'absolute value' of addiction as it really didn't matter what the substance was that was dominating your life and threatening to end it. What did matter, was a commitment to the 12 Steps and the 12 Traditions that are included in your order of service this morning. I learned quickly that if a person is completely committing to Alcoholics Anonymous, then the 12 Steps and 12 Traditions are the quintessential road map to spiritual progress in recovery, one day at a time. I found that the practicing of these steps and traditions fosters a spirituality that helps me 'let go' of the toxic substance that I have been fighting and experience a new freedom and perspective in my life, facilitating healing and growth.

There are many different kinds of AA meetings as there is no 'one size fits all'. To characterize one of my Thursday night meetings, there can be as few as 25 and as many as 50 people sitting in chairs forming a circle. After the secretary reports administrative news and notes, the chair of that night's meeting does a reading of their choice from the book 'AS Bill Sees it', a digest of personal reflections from Bill Wilson who, with Dr. Bob Smith, formed AA in 1934. The chair then speaks on why they chose the reading and how the reading is meaningful in his/her life. Then the chair opens up discussion for others to offer their views on the reading as it applies to his/her life in the recovery process. One side note: in these weekly meetings, one thing that struck me right away was the similarity of these meetings to our own UU Small Group Ministry meetings in that there is a profound respect for one another in shared silence, in sharing and in deep listening. I found that there is intrinsic value in each person's perspective, stories of daily adversity and progress, helping AA veterans and newcomer's alike, empathize with the speaker's struggles, strengthening the identification process that 'Wow, he's/she's just like me' and 'I am not alone fighting this fight to reclaim my life.' And in those early days of my recovery, 'identification' was key for me because it was a little like the reading of the book 'The Little Engine that Could' in that I started to believe: 'I think I

can, I think I can’.

In the spirit of an AA meeting, I will now read my favorite entry from ‘As Bill Sees it’ and then reflect on it as it applies to my life in recovery. I chose this reading when I chaired at both my first and second anniversary meetings. It may also broach the question ‘How am I, myself, doing now with my own recovery’?

Perception of Humility from Twelve and Twelve pp 74-75

An improved perception of humility starts a revolutionary change in our outlook. Our eyes begin to open to the immense values which have come straight out of painful ego-puncturing.

Until now, our lives have been largely devoted to running from pain and problems. Escape via the bottle was always our solution. Then, in A.A., we looked and listened. Everywhere we saw failure and misery transformed by humility into priceless assets.

To those who have made progress in A.A., humility amounts to a clear recognition of what and who we really are, followed by a sincere attempt to become what we could be.

I have never been humbled more in my life than by alcohol. Not humiliated, but humbled. Alcohol owns me. I have absolutely no control over it. It has complete control over me. When I first made the commitment to stop, there was a lot of pain in many different ways. First there was the pain of withdrawal which I can best describe as being like a deep sea diver that resurfaces too quickly and gets the bends. I had no decompression tank. Then, there was the pain of facing everyday life without alcohol being there as my anesthetic. And, yes, as Bill writes, there was painful ego puncturing as well attached to the realization that the foundation upon which I was leading my life was erroneous, not one based in reality, toxic, and that I had deeply hurt the ones that I loved. And there ‘is’ great value in knowing these things although forgiving oneself is a very difficult hurdle to face. But as one of my close AA friends put it, we get in our own way if we dwell too much in the past for there’s a good reason why when you’re driving your car that there’s a huge windshield in front of us to look through moving forward and only a small rear-view mirror for us to see what is behind us. So now, through the humility and vision given me by my higher power, I found that I can now work to, at long last, grow into my own skin, fulfilling my potential as a human being, becoming the best me that I can be, one day at a time.

I will conclude with a quote and a prayer. The quote is from the late Rev. Elizabeth

Tarbox who I heard in this sanctuary, from this very pulpit in 1999. It was to be her last ministered service, and in her last sermon when she, herself, knew that she was dying of cancer, she said these words and I quote ‘ Don’t die with the music left inside’. ‘Don’t die with the music left inside’. If we are not careful, alcohol and/or drugs could transparently and silently dominate our lives or someone in our family’s life, robbing us of the opportunity to meet our own personal destiny, to fulfill our individual potential, to create our own beautiful music that we can share with the world. And if you want to actually witness a throng of people struggling to reclaim their lives to create their own music, I encourage you to attend a 7:00 AM meeting any day of the week, 365 days/yr. at The Vineyard Church in Kingston on Hilltop Street, right off Route 3 Exit 9. It is indeed both incredibly spiritual and motivational to see so many people, on their way to work, so focused, so determined that ‘on this day’ I will not drink because I have a life that deserves to be lived, music to be made. I, myself, am not exactly positive what my music will be as yet for, in recovery, I am still very much a work in progress. However, if I can help one person, one family of our extended congregation to start the healing process, what an awesome beautiful symphony it would be.

And now the prayer that is so near and dear to those of us in Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon as well:

To my higher power that I know as God:

Grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The Courage to change the things I can,
And the Wisdom to know the difference.

Amen.