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Addiction as Transformation

Moving from the dance with death to the embrace of healthy pleasure.

Introduction: Understanding transformation

We normally consider addiction and alcoholism to be an illness that deeply troubles and then destroys a person, his family, or his organization. Certainly, the suffering associated with addiction justifies this perspective. This essay, however, suggests a different but complementary perspective: the task of personal transformation is profoundly enhanced by major life crises. Facing addiction can transform all who come face to face with it.

Gratitude: An Inspired Way of Perceiving Addiction

I began thinking about addiction as a transformational breakthrough at a specific moment in my life. I was sitting in the audience at an AA meeting when the speaker began to talk about what was, to me at the time, an outrageous idea: he was grateful that he was an alcoholic. Despite the suffering his lifestyle had created for himself and the people he loved, the speaker suggested that he would never have found a personal relationship with God without this sort of immense problem to deal with. His message has inspired me ever since. It was a remarkable new way of looking at human suffering and I have found it exceptionally useful ever since.

Transformation versus Change

Let's first look at the meaning of the word --Transformation. It certainly involves change. Human behavior changes dramatically when one stops drinking alcohol or smoking cigarettes. As anyone involved in working with the wounds of addiction can attest, these changes do not necessarily predict any sort of personal transformation. Instead, one often uses the term "Dry Drunk" for this early stage of the healing journey.

Transformation, on the other hand, suggests a New World View as momentous as the metamorphosis from a caterpillar to a butterfly. We may recognize a person who has gotten sober because he may still have many of the basic behavior patterns and personal preferences he had when active in his addiction. This same person could then tell you that he is "transformed" by the endeavor of recovery. This implies that there has been a dramatic change in both his experience of the world and his experience of his place in it. A transformed person sees the world with new eyes and an open heart.

Attitude Shift: From Individualism to Becoming a Member of a Community

Transformation often reflects a paradigm shift in a person's attitude from an individualist approach to life to one of belonging to a community. There is also a strong sense of one's ability to make a difference in it. The link between change and transformation is evident in the mission statement of the Center for Psychology and Social Change. This organization thought the word "transformation" was too New Age to use in their name so they used the word "change" instead. It was the correct term for the work they wanted to do, however. Accordingly, they stated their mission to be: "Changing what people do by changing the way they see". In other words,

transformation has taken place when a person's new experience of the world guides his or her actions in different ways.

From Shortsightedness and Darkness into Love and Light

Transformation also reflects the spiritual idea that the task of life is to turn the darkness in our lives into love and light. In this approach each of us must face our baser and more self-interested impulses, so that our capacity for love, our connectedness to others, and our capacity to nurture can grow.

To understand addiction, one must realize that, from the point of view of practical self-interest, addictive habits have always served some sort of positive function for the individual, albeit shortsighted functions. Treatment for addiction provides the space to confront the reality of our negative attitudes and actions- our “dark side”. Transformation, in this analysis, is the move towards taking our mistakes in stride, developing an attitude of compassion and forgiveness, and discovering the profound depth of relatedness to all life that mystics speak of- “The Light”.

Taking Responsibility for Recovery from a Disease

This spiritual approach to addiction as transformation is radically different from seeing addiction as sin or lack of will power. The disease model of addiction has happily rescued many people from blaming themselves for their weakness; an incorrect way of thinking that often drives one further into addictive patterns. The transformed addict lives by a different motto: I am not my fault, but I am my responsibility. Life is bigger than simple cause and effect. My contribution to the world is to learn from my experiences and give my best to life.

Responsibility should not be confused with blame but rather asks the question: “What can I learn from this situation so I can do it better next time?” Learning, as anyone who ever took Psych 101 can tell you, is trial and error, not trial and success.

Transformation: An Exceptional and Unpredictable Shift...

Consider that the shift that occurs in transformation is analogous to the shift from Newtonian to Relativistic Physics. In the Newtonian world, we look for specific cause and effect. For example, we might try to figure out all the causes of addiction. In a Relativist world we realize that the specific effects a scientist chooses to study are simply the visible pieces of a huge and complex puzzle. The transformational focus is to study exceptional and unpredictable moments such as the point when one chooses recovery over addiction. (“How can I help this person wake up to the unmanageability of his situation?”) In the Newtonian paradigm, one can imagine that this moment might be predictable: (“I could tell that this was to be his bottom.”) From those that are close to the addictive process, however, it is very obvious that the moment of sobriety is more like a little miracle than a specifiable event.

- **To Feelings of Connectedness**

There has been a progression in Psychology over the last two decades toward realizing that relationships with siblings, friends, and other members of the community are important to one’s psychological health. It’s not just Mommy, Daddy, and me anymore. It’s also me in the world, me and my teachers, my work, and me in intimate relationships: how I experience “belonging” to my world.

The language of connectedness reflects emotions rather than ideas. It is not centered in the rational mind. If the “head” of an individual listens to the “heart” and the “gut” as a source of wisdom, that individual has gone through a transformation from isolation to connectedness.

- **To Experiences of Relatedness**

The addiction experience is powerful enough to bring about this kind of breakthrough to another level of awareness. When someone admits that she is “powerless” over a pattern of behavior and reaches out to others and to a “Higher Power”, she begins to have a sense of this life being more significant than simply satisfying some needs each day.

This awareness of how interdependent we humans are can grow to a level of social and ecological activism or remain essentially interpersonal. The transformational experience includes a feeling of belonging to the world and feeling inspired to live a purposeful life.

Addiction as a Way of Life

The addictive pattern is one that many fall into and is more destructive with some substances and behaviors than with others. Even the most adaptive but potentially addictive behaviors (e.g. shopping, work, meditation, exercise) can become problems in peoples’ lives when they take priority over peoples’ intimate relationships, their responsibilities in the world, or their spiritual lives. Alcohol, drugs that take one up and down, cigarettes, and caffeine are the traditional substances of addiction, but compulsive eating, voluntary starving, sex, television, and computer surfing have taken firm hold in many individuals’ psyches. Opportunity for addiction is everywhere.

Addictive Behaviors

Addiction, whether to substances or compulsive behavior, has four characteristics:

- **Compulsion** is the sense of self-definition as an addictive person. It’s what I do with regularity. I would not know myself without it.
- **Tolerance** is when the activity gives more relief or satisfaction in memory than it does at present. Today tobacco companies would not dare to use their old slogan: “Are you smoking more now but enjoying it less?” It is a tantamount to an admission of the addictive nature of nicotine.
- **Dependence** is when one’s life feels not normal until one has acted out one’s addictive activity, gotten one’s fix. Some runners can have a similar depression to a dry alcoholic when they are deprived of vigorous exercise because of injury.
- **Pain Avoidance** In our book Emotional Healing, Karen Paine-Gerne and I looked at the various elements of addiction and the effects they had on Adult Children of Addiction. We discovered a consistent pattern of behavior that can best be described as doing things to avoid pain. This we contrasted with the natural impulse to pursue pleasure that Freud postulated in his earliest research on the psyche.

Moving from Pain Avoidance to Pleasure

When one is pain avoidant, it is as if one’s survival takes priority over learning to thrive. Life’s difficulties appear too overwhelming to the addict. Initially the addictive behavior looked like fun and a reliable coping strategy. The self-destruction only becomes apparent later. The return to valuing healthy pleasure over pain avoidance is then a courageous act because so much

of the pain that has been buried over the years can and usually does come back to the surface, particularly when there are stressors.

“Self-Filled, not Selfish”

Giving pleasure its important place in one’s value system is a problem for many because too often it is seen as selfish and self-indulgent. This is a misunderstanding of pleasure. After one has lifted away the veil of pain avoidance, there is an amazing discovery that healthy people actually find it distasteful to exploit, seduce, or otherwise take advantage of others. It is obvious that most people want others to be enjoying their lives along with them. It is in their self-interest that others have pleasure too, that the feeling be mutual. This is a form of transformation because the word ”selfish” now has a new meaning that I suggest we call ”self-filled”. From this new perspective, it is my pleasure to help another and to see another win.

The Opportunity for a New Path

With the healing of the wounds of this so-called selfish behavior called addiction, the addict rediscovers an impulse toward finding fulfillment (pleasure), which embraces life, including the painful parts. Of course, the addict went down the road of addiction in the first place because it provided pseudo-pleasures (pain avoidance). In interrupting the path, the opportunity to find a new road shifts the addict’s entire approach to life. (Transformation).

The Shift from Pain Avoidance to Healthy Pleasure Seeking

To illustrate this shift, I draw on my own life as an example. Growing up in an alcoholic home in the 1950s, there was a message of normalcy about addictive behavior. Alcohol was a rite of adulthood. Offering a drink was the first thing that occurred when someone came to our house. Renouncing those addictive substances as an adolescent, I turned to my drugs of choice: marijuana and psychedelics. There was also a third substance of abuse, adrenaline. I will call it “the addiction to excitement”. Psychologists have called it “sensation seeking behavior”. Much of what most would agree makes up a normal life became boring to me and I yearned to create the awakened state I associate with having adrenaline coursing through me. Some suggest that this is a habituated response to growing up in a chaotic home without clear and consistent limits. In fact, adrenaline is just another addictive substance that is essential to healthy human functioning but can become a problem if over-generated by the body.

Use: A Maladaptive Way to Attempt to Control Life

The unifying characteristic of drinking, drugging and adrenalizing is the addictive impulse to find activities to do that effectively make pain go away. While they may not look like it, these are all maladaptive but sincere attempts to get control over one’s own life.

Eventually these efforts of mine ran their course and failed. Luckily I found personal growth, my professional training, and many rewarding personal relationships instead of going further into substance abuse. For example, at a workshop called Opening the Heart, I learned to grow by opening the hurts that were inside me and meeting those truths with the loving kindness of others in the workshop. I now affectionately call this the ”manure theory of human

development”. The theory is simple: Open your heart and express the sadness, anger, and fear inside and the manure provides the fertile ground in your heart to eventually turn it into a chalice of love.

The Path to Health: Facing Pain Avoidant and Self-Destructive Behaviors

This model seems to work for some and is useful because it gives a clear instruction for dealing with painful feelings as one moves toward emotional health. Unfortunately, for addicts and people who grow up subject to parental addiction and abuse, the path to health means facing many pain avoidant and self-destructive behaviors in our adult lives along with the traumas of childhood. Freud first articulated this compulsion to recreate childhood hurts in one’s adult relationships. Tragically, if you are used to inconsistency, unreliability, and unpredictability, you unconsciously tend to recreate it. The addiction to excitement makes it even more fun because the addict’s internal dialogue rationalizes the chaos of one’s life by telling him that it is interesting and exciting.

Another understanding of this phenomenon suggests that the individual unconsciously recreates childhood hurts hoping deep in his heart that in this latest recreation, things will turn out differently. This model has a spiritual assumption that life is not chaotic or random. Rather, it is thought that each of us has the task in life to resolve important relationships so that what is left is love and a sense of connectedness to others.

Embracing Life in All its Forms: Getting off the Roller Coaster

Eventually I chose to get off the emotional roller coaster. This led to a shift in my understanding to what I call an “Aliveness theory of human development”. The spiritual principle here is to embrace life in all its forms. In my healing journey I am no longer trying to get rid of old feelings but rather deepen with them, make friends with them. Anger, sadness, and fear are no longer the enemy if I don’t resist them.

The metaphor I like best is that of striving to turn the rocky cliff trail of my unexplored psyche into a beautiful interstate with easy on-off ramps by getting to the heart of my suffering. With familiarity comes the understanding of what is old pain to be worked through and what is a current stressor that might be triggering an inappropriate defense mechanism. When I am comfortable with feeling, I can make healthier choices based on effective understanding of my inner life along with accurate awareness of the information that is coming to me from my environment.

Shame Reduction Work: Shifting to Pleasure Seeking from Pain Avoidance

The aliveness theory also suggests that when I don’t avoid pain, I have more access to the life force and can trust my own pleasure impulses. Shame is the opposite. It is the internalized hatred of one’s innate movement toward love and connection to others. Addictive behaviors and other destructive behaviors toward others are the acting out of that shame. The key component of the shift from a pain avoidant stance towards one of healthy pleasure seeking is “shame-reduction work”.

Shame as a Betrayal of Self

Many people do not even know they suffer from shame. It is different from guilt, the sense that one has done something wrong or omitted to do something that one wishes had been

done. Shame is a sense that one is wrong, that one's place in the world is on shaky ground at best. Shame reflects a pattern of living up to a standard that is an "idealized self-image" that one is either skilled or unskilled at fulfilling. To be good at living up to the image certainly has its social and economic benefits, but the underlying experience of shame is inevitable when you are fooling yourself and others.

Portraying an image is a betrayal of the real self, a habit that starts in childhood when we try to be a person we are not, in order to please parents, teachers, and friends. Shame shows up later in life when we are so involved with images of how we should or might be that we have lost all track of what we really think or how we really feel about things. It is as if we have decided to believe our press releases rather than what our heart is telling us is the truth.

Shame Reduction Work is Often Anger Work

Shame reduction means giving the shame back to the purveyors of anti-life messages with self-affirming energy. That usually takes the form of anger. For example, as we heal from shame, we learn to assert a vigorous "NO" to the people who called us "selfish" as children. It is the fundamental task of a child to develop a strong sense of self. Therefore, being selfish means we are doing a good job being a child. A prematurely empathic child (e.g. one who is pre-occupied with his mother's moods), in contrast, has been profoundly shamed into this ability to sense every nuance in another's emotions. A relaxed empathy naturally develops as a child matures. A healthy child learns first how to take a walk in his or her own sandals and only later learns to see things from another's point of view.

Shame Reduction Work Is About Telling our Story.

Simply telling our story to others who accept the narrative and the associated feelings as heroic efforts and teaching stories can be very healing. It is not a newspaper report that touches others' lives, however. The healing comes with the re-experience of the feelings and real contact with the witnessing audience who can empathize with and grow from the experience as well.

Confronting addictive behaviors in oneself and others becomes transformation rather than problem solving when the shame is addressed. Without it, you are simply trying to change dysfunctional behavior. Almost everyone feels guilty for his or her self-abusive behaviors, but when one addresses the underlying shame that is buried by these coping strategies, there is an ecstatic experience of self-forgiveness for these actions. There is also a sense of gratitude that the addictive behavior played such an important role in helping one wake-up to the profoundly spiritual nature of life. With shame reduction, the journey through suffering is worth it.

Susan's healing journey provides a concise example of this phenomenon. A youngest of three and the only daughter a very hard-working and therefore absent father and a mother with periodically severe paranoia, she grew up idolizing and depending on her brothers. They would hide and protect her as best they could from their mothers' rages and offered her their alternate views of reality when her mother was enforcing her paranoid ones on the entire household, including the father.

Tragically, as the boys struggled with their own lack of guidance through adolescence, each secretly engaged in drawing Susan into sexual games that she was both uncomfortable with and felt shamed by. These experiences reverberated in her psyche as power games she consistently played with men well into her thirties. She was not to find a loving sexual relationship until she resolved her earlier submissions to unwanted sexual activities. Shame reduction for her involved not only going through the feelings in therapeutic settings but also sharing her confusion and

suffering with her brothers. They each were initially defensive and minimizing of their behavior. Susan's perseverance ultimately led to a life-long closeness that is treasured by all three.

The Developmental Task

It is one of the curious paradoxes of human development that the two primary tasks a child must manage are simultaneously divergent in nature and synergistic in effect. This is because the capacity for one enhances the capacity for the other. A healthy adult must develop a capacity for autonomy as well as a capacity for attachment. The root of these abilities emerges in the first few years of life when both genetics and the family environment have significant effects. Healthy families make attachment safe and pleasurable. They also recognize each child as separate and different, allowing the child to develop a unique niche for him or herself in the family and the extended community.

Addiction as Unhealthy Autonomy

Addictive behaviors are for some an insurmountable test of these capacities. Peer pressure is a major cause of adolescent experimentation with substance abuse. Later on as adults, those who have never learned to say "NO" have a very hard time fully giving themselves to anything or anybody with the healthy passion of attachment.

In terms of Jungian archetypes, it is "the wise virgin" who says, "No, I am not ready. I will let you know when I am." This archetype is not gender specific and seems to be actively ignored as children rush into their independence without having first developed much capacity for autonomy. Getting drunk or compulsive eating/starving may look like freedom and taking control, but it is usually much more about avoiding the pain of loneliness and other forms of alienation from one's inner self, one's family, and one's community.

Codependency: A Problem with Healthy Attachment

Codependency, the behavior of others around the addict, is a problem with healthy attachment. One is seen to be codependent in a relationship when any one of three things takes place:

- One's self-esteem is dependent on the other person's view of them. The addict will take a lover or family member on a roller coaster ride of emotions in order to keep the focus off the addictive behavior.
- The codependent will deny him or her self anything, including her own thoughts, in order to preserve the form of the relationship. The classic illustration of this is the wife who lies to herself because she likes being married over the alternative.
- Similarly, the individual will do anything because of the fear of abandonment. It is different from number two because it is not the identity or label of "wife" that is of concern, it is the panic of being isolated that the person avoids with impunity. Affiliation is seen as success in life and autonomy as a dangerous abyss.

The codependent manages the abyss by engaging in some sort of compulsive behavior that revolves around loved ones. This supports the fantasy that one can get control of one's life with certain forms of pain avoidance (e.g. "Please don't leave me!") In response the active addict refuses to let anyone tell him how to live his life.

The healthy person, in contrast, manages a balance between affiliation and autonomy. Relationships are important but not the only meaningful thing in this person's life. Autonomy is not seen as a dangerous abyss but rather an opportunity for creative expression of one's uniqueness and an opportunity to be an effective agent in one's life.

Healthy Sobriety: Autonomy and Attachment

Healthy sobriety requires one to develop in both areas.

- Autonomy: To not drink requires many small acts of courage to change one's way of life in the face of many tacit and some explicit suggestions to have another drink.
- Affiliation: The fact is that most people who successfully remain sober do so in the company and support of many other like-minded people. The capacity to love and be loved in these relationships is a very good example of the transformation of a person's life from an isolated and alienated addict to one who believes in the healing power of love.

A primary task of a healthy person in recovery is to find ways to create this transformation in us and in others. It requires communication skills, a capacity for connectedness to others, and a personal history of love.

Developing Emotional Intelligence (EI)

“Don't just do something, sit there!”

When one enters recovery from codependence or addiction, the first thing one is encouraged to do is to cease the addictive behavior and to enter into a healing community where new habits are learned. Deferred gratification is the critical element that needs to develop. To interrupt the impulses to “do something”; one must find a way to discover faith in life as well as become comfortable in one's own skin.

Both are required if we are to sit still while the pain avoidant mechanisms are screaming to be active. It is in the body that the transformation takes place. Where before the body was a place ruled by biochemistry, now it becomes the temple where the language of soul is listened to and learned through attunement to the feelings in the body.

EI: Having Feeling versus Being Had by Feelings

Emotional intelligence can be summed up as ability to have a feeling rather than being had by it. In other words, a person with EI has a well-developed ability to listen to the voice of his feelings without having to act on the impulses these feelings elicit. It is learning the language of the soul as it speaks through the body. It is not easy to do this because:

- Childhood trauma interrupts healthy adaptation.
- The skills have been lost because childhood messages (e.g. “Big boys don't cry!”, “Nice girls don't...”, “You are too intense.”) that can be summed up by the inaccurate assertion that adults have control and should maintain control of their emotions. Healthy adults have control over choices to express emotions.
- Clinical depression makes listening impossible.
- Addictive processes have taken hold of the individual.

The good news is that healing is possible in almost all cases. It just takes time, patience, and practice.

Feelings - The Four Basics: Joy, Sorrow, Anger, & Fear

There are many words that express feelings but they can all be boiled down to four basic categories of feeling: joy, sorrow, anger, and fear. Each feeling has levels of intensity that create a range of experience. For example, mild irritation can turn into frustration and anger, eventually exploding into murderous rage. Each feeling also has different cultural, familial, and gender biases that effect the way we approach them in ourselves and deal with them in others.

The first impression that most people have when they look at this list of feelings is that there are three “bad” ones and only one “good” one. In a transformational model, however, there are no bad feelings. Some are more painful than others. Some are more socially acceptable. As adults we can learn to attend to the content and the intensity of feelings. The task is to find a powerful silver lining in them. This is certainly easier when we can have our feelings before we make conscious choices whether to share them or not in a specific situation.

Joy

Joy can be a problem for many especially when it is seen as childish or embarrassing. Some even lose the ability to have an uncontrollable laugh. Those that can let go with ease, however, have access to a sense of the true mystery of involuntary processes like breathing and feeling. Without that sense of spontaneity we all learn from laughter, the body appears to be a machine that must be managed rather than the miracle of life that it is.

Sorrow

Sorrow is a feeling that some people feel they must get control over or they will be overwhelmed. Some worry that they will fall apart if they give in to grief, while others have been told that crying is only for the young and immature. These are tragic and self-fulfilling messages. Healthy adults are able to have a deep convulsive sobbing when a loss occurs and then move on just as a child can. Movies and novels are wonderful places to practice this skill.

People who know their own grief get another reward: their losses become part of the rich fabric of their lives. Resolving grief through catharsis leads to a profound connectedness to loved ones that have died and a sense of the importance of other failures, disappointments, and losses. Through “good grief”, the mourner stays intimate with loved ones. Grieved losses do not need to be buried secrets but instead become cherished memories of difficult times lived through as a hero in one’s own narrative.

Anger

Anger is a potentially lethal emotion that people often blame for their actions (“Anger made me do it!”) In fact, it is their inability to contain (have) their anger that leads to this sort of acting out. The most important principle I teach to individuals who are forced to see a psychologist for “anger management” is that **the only thing you can control is your own actions**. I cannot control what I think or feel, nor can I control what you think, feel or do. Hitting by children, for example, becomes habitual when adult caretakers do not impart firm consequences for these inappropriate acts. The child is not learning to control his actions when he becomes angry. The hit releases the perpetrator’s tension and is designed to manipulate (control) the victim.

Moreover, most children do not accept double standards for parental misbehavior either. Hitting a child for hitting tends to role model the behavior one is trying to extinguish. Alcohol is particularly insidious in this matter, as it tends to dissolve one’s inhibitions to hostile actions.

When you carefully examine your anger, however, you will find deeply held life-affirming values buried under the layers of impulses to destroy the source of frustration. Healthy people are able to privately experience their anger and then decide to communicate about it effectively rather than impulsively venting it.

Sometimes verbalizing anger directly is a useful choice. In almost all cases, anger is less destructive and is more creative when it is framed as a genuine enthusiasm for something I care about. When I am grounded in my values, anger is creative. When I am ungrounded and swept away with my justifications for my anger, I will be destructive. However, when a tank is marching through town blowing up targets, it is indeed a grounded response to meet it with another tank. This is simply an example of “tough love” that is capable of getting through to another (pun intended).

I will tell a child, for example, that we don’t hit while I also remind him that our family’s goal is to respect each family member, however irritating they might be at this moment. I will also openly admit to and apologize for losing my temper. Kids don’t need or want their parents to be perfect; just honest.

Fear

The problem with fear is that its effects compound geometrically. In other words, fear is scary! To be scared to death is sometimes a trauma that can take years to work through. In addition, fear is not something adults generally like to admit to unless it refers to physical danger. Many men are often terrified of emotional risk but rarely are even aware of it let alone being willing to volunteer this information. When people speak of being stressed out, they are finding a socially acceptable way of saying that they did some scary things that day.

However, fear is so much more than that:

- It can protect us when we allow ourselves to feel it. It makes us more alert to danger and to the details that can be useful for our survival in a desperate situation.
- People who allow themselves to experience a moderate level of test anxiety do their best because the fear (often called “butterflies”) brings them to peak performance and encourages meticulous preparation.
- People who have learned to bear the intensity of their fear also have a sense of reverence and awe for life that people who play it safe do not.
- People who define themselves as risk-takers also tend to have higher self-esteem.

When fear serves as a friend, it keeps us from being foolhardy in our wishes but allows us to perform in risky situations. If we ignore it, we bury its warning signals or are paralyzed by its intensity. To develop full emotional aliveness, an individual needs to learn to embrace fear, breathe through it, study the data with the heightened perception fear can enable, and then decide what to.

Interpreting the Fuzzy Data of Feelings

An important attribute of those who have emotional intelligence is that they accept the irrational nature of the unconscious and the inscrutable quality of emotional information. Rarely does a feeling immediately translate into an obvious solution or reaction. One must learn how to interpret fuzzy data from inside and be comfortable with ambiguity. Meditation and other forms of quiet attunement to the “small voice” of the heart and the gut are valuable tools for living. In order to do this well, one must also take an attitude toward life that it is a novel experience where the healthy individual never stops learning.

The Learning Model

Learning is “trial and error”, not “trial and success”. Once you succeed, the task is already learned. People who “live and learn” accept, if not welcome, disappointments and failures with the attitude that “there is something to learn here that will help me do it better next time”. It is an optimistic attitude but it is also a humble one. Getting things right is still an aspiration commonly known as “the pursuit of excellence”, but the process of transformation is one where the learning is the adventure. Problems are to be expected rather than dreaded.

Admitting I Have Something to Learn

People who go down the path of addiction use the substance or the behavior as a way to avoid the conflicts they are otherwise faced with. Accepting that one is handicapped or wounded in some way requires the simple but often very hard step of admitting “I have something to learn about life”. This is at the essence of “asking for help”.

Woundedness as Reality - Perfectionism as Denial

I encourage people to think of human woundedness as a natural state. Perfection is an idea that technological culture has instilled in us as a standard. Perfectionists cannot settle for an imperfect lawn and believe that ideally all our blemishes will go unnoticed. Problems are to be fixed rather than enjoyed. If we are successful, we fix them or hide them from the gossiping crowd. This approach only fuels the disease of Denial. If no one can see my problem, is it really there?

Most people we come into contact with know how to dress themselves and behave appropriately. In the context of a transformational culture, however, we remember that while these people may appear “to have it all together,” they are wounded and deserve our compassion. They are struggling to “make a living” within their own circumstances. The secret is out and it is not such a bad thing after all. Pass it on!

When I accept my woundedness and my limitation, I am able to have an error and say to myself “Oops! Better luck next time.” I put my effort into learning something while the data is fresh. The alternative is rationalization, blaming, and even overt denial that anything went wrong.

Powerlessness, Woundedness and Transformation

Within the context of twelve-step recovery, the learning model is reflected in the move away from the belief that I can with my will make things work. Instead I admit to my powerlessness (a form of woundedness). The disease model of addiction helps people accept that they are not “bad” for being addicted and imperfect. It serves as a wonderful bridge from the isolation of the individual to forming a fellowship with others who are able and eager to help.

The attitude of transformation is that we become grateful for our woundedness because it draws us beyond ourselves into a deep engagement with others. It is a potentially very rewarding learning experience.

Learning the Language of the Soul

Once one has taken on the task of eliminating an addiction from one’s life, the journey of transformation can begin in earnest. A renewal of a positive relationship with one’s body is essential. The body is the instrument through which our soul speaks to us through the language

of the feelings. To the extent that our observing self is attuned to this language, our feelings can be an extremely useful guide to healthy living.

The opposite is also the case. Caring for the body in terms of diet and exercise has a positive effect only when the goal is to embrace the full range of feeling as we experience it, especially under stress.

To use diet and exercise for control of the body has the opposite effect, alienating the individual from his body as a resource for wisdom and emphasizing the mechanical functions that can be perfected. Compulsive diets or exercise can become pain avoidant addictive processes leading to same alienation from ourselves and others that the more debilitating addictions cause.

Everyone knows how to behave when not under stress. It is the hurts, the threats, the losses, the errors, as well as the intense intimacies that reveal the individual's ability to embrace life in all its forms. Practice is essential to becoming accomplished at staying with the feelings while in contact with stressors. Pain avoidant patterns have been in place for a long time and remain buried underneath the masks we use day-to-day. Therapeutic settings and self-help meetings provide opportunities to open up the stresses without retraumatizing ourselves: they are excellent places to practice tolerating intense emotions and developing compassion for oneself and others.

“Right Size” Your Shame

For transformation to take place, the vitality of the body must be increased. Stopping the toxic behavior certainly helps, but the next step is to change one's way of life through the very difficult task of shame-reduction work described above. Shame, the experience that our rightful place in the world is in question, does diminish vitality in the same way that we all wither in the face of hatred. We must learn to cultivate our vitality in the context of our personal histories of shame and other trauma.

However, in the same way that our woundedness is a natural state, healthy people have some shame. It is experienced as modesty and humility. It is expressed as a tentativeness or shyness when entering a new situation or stating a novel idea. It embodies the paradox: “I am unique but I am not special.” Healthy shame is an acknowledgement that I am simply one among many individuals and that I want mutual fulfillment over simply having my way. In contrast, the extreme of the shameless person is the sociopath who is unable to derive any pleasure from the joy or fulfillment of another.

Too much shame pulls us out of the possibility of developing mutual fulfillment with another. If self-hatred is the primary operating principle in the psyche, it is very hard to even begin the conversation about what might be mutually fulfilling. Most addicts begin recovery with too much shame. It is always a mental stretch for someone beginning recovery to believe that being a sponsor offers as much fulfillment as being sponsored.

Do We Deserve a “Pleasure-Based Life”?

Consider that the healthy life is a “pleasure-based life.” Notice the initial reaction to that simple phrase. Doesn't it sound hedonistic, selfish, immature, or at least, unrealistic? These attitudes reflect the fact that you have too much shame. Once one has achieved a level of transformation where one is more connected to others, healthy pleasure means finding it very distasteful to seduce, take advantage, or otherwise cause displeasure to another. Instead, taking the time to work out a conflict maximizes mutual satisfaction. I like it best when we both win!

Once you have bought into the idea that pleasure is a worthy cause for living, the most important step in shame reduction work is possible: reclaiming one's birthright to an autonomous and fulfilling (pleasurable) life. This is easier said than done. Living a "shame-based life" is a habit that is hard to dissolve. It takes trial and error, working things out as you go along, to find mutual pleasure in your transactions with others.

Expressing Feelings About Shame-Based Memories and Beliefs

The first step in the shame reduction process that I have already described is the identification of the sources of shame. Telling them to another must be done in ways that go beneath the story to the re-experience of the feelings of joy, anger, sorrow, and fear that the memory elicits. The most important memories or beliefs either have sexual content or involve family secrets that one has held safe out of loyalty or a fear that one won't be believed.

The goal is not the telling of a story but the full expression of feelings. Techniques like Psychodrama, Gestalt, and Bioenergetic Therapy can be very useful adjuncts to this step because they take one out of "there and then" storytelling and into "here and now" re-experience of the event through feeling.

Giving Back Shame

This idea- giving back the shame to person, place, or thing that caused the shame message in the first place- may seem quite alien to some. Remember that to a child, parents and other authority figures resemble gods who can do no wrong. Many people forget this because our more concrete memories of childhood are after age seven when children have witnessed their parents' flaws. Unfortunately, pain avoidant mechanisms are pretty much in place by age six.

We all take on shame as children because we want to belong to family, school, and church/temple: to name our primary institutions. To the extent our parents act out of their own shame, we will take it on eagerly and make it our own as an unconscious way of being close to them.

I Will Not Carry Your Shame

The core healing statement one needs to make to one's parents is that "this is your shame and I will not carry it for you further". This message is sent with anger or at least a powerful personal assertion. Anger is a message in itself that "I am separate from you and self-supporting". However, the parents in questions are the ones you had at the time of the trauma, not the ones living today. Most people have very different relationships at the present time, especially when the dependency is reversed with age and infirmity. This healing is much better done in therapeutic settings rather than with the individuals themselves. Too often parental encounters are retraumatizing and so must be planned carefully or they are rarely worth the risk.

The second statement is: "I will bear my own shame with acceptance of my woundedness. My love for you is not at stake, even as I give you back your shame. I am grateful to you for providing the learning environment I needed to become the best human being I can be." The idea here that I will not take on any message that I must hate myself. There are things I have done and left undone that I feel guilt about, but my place in the world is secure. My right to pursue my pleasures- social, sexual, spiritual, or otherwise- will not be invalidated by you. You may refuse me and I accept that. In my independence I will seek out others who find their own pleasure in saying, "yes" to me. I find no joy at the expense of others and avoid those who do."

Transformation in the Steps

As the shame reduction work proceeds, an individual finds pleasure both in his or her autonomy and affiliation. Each of the steps of recovery continues to take on profound meaning for the individual. The transformation is that the steps are not simply ideas but a new way of moving and being in the world. The experience is one of wonder at how pain and suffering are part of the miracle of life. It is also an experience of gratitude for one's own life path that brings us all to this moment. There are several examples of these admittedly grand claims:

- **Accepting powerlessness:** This is no longer a loss of anything except perhaps a perfectionist image we have nurtured for a long time. The fact is that I am a human and “not God”. In my woundedness I have shifted my allegiance away from my will and the images of success and perfection I create for myself. Instead, I listen first to my body and the feelings generated there. I still have ideas and schemes, but I hold them lightly until they are time-tested. I live and learn, “accepting the things I cannot change”.
- **Asking for Help:** I ask for help from others, taking refuge in a community of like-minded others who encourage me to live fully in healthy pleasure, “changing the things I can”. This community supports the body life, encouraging exercise, healthy eating, plenty of rest, etc. It also supports me to reach out. Others meet my reach with focused attention, eye contact, touch, and even a full hug at the right time.
- **Experiencing the Healing Resources of the Fellowship and Higher Power:** I learn to receive the warmth and wisdom of the community and enjoy the pleasure of their company. I realize in my transformation that the healing power of the fellowship is greater than the sum of the parts of the organization. In this way I come to direct experience of a Higher Power in my life.
- **Examining One's Life with Supportive Listeners:** I engage in a very personal self-examination of my life and the feelings that these memories bring up for me. The emergent feelings are experienced and fully expressed in the body and are shared with others. The presence of a responsive witness deepens my capacity for affirmation and pleasure in another's company. The painful memories are no longer dreaded but now are part of the rich and heroic fabric of my life. They will be more easily shared the next time this sort of intimacy is called for. There is no more blame, just the facts of my life.
- **Mutual Healthy Affiliation through Amends and Personal Boundaries:** With the increased capacity for healthy affiliation that comes from practice (trial and error, and retrial), I take action to make amends for things I feel guilty about and manage my personal boundaries with civility. I tell others what my preferences are (pleasure-seeking) and inquire with genuine curiosity as to what are theirs. I seek mutuality as my ultimate fulfillment. My personal boundaries are points of transaction with others rather than walls with which I barricade myself in and others out.
- **Profound Inspiration of Shared Lives:** My life and the lives of my friends and loved ones are a source of profound inspiration to me. Problems arise and are approachable with trial and error. I find pleasure sharing this inspiration with others, curious to hear about their concerns and what I will learn through them as a witness to their healing.

Rekindling Ecstasy

If all that sounds a little too idealistic, it is because we all still have an inner child who fantasizes that the pain will go away if he or she gets it right. There is no right way and the Buddhists have it pretty close to accurate when they suggest that the First Noble Truth is the fact

of human suffering. Life is easier when we have few preferences but denial of real preferences is still denial of something real. Transformation is in the willingness to give up pain avoidance and accept life as it presents itself.

Accepting our Addictive Patterns While Focusing on Healthy Pleasure

A healthy person does not deny the circumstances of his or her life including its addictive patterns. IT IS WHAT IT IS. In my health I do the work of emotional healing as it becomes necessary and then get on with pursuing the pleasure of life as it is determined by my own preferences and current possibilities. Focusing on pleasure at least gives one the chance of hitting the target with actions. With emotional intelligence, we can know that there is a deeper pleasure in sobriety than there will be in taking that drink or smoking that cigarette.

Transformation Beyond Sobriety

In fact the task of transformation does not stop with sobriety because we live in a world that is focused on control and pain avoidance. Individuals who focus on their need for power and control can be very threatening to people involved in the pursuit of personal transformation. Control (old paradigm) wants you to stop drinking because you are making a mess of things. Transformation (new paradigm) offers you the possibilities of sanity and pleasure if you will give up your pain avoidant mechanisms, the addictive behavior being, as the AA slogan puts it, the “First Thing[s] First.”

Transformation as Accepting Addiction as a Human Condition

Ultimately transformation becomes a political movement that accepts addiction as a part of the human condition. In time the focus of healing shifts from imprisoning addicts to making sure there are enough treatment centers and enough addiction education for all age brackets so that when the readiness for transformation is there, the opportunity to heal is available. Rather than trying to dominate addicts, we seek the pleasure of their company in recovery. We are not passive about it nor are we threatening. We are aggressive about the fulfillment that is possible if people are taught to find the richness that lies inside their own bodies. As each of us becomes healthy and more full of vitality, we can do more for each other. There is even a great deal of fun to be had when we do it together.

The Ecstasy of Transformation is an Engaged Life in Serenity

The ecstasy of transformation is not another new high. It is a serenity that life has it's own meaning and beauty when we refuse to avoid it, however ugly it can appear to be. It is a call to action and engagement with others because the dance of pleasure is less when anyone “sits this one out”. Each person's participation furthers the transformation for all of us.

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