

A Journey of Dual Recovery

A sermon for Recovery Month 2010
Bill Norton, Shoreline UU Church, August 29, 2010

Each September is National Recovery Month, sponsored by the US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). This is a reading from their introduction to Recovery Month, 2010:

“For more than 20 years, National Alcohol and Drug Addiction Recovery Month (Recovery Month, for short) has worked to improve the lives of millions of Americans in need of treatment and recovery services, to celebrate individuals who have achieved long-term recovery and to acknowledge those working in the field who provide treatment and recovery services. As you may know, the negative effects of mental and substance abuse disorders ripple throughout communities nationwide. Over the years, SAMHSA, in collaboration with its partners, has demonstrated that treatment is effective and people recover.

“The regulations implementing the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008 requiring equitable consideration of mental health and substance use disorders in health insurance plans are only the beginning of equitable treatment for these health conditions.

“Recovery Month inspires millions of Americans to raise awareness about the effectiveness of treatment and the hope of recovery. It also encourages individuals to share their stories of recovery and to reach out to others.”

In the sermon this morning, I will be sharing some of my stories of walking paths of recovery. Perhaps we can all reach out to others.

< sermon hymn UU Hymnal #359 – When We are Gathered >

I want to start my story with a reading from St. Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome. I don’t wish to imply that St. Paul suffered from issues that required a journey of recovery, but I quite identify with the state of being he describes here:

“My own behavior baffles me. For I find myself not doing what I really want to do, but doing what I really loathe...I often find that I have the will to do good, but not the power. That is, I don’t do the good I set out to do, and the evil I don’t really want to do I find I am always doing...This is a continual conflict with my conscious attitude, and makes me an unwilling prisoner of the law of sin and death.”

The second reading is an excerpt from the poem
New Heaven and Earth, by D.H. Lawrence:

I was so weary of the world,
I was so sick of it,
everything was tainted with myself,
skies, trees, flowers, birds, water,
people, houses, vehicles, machines,
work, recreation, governing, anarchy,
it was all tainted with myself...

I shall never forget the maniacal horror of it all in the end when everything was me,
it was a maniacal horror in the end...
(and I was) trodden to naught,... quite to naught,
absolutely to nothing
nothing
nothing
nothing....

I, in the sour black tomb, trodden to absolute death
I put out my hand in the night, one night, and my hand
touched that which was not me.
verily it was not me.
where I had been was a sudden blaze, a sudden flaring blaze!

So I put my hand out further, a little further
and I felt that which was not I,
it verily was not I,
it was the unknown.

Ha, I was a blaze leaping up!
I was a tiger bursting into sunlight.
I was greedy, I was mad for the unknown.
I, new risen, resurrected, starved from the tomb,
starved from a life of devouring always myself,
now here was I, new-awakened, with my hand stretching out
and touching the unknown, the real unknown, the unknown unknown.

As I review it, my recovery story is a story of learning, actually several learnings.

The first learning is in relation to the abuse of alcohol or alcoholism. It is this: not drinking (putting a plug in the jug) is not the same as Recovery.

The second learning is in relation to being affected by an emotional or psychological illness, in my case, Bi-Polar Disorder: the learning: Recovery in this context is much more than just trying to manage one's condition.

The third learning, regarding Recovery in general is that there are new patterns of behavior required for and given by walking paths of Recovery. As I have experienced it, Recovery is not a state ("I have Recovered" or "I am Recovered"), but is a process: a process that requires daily practices and some sort of spiritual perspective.

I began abusing alcohol in college. A few years ago I had opportunity to review my college transcript, and there was the record. In my freshman year I was a Dean's List student, but starting from my Sophomore year—when I began drinking heavily—my grade point average began to decline. I managed to get through college and grad school, but never again did I achieve any kind of excellence.

After grad school, I married. I was still drinking alcoholically. Until—one day, ten years into the marriage—in an alcoholic stupor I insulted a family friend who was visiting our home, and he left, seemingly never to come our way again. My wife hauled off and hit me in the jaw. I got the message, and soon thereafter I put up the bottle (put the plug in the jug), and stopped drinking.

I gave up drinking for the sake of family for the next 20 years. Then Maxine and I divorced. The motivation for my sobriety was thus gone away, so I decided—since I was so good at not drinking—to “let a little alcohol into my life.” Within a week or so, I was drinking alcoholically again. I talked on the phone with one of my best college drinking buddies. He had been dry for the same 20 years I had, but he had done so as a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. At his suggestion, and with the knowledge that he was still sober and I wasn't, I found my way to AA. This month is my 10th AA birthday.

In AA I learned that my behavior—which I thought had been unique to me—followed a pattern well known to AA. Sobriety that--in the drinker's mind--depends on someone else never lasts. It will end when that person goes away. And an alcoholic can never drink like a normal person. An alcoholic is really allergic to alcohol. When an alcoholic touches alcohol after a time of abstinence, he or she picks up booze as if they had never stopped.

In AA, I have also learned that Recovery is a lot more than not drinking. There is an underlying life orientation—self-centeredness—that unless addressed, the drinker will drink again. Recovery is walking a path of life that acknowledges that one is powerless over alcohol, and that day-by-day, one day at a time, one must tap into a power greater than oneself through specific--usually spiritual--practices in order to live life in a broader

context than the self-centered, guilt-ridden, resentful world of the alcoholic. If you look at the 12 Steps of AA, you can see descriptions of a three of these practices. Step 10, continually reviewing ones life and making amends where necessary, Step 11, connecting to that which is spirit, and Step 12, service to others.

More about the practices in a moment.

In the early 80's, I was working with a non-government organization involved in a process of capacity-building in villages throughout Kenya. Our program was funded primarily by aid agencies from around the world. I was responsible for finding funds from local Kenyan sources to complement international aid.

In 1984, there was a drought in Kenya. People were hungry, (that means people were starving and dying). All aid coming to Kenya was redirected toward famine relief. Our program needed to be funded entirely from local sources (my responsibility), which dried up as the drought continued.

My response to the stress this situation caused was first to spend large amounts of time in bed, hibernating, and then staying up all night going out dancing and partying. My wife and colleagues realized that something was not quite right.

I was diagnosed with Manic-Depressive Illness, now more commonly called BiPolar Disorder.

Over the next 20+ years, in attempts to manage the symptoms of my condition, I took various medications, but always every few months I experienced “break-through mania” or “break-through depression.” The doctors and I would try another medication or combination of medications, which would work, at least for a while.

The self-centeredness I experienced as an alcoholic became self-centeredness squared, with my attention focused on the next cycle of depression or mania, or the magnified stresses of daily life. As the poem I read at the start, it was a “maniacal horror.” At 12-Step meetings I have heard people telling stories of their seeking a way out. But I've heard it said that it wasn't so much that people want to die. We just didn't know how to live. Many attempts at the “ultimate solution” are gestures or cries for help.

Several years ago I heard the term Dual Diagnosis for the first time. Dual Diagnosis (sometimes called “co-occurring disorders”) refers to men and women who experience both a chemical dependency and an emotional or psychiatric condition. My goodness, I found that other people experience what I do! Dual Diagnosis emphasizes that these conditions are interrelated, and must be dealt with together.

Through the 12-step program, Dual Recovery Anonymous or DRA, I discovered a whole new way of relating to BiPolar Disorder. No longer seeking to manage or control a condition that in my experience was essentially unmanageable and could not be controlled, the focus was on Recovery.

Not too long ago, King County (Seattle, Washington) became one of the first counties in America to re-orient its mental health services around Recovery. The Recovery model for dealing with mental illness has now become the main paradigm for mental health services. The focus is on quality of life, and developing a program that is both bio-medical and psycho-social, a program of medication and healthy living environment and daily spiritual practices to manage stress and promote balanced living.

Three years ago, following this model, I found a new doctor whose course of treatment has included talk therapy in monthly appointments. He invited my younger daughter to come to an appointment, asked my older daughter to call him, and asked my “ex”, Maxine, to write him a letter. He was concerned to have perspectives from my family as he developed an approach for our working together.

Each month we review how things are going for me. We review the mood chart that I fill in each evening, and talk about achievements and challenges, like Step 10, continually reviewing my life journey. Some might call this Cognitive Behavioral Therapy or CBT. I was interested to see a lecture on the University of Washington TV station last month about some studies that indicated that other approaches such as Mindfulness Training are equally as effective as CBT.

A couple of years ago, a new medication—Seroquel--became available. I can't help but think how different my life would have been if I had known about Recovery as a modality for responding to my illness, and if the medication Seroquel had been available 12 or 20 years ago. A lot different. I certainly am grateful that that is the situation today.

As I mentioned above, my experience of Recovery--in relation to both addiction and mental health--is anchored in a spiritual perspective, and requires daily spirit practices.

I've found a number of spiritual perspectives helpful. The primary impact of these is an alternative to self-centeredness or self-centeredness squared:

Acknowledging the reality of that which is other than I (D.H. Lawrence's “unknown unknown”). The “mysterium tremendum.”, whom some call God.

The understanding that spirit exists in the relationships with others (the “I-Thou” of the Jewish theologian Martin Buber). So one must respect interpersonal relationships.

The acknowledgement of the worth and dignity of every person and respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part (two of our Unitarian Universalist principles)

A mantra of Forgiveness (see the Buddhist prayer at the end of this sermon).

And, as perspectives for mapping the direction for one's life, a 12-step-like understanding of living in relation to a “higher power” and living a life of service.

My walk of Recovery is supported by spiritual practices like morning and evening meditation, keeping a mood chart and a journal, and attending group events like AA meetings, Chalice Circles and worship.

When I find the journey of Recovery rough, I turn to the Ninth Step Promises from the “Big Book” of Alcoholic Anonymous:

“There may be some wrongs we can never fully right. We don’t worry about them if we can honestly say to ourselves that we would right them if we could.

No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace.”

From the “Big Book”, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 83, 84

I don’t suppose—if I’d had the choice—I would have chosen to be bi-polar or alcoholic. But since this is the hand I was dealt, I try to do my best to walk in Recovery and help others.

Let me add that obviously this has not been a thorough treatment of the world of Recovery. There are other addictions beside substance abuse, for example, addictions—usually called “process addictions”—to behaviors like gambling, shopping, work, or relationships of one type or another. There are those who have multiple addictions, often called “poly-addiction”. In all these cases, in my experience, it is still possible to walk a path of Recovery. The landscape would quite likely look like what I have described.

There are challenges of Recovery in universes other than addiction and mental illness. Chronic pain, disabilities, other illnesses, you name the rest. I think that AA’s Step 1, “We admitted we were powerless” is probably a great place to start any journey of Recovery. And a good next step is coming to believe that a Power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity.

Sometimes I imagine what life might have been like before the mid-1930’s when the first plans of Recovery were mapped out. Let us all give thanks for Recovery, in whatever form, as a response to whatever condition, as a path of healing for us all.

So be it.

Forgiveness Prayer

If I have harmed anyone, in any way,
either knowingly or unknowingly through my own
confusions,

I ask forgiveness.

If anyone has harmed me, in any way,
either knowingly or unknowingly through their
own Confusions,

I forgive them.

And if there is a situation I am not yet ready to
forgive,

I forgive myself for that.

For all the ways I harm myself, negate, doubt,
belittle myself, judge or be unkind to myself
through my own confusions,

I forgive myself'.

- Buddhist Prayer