

What I Learned In Rehab

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When I planned September's sermons last month I thought they would likely be my farewell sermons to you. Little did I know you would be *voting* on me at the end of the month! I tried to weasel out of preaching today's sermon, but I decided to go ahead and share deeply about an important period in my life.

I have not spoken or written about it for five years. I have waited until I was at a point where I could speak about it with some degree of authenticity. And I speak to you about it because of the safety I feel with you.

In January 2013 I spent a month at Father Martin's Ashley. It was a sub-acute medical facility for the treatment of alcoholism and other addictions. The month was an exploration into the truth of who I was. I call it now my Spiritual Boot camp. After leaving there I was in an out-patient program in Charlotte for four months, and I went to A.A. meeting every week for a year. At the end of that time I concluded that I was not an alcoholic. Doctors make a distinction between alcohol abuse and alcohol dependency, the latter being alcoholism. I had been in the former category, abusing alcohol to self-medicate my depression and anxiety.

But the month at Father Martin's Ashley and the year of being actively a part of the recovery community was one of the most important spiritual experiences of my life.

I

First, a few words about what led me there. For a few years I had been growing more and more depressed. I was in the care of a psychiatrist and therapist. I was living alone after a sorrowful divorce. I was on a number of anti-depressants and sleep medications, and I began to drink more and more. I was trying to find relief from depression and anxiety and something that would help me sleep at night. But of course, the alcohol made it worse. It was undercutting the effectiveness of the anti-depressants and only temporarily relieved the anxiety. I was depleted mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually.

That fall I went to a Chinese restaurant. The fortune cookie said: "Your judgment is impaired. Consult with others before making any major decisions." "Oh great, I said to myself, "even the fortune cookies are on to me."

In mid-December I sought the help of a spiritual director with experience in helping people with addictions. We talked for awhile. I poured out my life to him. He said, I don't know whether you are an alcoholic, but I recommend a month away from your work where you can get professional care and regain your

strength, body, mind and spirit. It felt like a life saver thrown over board to me. He recommended Father Martin's Ashley in Maryland. On December 31, 2012, I flew to Baltimore to begin my treatment there.

During my ministry I had preached on "surrender to God". Now surrender became a concrete act. I called Father Martin's Ashley, 1-800-799-4673, told them my story and began the admissions process. Surrender as real as 1-800-799-4673.

When I got there I discovered I would have no cell phone, no computer, no I—pad, no T.V. or newspapers. And horror of horrors, no *books!* The night before I left I had carefully packed a second suitcase of books I had been wanting to read. What did I think this was, a cruise? So the first thing I had to do was to hand over my suitcase of books. They wanted me to concentrate on *me*, and on all the recovery materials they supplied. So I was there without the customary props that would distract me from why I was there.

Here was the schedule. Every morning up at 6a.m; Breakfast a 6:45; worship 7:45; then from 8:30 in the morning to 9 at night there were lectures, therapy sessions, group and individual, and A.A. meetings. The only break was 2 or 3 hours for recreation and rest in the afternoons. /while there I dealt with my depression and anxiety, with past trauma and with the ways of addiction. I had a

wonderful group of doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists, ministers and therapists helping me.

In my last days there I began to experience happiness on a cellular level, something I could not have imagined months before. These last five years have been a journey toward healing. Today my depression has abated. You have been an important part of that healing journey.

II

What did I learn there and in the following year? Here is a beginning.

Truth One: learning to love fellow sufferers is a way of learning to love yourself. We had “outed” ourselves as part of the human race. We learned about addiction and about ourselves. There were people there young and old, and from all walks of life. The beautiful young people were mostly there for opioid and drug addiction, an epidemic in America today. We grew to love each other and to love ourselves.

Truth two: I began the 12 Steps and discovered it to be one of the most powerful programs of practical spirituality we have.

While there we concentrated on the first three steps.

Step One: “We admitted we were powerless over our addiction, that our lives had become unmanageable.” I certainly had experienced my powerlessness and the unmanageability of my life.

Step Two: “Came to believe that a power greater ourselves could restore us to sanity.” Isn’t “came to believe” a beautiful phrase? Here was the profound experience of reaching out to God.

Step Three: “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understand Him.” It was the trusting of one’s life into the care of God. You’ve heard the expression, “I’m spiritual not religious.” Religion says: the one with the most will-power wins. Spirituality says, it all begins in powerlessness which leads to transformation.

Richard Rohr the great Franciscan spiritual writer has written a wonderful book on the Twelve Steps, *Breathing Under Water*, In it he says:

It is the imperial ego that has to go, and only powerlessness can do the job correctly... Otherwise, we try to engineer our own transformation by our own rules and by our own power,, which is by definition, therefore, not transformation! It seems we can in no way engineer or steer our own conversion. If we try to change our ego with the help of our ego, we only have a better disguised ego.

After leaving Father Martins Ashley I began to work through the Twelve steps with my sponsor.

Step Four: “We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.” How much better we could all be if we were brave enough to take such a journey. And doing it with another person made it more real and honest.

In preparation for this step my sponsor asked me to write down the names of all the people I had grudges against. “Hey, this is easy”, I said to myself. I brought the list and we started at the top. With each person he asked, “What is your part in this?” Whoah. Suddenly it wasn’t so easy. Jesus said “the truth shall set you free”, but sometimes first it makes you miserable. A searching and fearless moral inventory. Someone said: “the bravery of a book is that it looks away from nothing. So the bravery of a *life*. All of this was possible because I had entrusted my life to the care of a God of great mercy.

The Twelve Steps were a spiritually rigorous and healing, freeing process for me.

Now I go on, Third Truth. The A.A. community is marked by the most amazing humility, honesty, grace and gratitude. It is “church” in the deepest sense. Frederick Buechner has written that the most church he has seen goes on

in the basement of churches where Twelve Step groups meet. I try to carry that humility, honesty, grace and gratitude with me.

Truth number Four: We need God and one another more than we ever know. Poet Maya Angelou wrote

Lying, Thinking last night
how to find myself a home
where the water is not thirsty
and the bread loaf is not stone.

And I came up with something
and I don't think I'm wrong.

Nobody but nobody can make it here alone

Truth Number Four: Three of the most important words in the English language are "I Need Help". How strenuously we hide our need from one another.

Truth Number Six: Here's a saying from A.A.: "Do the next right thing and trust the outcome to God." We cannot undo the wrongs of the past, nor can we plan out all the right decisions for the future, but we can do the next right thing, as best as we can know it.

And as for trusting the outcomes to God, think of how much effort and energy we spend trying to manage outcomes, trying to control what happens.

Such exercises exhaust us and tie us in knots. So try this: Do the next right thing and trust the outcome to God.

Truth Number Seven: Helping others helps us. Bill W., the founder of A.A., tried for years unsuccessfully to quit drinking. The key came when he discovered that by helping other alcoholics he was able to stay sober.

Truth Number Eight: Resentments are a trigger for addiction and are a form of self-inflicted bondage. Resentment comes from the root word that means “to feel again.” Resentments are a way of feeling again and again the hurts from the past. Nelson Mandela, who spent 27 years in prison before he became President of South Africa said: “Resentment is like drinking poison and waiting for your enemy to die.”

Truth Number Nine: Humor is a healing gift of God. A.A. meetings are filled with humor, a humor that pokes gentle fun at our common humanity. Here's one A.A. Joke about denial:

Woman to another woman: “I hear your husband died. I'm so sorry. How did he die?”

Second woman: “He had cirrhosis of the liver.”

First woman: “Did he ever go to A.A.?”

Second woman: “Oh, it never got that bad.”

Truth Number Ten: The importance of Prayer. Prayer is bringing our whole real self to God. Sometimes with words, other times with cries and whispers too deep for words.

But the right words help guide our prayer. Every A.A. meeting begins with the Serenity Prayer. It was written many years ago by the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. We prayed it today

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.

It is one of the most prayers I know. And A.A. meetings normally end with the saying of the Lord’s Prayer. We could do worse than beginning every day with the Serenity Prayer and ending it with the Lord’s Prayer.

Paul’s words on prayer have meant so much to me

Have no anxiety about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Lord, give us such peace.

