

August 25, 2017

Dear Beautiful Soul with Pain,

I can't begin to understand your pain, and I am sorry that you might be suffering, but all I can do is to share my own experience and a few of the things I learned recently at what I understand is one of the world's best Pain Recovery Centers. I hope that you might find a few helpful nuggets amongst the words I am sending you via the wonderful therapist we have in common, Molly.

The first thing you should know about me is that the closest thing I have to a religion are the 12 Steps of Recovery. They are beautiful things and it took me years to learn that the steps are all about a different kind of pain relief. I ran the numbers recently and think I have attended somewhere between 1500 and 2000 AA meetings over the last 30 years, so what I am about to relay to you comes not only from my 28 days at a Mindfulness-based Pain Treatment Center but also from the 12 steps of recovery.

The steps work so well that they have been adopted for drugs, gambling addiction, etc. and here is a ready link to the [12 Steps of Chronic Pain Anonymous](#) which is a wonderful group.

Right before I let chronic pain and opioids ruin my life, I celebrated my 60th birthday in April 2013 by walking my golden retriever Charley about a mile and a half through a nearby forest, played my 24 year old son Steve three rigorous games of indoor racquetball, and then took a ten mile bike ride along the Lake Trail on Palm Beach with my wife of three decades. Not only was I in decent physical shape, but was on top of the world enjoying a thriving public relations firm, three kids, a thirty year marriage, and I had a sweet little side gig helping a major university start up a cool little think tank.

Perhaps the most important part of my pre-pain story is that I enjoyed a relationship with the God of my understanding. In 26 years continuous sobriety, I came to believe in a Higher Power, a benevolent Being of pure Love and Light. I was happy, joyous and free which was a huge shift from the depressed, mean-spirited alcoholic that I used to be. I was blessed, I knew it, and I gave thanks to my God every day. She's awesome.

Then, exactly four years ago, I started coming up lame in racquetball. My ankles hurt like hell, I thought they were just sprained, but I could no longer play. I was in denial when my physician diagnosed Traumatic Osteoarthritis, a degenerative joint disease which I had caused back in my athletic glory days when my impressive recklessness resulted in half a dozen serious sprains, breaks, and injuries in each ankle.

No need to describe pain to you, would not trade mine for anyone's, but to me it was the end of the world. A lifelong hiker and athlete, I could no longer walk at all some days, the very thing in this world I enjoyed the most, which really made me ANGRY. I was not only irate at the pain, but I was pissed at my Higher Power. How could She allow this to happen? This wasn't part of what I thought was "our deal". My TRUST in the benevolence of God was the first thing to go. I started to see more clearly, I thought, all the agony and suffering that He or She or IT allowed all over the planet. What kind of God lets kids starve to death? What kind of God gives ME pain?

Just to give you an idea of my spiritual condition, someone once asked me to pray for their cancer. My silent prayer was, “God, you asshole, if you exist, please reconsider your decision to invent cancer”.

I hated the pain. I went to war against it and did everything I could to KILL it. I tried to murder it mainly through opiate pain killers, but tried a variety of things ranging from diet to acupuncture. Nothing worked better than painkillers so this alcoholic and addict took them continuously for the last three years at the recommendation of my physician and the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th medical opinions that I sought.

I took Tramadol as prescribed, my tolerance grew, so my doctor slowly upped my dose to the maximum legal limit of 400 mg a day. Eight little pills that provided so little euphoria, so little pain relief, at such a great price. They sucked my soul, robbed my IQ, clouded my judgement, and robbed me of all so much precious energy.

While I never did murder the pain, or successfully hide from it, the pain assassinated my Higher Power. In our war, it won on every battlefield: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. By the end of the war, I wanted only death. I could not inflict suicide on my family, so instead I isolated in my backyard and prayed daily for death to a god that I no longer believed in. It was all so horribly depressing.

It was only when I “surrendered” and asked for help, that my life was saved. I looked up online the doctor who helped me get sober 30 years ago. I found him, we met for coffee, and he told me about his friend Dr. Mel Pohl, the medical director at [Las Vegas Recovery Center](#) and its eminent Pain Recovery Program.

PAIN RECOVERY

I thoroughly recommend Dr. Pohl’s book, [A Day without Pain](#), which will go into much greater detail than I can here. I can loan you my copy. But here is the story of what happened to me, how I am “rewiring my brain”, some of the milestones, and where I am now.

- Surrendering, admitting that my life had become thoroughly unmanageable, and asking for help were keys that created within me a new willingness to go any length to crawl out of the hole I had dug for myself in reaction to pain and painkillers. Self-honesty, open-mindedness and willingness are keys to any sort of recovery.
- In my case, after asking for help, a remarkable series of coincidences happened whereby it was as if by divine direction that I was transported from my isolation to a world class pain treatment center that I could never have found or afforded on my own. For the first time in years, I dared hope that there is some sort of benevolent mechanism to the universe. In other words, some psychic changed within me, melted my **hate** of pain, and cracked open the door to reception of healing grace or energy or whatever you want to call it.
- I am a scientist by training, and a skeptic. In the days before my flight to the center I read some remarkable evidence-based research on the effectiveness of Mindful Meditation on chronic pain. PLEASE check out this remarkable Ted Talk video showing that mindful meditation is more than twice as effective as morphine on pain. [THIS VIDEO](#) gave me HOPE. It’s only 18 minutes but changed my life by making me OPEN to working on it.

- The most unusual part of my experience at the Center was how KIND everyone was to me and to each other. I learned that **KINDNESS** is a key and required element in Mindfulness. I had never in my life experienced this level of kindness and I found that it was contagious. I started acting kindly to people and in an instant karma kind of way, kindness was what I always got back.
- At one point, I mentioned to a staff member, “This is the kindest aquarium I have ever been in.” She replied, “Not everyone has the same experience. You go out of your way to act kind to everyone, and of course that’s what comes back to you”. This was great news, because I have found that **kindness karma** seems to be a law of nature and even here in bustling, backstabbing real life in South Florida, when I act kind to people, or say kind words to strangers, they almost invariably treat me with smiles and kindness and a warmth that I personally find more therapeutic and gratifying than any drug.
- **Harm vs Hurt.** In one key lecture, I learned the difference between my pain *hurting* me vs *harming* me. For example, my orthopedic surgeon often used the expression “you are bone against bone” so I thought I was doing more HARM with every painful step. Truth is “motion is lotion” and the more I sanely exercise and move, the better for my body and the better for my pain in the long run. Fast forward to now, when I PACE myself and am willing to endure the pain of 45 minutes of exercise at Table Tennis, even though my ankles will almost certainly hurt like hell for the next four hours, its worth it and I do no damage. This simple harm vs hurt equation gave me a whole new way of looking at things and freed me up to undergo pain that does no actual harm or damage to my body.
- **Don’t Catastrophize!** When I was at war, I felt like my pain meant the end of the world. Mindfulness meditation allows me to be in the moment, rather than at the apocalypse. I don’t project to a future where everything might be worse or what I coulda or shoulda done yesterday. Mindfulness is a way of objectively identifying what is going on now. For example, when I used to take a shower, I would be in there fuming about politics, my schedule the rest of the week, something I should have done yesterday, etc. Now it’s more of a pleasurable experience as I concentrate on the warm soapy feel of the moment. Similarly, if I sit in a chair to read and accidentally direct my attention to my nails, and they happen to be dirty, that does not mean I have to act on this right now. This is crucial, when I direct my attention to my pain, I can more or less objectively recognize its signals, acknowledge them, but I don’t have to ACT on them or throw a poor me pity party, I can just direct my attention elsewhere.
- **What you practice becomes stronger.** Check out this [YouTube Video](#). When we first start to mindfully meditate, we are using “unpaved” pathways in our brain. So the first few times, or the first few dozen times, might not be pure nirvana but we are creating new pathways thanks to the elasticity of the brain. It’s like learning to play a violin or hit a curve ball, the more you practice the “unpaved” pathway turns into a 2 lane paved highway in your brain which after years of practice hopefully becomes an 8 lane expressway.

- The only thing acute pain and chronic pain have in common is the word, PAIN. I learned they are different. Chronic pain is like a broken smoke detector that keeps sending signals years after the fire, after the damage to our body is done. You can read about this in Dr. Pohl's books or online.
- CHRONIC PAIN IS 80% EMOTIONAL. We pain patients did an exercise where we all listed adjectives to describe our pain. The words that came up included: suffering, depression, suicidal thoughts, horrible, unfair, self-pity, isolating, etc. These words actually describe our emotional reaction to pain. The point is that few people (and none in my group) used words like "sharp or burning or throbbing" to describe the physical reality. For me, this hammered home the idea that I have been emotionally harmed (I wanted to eat a bullet and that's pretty emotional). So my relief or cure or the solution comes from improving my emotional reaction.
- Objectivity: Who am I? I learned from an excellent book, [The Untethered Soul](#), that I am NOT the voices in my head. We all have that constant self-talk. My brain is a dangerous place to be alone where my "inner voices" tend to call me names, urge me to take yet another pill too early, or blow off this or that. One of the most important things I ever learned is that I am NOT the voices in my head. I am the person listening to them. **Similarly, I am NOT my pain.**

Dear fellow soul, not sure you can relate to this, because this was more of a personal and profound realization. Early in my 28 days, the leader asked us to meditate on our pain. He wanted us to objectify it, look at it, observe it, and determine everything we could about its reality, color, shape, smell, size, personality... if those words make sense to you. The meditation was useful because it served, for the first time, to help me realize that me and my pain are separate entities. I was able to look my pain face to face, I looked it in the eye for the very first time after years of trying to kill it or run away from it. Unexpectedly, instead of hate, I felt a strong emotional upwelling of empathy and the words, "I'm sorry" came to my mind. I apologized to my pain. I apologized to my ankles for my part in doing the damage. It was a breakthrough in that during that meditation, **my pain and I came to an understanding. We decided to peacefully co-exist.**

My pain is with me as I write this. But it's not the end of the world, just the end of a productive day. I'll treat my ankles to ice, the occasional Tylenol or NSAID, but never again will I try to kill my pain nor my soul with painkillers.

I wish you well on your own journey and am open to questions or contact or however I might help you.

Kind Regards,

Denis E