

# Recovery & Transformation

UUMAN, November 25, 2018

This morning I want to talk to you about addiction and recovery. I considered reading the names of the people who have died in North Atlanta in the last 10 years from addiction, but I only have about 20 minutes to talk. I saw this week in my Facebook feed that we lost another young man. He was in his 20s and leaves behind a young son. Addiction is a much mis-understood subject, so maybe I should start by explaining some things about what addiction is and what addiction isn't.

No one ever woke up one day and said, "I think I'll become an addict." Addiction creeps into our lives slowly, gradually, and always wants us to believe we are in control and that we aren't addicted. On page 8 of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, Bill W, co-founder of AA puts it this way, "No words can tell of the loneliness and despair I found in that bitter morass of self-pity. Quicksand stretched around me in all directions. I had met my match. I had been overwhelmed. Alcohol was my master." That passage has always resonated with me.

We all probably know or have met someone who is an addict, or who we think is an addict. But what does it really mean to be an addict? Is it someone who just uses too much or too often? Someone who drinks or uses on a daily basis? Someone who crashes cars, loses jobs and relationships, gets kicked out of their housing situation? Are addicts people who come to your house and steal your TV? To some degree, any or all of these things may be true. But I think there is a better, more compassionate definition.

On page 24 of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, it describes alcoholism (or addiction): *The fact is that most alcoholics (and addicts), for reasons yet obscure have lost the power of choice... (Their) so-called will power becomes practically nonexistent. (They) are unable, at certain times, to bring into... consciousness with sufficient force the memory of the suffering and humiliation of even a week or a month ago. (They) are without defense against the first drink (or drug).*

From this, we can establish a very easy test for addiction. When you drink or use, and you're ready to stop, do you continue anyway? When you aren't drinking or using, are you thinking about drinking or using? And when you don't want to drink or use, do you drink or use anyway? If you answered, "Yes," to any of these questions you might be an alcoholic or addict. The important distinction is the "power of choice".

The accepted definition of addiction in 12-step programs is that it is a two-part disease. The first part consists of a mental obsession, which can take on many forms. For many, the mental obsession is an argument in their heads—"I promised myself I wouldn't use today" "Call the dope man." "But I'm doing so well, and I –" "Call the dope man." "But, I –" "Call the dope man." And they lose the argument every time. For others, they tell themselves lies. "I never drink (or use) before 6 PM." "I always get in trouble when I drink with Roger, so tonight I'll drink with Fred." "When I drink the brown liquor, I always lose control, so tonight I'm only drinking clear liquor." "I only get drunk when I drink Tequila, so tonight I'm only going to drink Bourbon (or wine, or beer)." These, and many more, are examples of the mental obsession.

The second part of the disease is the allergy. Simply put, an allergy is an "abnormal reaction". For most alcoholics and addicts, the abnormal reaction is that once they put any mind-altering substance in their bodies, they are incapable of stopping until there is no way for them to get any more. They are physically unable to moderate. I use the term "substance" loosely here, as people can be addicted to gambling, shopping, spending money, eating, sex, and many other things. As long as the necessary "endorphin rush" is achieved, a person can become addicted.

What confuses things is that there are a lot of people who have a problem with drugs or alcohol, but who are not addicts. Given the right circumstances, this class of users can simply stop or moderate. They aren't real addicts. They sound like this: "Wow! That glass of champagne is really going to my head. I'd better stop." As they push away a half-filled glass. Or, "Can you believe it! The judge ordered *me* to AA. It was the first time in over three years that I'd even had a drink. My dumb luck to get pulled over." Or, "My mom got really mad because I was smoking so much pot. She wanted me to go to rehab, and I didn't want that. So, I stopped." What all of these people have in common is that they can control their behavior. The real addict can't.

Paradoxically, those who have become real addicts have placed themselves beyond human aid. They are unable to stop or moderate on their own. And, in many cases, too proud, or too deeply in denial to ask for help. "I can stop any time I want." "I don't drink any more than anyone else." "I've never missed a day or work because of my using." "I wouldn't use so much if you'd just stop nagging me. Buzz kill..." "If I ever drink (or use) in front of my children, I'll stop."

I knew how bad it had gotten, and I knew I couldn't stop on my own. I hadn't been able to achieve more than a few days clean in several years. A dope dealer asked me if I thought I could stop, and that time, I sincerely believe I could have. But I was still having fun. When my using got to a point where it wasn't fun, and I really wanted to stop, I found that I couldn't.

I decided to go to Arizona for Christmas and get dried out. I wouldn't drink or use for two weeks while I was there, and I'd come back to Atlanta refreshed. A new man. But it wasn't to be. I had only been on the ground in Tucson for an hour, or so, when my sister, Colleen, informed me that she had scored for me, and that I owed her \$!00. A bottle of Bourbon would pair nicely.

It was when Colleen passed away in January 2007, that I decided I needed to go to treatment. We assumed Colleen died from a drug overdose, however, her official cause of death was that her heart stopped. Cocaine and Heroin kill like that, so we'll never really know.

You would think the death of a sibling would be enough to make me stop, but it wasn't. When I got back from the funeral, I checked myself into a 28-day treatment program. The most significant things I got for my time and \$18,000 were copies of the books Alcoholics Anonymous and the 12 Steps and 12 Traditions, plus the discipline of going to 12-step meetings every day.

For 87 days I did what I now refer to as "off the wall recovery." That is where a person goes to a lot of meetings, preferably one a day, reads the steps on the wall, and thinks they are "doing" recovery because a), they haven't had a drink or drug today, b), they are working the steps silently in their head during the meetings, and, c), they're going to all these meetings. In fact, I had only really worked the first three steps. And it is debatable whether I had really worked Step 3, because I hadn't taken the action implied in Step 3, of working the remaining steps.

One Friday night--May 4<sup>th</sup>, I think--the phone rang as I was leaving a Cocaine Anonymous meeting. It was my favorite using buddy.

He said, "What are you doing?"

"I'm on my way home from a CA meeting."

"How long will it take you to get home?"

"About 30 minutes. Why?"

"I was wondering if you'd like to get some Bourbon, and have a few drinks with me?"

"I can't do that. I'm trying to stay sober."

"No. It will be fine. You were addicted to Cocaine, not alcohol. You can have a few drinks. It will be fine."

"I can't."

"No. Really. Call your sponsor. I'll bet he will tell you it's okay."

"I'll call him, but I know what he's going to say. He's going to tell me it is a bad idea, and that I shouldn't do it." By now, I was starting to have some doubts, because I really did want to have a few drinks, especially if it meant I got to see my young friend again.

"Call me when you get home."

"Okay. I will." I hung up the phone. I didn't call my sponsor. By the time I got back to my side of town, I had used my friend's arguments to convince myself that a couple of drinks would be okay. I stopped at the package store and bought a small bottle of whiskey--one of the little ones they keep behind the counter. I also bought a 2-liter bottle of lemonade. Such a small bottle of liquor was really only about 3 or four cocktails, so it shouldn't be a problem. It wasn't enough to get drunk or constitute a binge.

I should mention that alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, and sex all go really well together. Somehow, they are symbiotic addictions. I should also mention that I was very easily attracted to muscular, good looking young men. My using buddies mostly reflected that—very attractive, and willing to hang out at my house and use with me.

When I got home, I fixed myself a drink. It was gone in a few minutes. That went well, so I fixed another. I was beginning to feel warm and mellow. Halfway through the second drink, the thought came to me, "You know what would go well with this?"

Almost immediately, my drug dealer's phone number popped back into my head. It had been months since I called him. I had deleted his number from my phone, and from the caller ID. It is amazing how lucid my memory became when I wanted my drug of choice. And it is frightening how quickly I went from "I can't do that. I'm trying to stay sober", to "just a couple of drinks", to "let's smoke some crack".

Within an hour of going to the package store, I had been to the dope man, come home and "cooked" the dope, and was back to old habits. Around that time, my using buddy called. I didn't admit what I'd done at first, but he asked the right questions. He told me to come get him, and I did. That started my last debauch--six weeks and \$3500.

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One Sunday afternoon, we awoke at opposite ends of the recliner sofa. At some point, we ran out of everything, and passed out.

"You kissed me last night," I said.

"Yeah. I know. Can you take me home?"

Suddenly, what had felt like a magic moment began to feel like betrayal and manipulation. I drove him to Hickory Flat and dropped him off at his uncle's house. On the way home, I realized that nothing was ever going to change. The only thing I had any chance of changing was me.

I called my sponsor and asked what I should do. He said, go to a particular CA meeting on Friday night in Sandy Springs, find a particular man, get into his book study, and do everything he tells you to do.

The next Friday, I went to the meeting. The man I was supposed to meet wasn't there. Miraculously, I was able to stay clean that week. I went back the next Friday and found him. He said, "Be at my house Monday night at 8, we're starting at the blank page." What are the chances? Was that God doing for me what I couldn't do for myself? God certainly has a sense of humor, because this kind man lived in Hickory Flat, only a mile or so from where I had dropped off my using buddy two weeks earlier.

I went to the book study every Monday night for the next year. We read the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* and discussed it. As we came to a step in the text, we worked the step. This time, I wasn't doing "off the wall recovery." I was actually working the steps and living the principals. When I got to the fifth step, the obsession to drink and use was removed, and it hasn't come back. I didn't notice right away, but my life was transformed.

I haven't seen my using buddy again since that Sunday in June. We talked on the phone two or three times after that. I remember that he called one night to tell me that he had an ounce of Cocaine and wanted my help to cook it. I told him, no. I told him, I don't do that anymore. Then I called everyone in my recovery network for support. He called one more time after that to make arrangements to pick up some furniture he had stored in my shed.

And I haven't felt the need to drink or use. I've been through ups and downs that many would have gotten drunk or high over. I was in a serious car crash, and while I was in the emergency room, my nephew died in a house fire. There have been changes in my job, both good and bad. My mother was in a serious car crash. And through it all, I never felt a need to pick up.

As I've continued living by the principals of the Steps, my life has changed. I can't picture myself ever going back to that life. It is ironic, because when I was still drinking and using, I remember driving to get drugs with tears streaming down my face, crying, "I just want my life back." If I had gotten back the life I had before, I would have sold myself short. The transformation I have experienced is truly miraculous. There is no path that leads directly from where I was in the depths of my addiction to where I am today.

You might be wondering what I want you to take away from my talk this morning? In a word, compassion. I know, at least as well as anyone, that addicts behave very badly. They lie, they are unreliable, they steal, they do all kinds of bad things. But it is important to remember that

addicts are not bad people. Most of them are highly sensitive and deeply loving people. They behave badly because they are in the grips of an insanity beyond their control—the insanity of their addiction.

I'm not asking you to coddle or even tolerate the bad behavior of addicts. That wouldn't be the loving thing to do and could even lead to their death. No. Take a stand. Don't tolerate or accept their using. Tell the addicts in your life that you love them and that you will do everything you can to help them. Try to understand that in most cases they don't want to use or more precisely, they use when they don't want to.

Remember that each person is a little different and it takes what it takes for someone to reach a bottom. Until they reach their bottom, no addict has ever gotten sober. As long as there is still a way to use successfully they continue. This is the hardest part for those who aren't addicts but who have a loved one who is. We hate to watch someone fall down. We hate to watch someone hurt themselves. But sometimes the compassionate thing to do is remove yourself from the situation. Let the addict reach the point of hopelessness, so that they can find a new hope. Then guide them to the help and resources that are available.

If you have a family member or close friend who is an alcoholic or addict, be sure to take care of yourself. Find an Al-Anon or Nar-Anon group to join. Build a network of compassionate souls. Listen to the stories of family members whose addict or alcoholic has recovered. Listen to the ones who haven't recovered. Listen to the stories of alcoholics or addicts who have recovered. Find hope and inspiration and find your strength. Know that there are loving communities not just willing, but eager to help.

I found this quote this morning in my reading. "Love is the reward of Love."

My name is Loren, and I am a person in recovery from alcoholism and addiction.

Thank you for hearing my story.