"Addiction Recovery:
Life Lessons for Us All"
by
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One of the important teachers in my life was a remarkable man named Lee. Lee was a father, a musician, and an attorney who worked in academic administration in Boston. My introduction to Lee, however, was not at all auspicious. In fact, I thought he was a little wacky when I met him at one of the first AA meetings I ever attended. He went up to the podium that night to tell his story, and he started by introducing himself this way: "Hi. My name is Lee and I am a grateful recovering alcoholic." Grateful to be an alcoholic, I remember thinking? This guy has had way too many martinis. But I soon learned better.

Now nobody wants to be an alcoholic or drug addict. Nobody I know ever got up one morning, stretched, and announced, "Well, from here on out, it's the life of an addict for me!" But for Lee, with twenty years of recovery when I met him, the disorder had been a blessing. Just as cancer was for Rachel Remen's patient in this morning's reading, a serious illness can be a teacher of profound life lessons. With an urgency that the vast majority of nonaddicted people never experience, recovering addicts must look deeply into their lives to find a foothold for the climb out of despair and for healing to take place. I am not speaking here about biological healing; after removal of the offending substance or behavior, the indicators of an addict's physical health often return to normal relatively quickly. The healing I am speaking

about is essentially spiritual—spiritual growth toward a new, central, life-defining meaning, freely and continuously chosen. Without such growth, life without the addictive substance or behavior can be as desperate as addiction—a living nightmare, or just downright impossible, with relapse ever looming. While 12-step programs and psychotherapy can contribute to such growth—indeed, they are often essential—the spiritual path of the recovering addict requires something more. It requires regular and deep self-evaluation, wrestling with demons old and new, weighing new values, defining a new way of being in the world, and then continuously revisiting this way of being to test its moral and practical worth. It means a fundamental reconnection to self, others, and the life force, the mystery of being. The people who are successful in this struggle seem to move beyond addiction and sobriety to another level of life. It's as though the climb to lasting sobriety becomes a springboard to self-integration and a spiritual peacefulness that includes physical health but is much bigger. I have come to believe—and this is the critical point of my message this morning—that there are valuable lessons for us all in how these folks approach life.

If you gathered a thousand addicts—some still active, others with varying lengths of sobriety—and separated out those who have reached a stable recovery marked by spiritual centeredness, you would end up with a relatively small group, say, 80 people. No addictions expert could have predicted which 80 they would be, nor can anybody explain scientifically why these people were successful in their recovery efforts and others were not. We don't know why some people become addicts and we don't know why some people and not others recover. But if you look at the lives and the behaviors of those 80 people with long-term recovery and who are essentially at peace with life, you will notice some common characteristics.

In my years working with addiction I have identified 10 such characteristics, or strategies, that seem to mark the lives of people in long-term, stable recovery. All 10 may not be present in every recovering person, but their occurrence is so common that they should be considered equally compelling. The first four relate to the maintenance of physical and emotional health. The other six may be seen as components of a spiritual discipline with transformative power. Such discipline has lead many people to an enviably productive, spiritually full and serene life. It should also be noted that these healing strategies are virtually identical to those endorsed by the experts in stress management. The mismanagement of stress is, by the way, the underlying cause of most visits to the doctor. So here are my ten life lessons from people in long-term stable recovery—a gift from them to us, a bag of gold dropped in our path.

Number one is attention to good nutrition. The important point here is not only nutritional balance but also establishing a schedule of regular mealtimes so that one can avoid prolonged hunger. Not only is the discipline of a meal schedule itself valuable, but the emptiness and cravings stimulated by missed meals can be a trigger for upsetting mood swings. Good nutrition also means avoiding immoderate use of such stimulants as caffeine and sugar, whose psychological effects can mimic the rush and withdrawal associated with stimulant drugs, whether or not one has ever been a drug addict.

Number two is the maintenance of a schedule of regular exercise. In addition to being good for the heart, lungs, bones, and muscles, the discipline of regular exercise is one antidote to the loss of structure and stability that can come with a busy life. And it is a powerful relaxation tool. Sustained aerobic exercise unleashes the natural, morphine-like brain

chemicals that are responsible for the so-called runner's high, which is completely legal.

Number three is a well-exercised sense of humor, especially directed at oneself. Not only is laughing fun, but there is strong evidence that, like aerobic exercise, a hearty laugh releases the feel-good endorphins in the brain. And the ability to laugh at oneself--at one's mistakes, even one's pain—helps maintain objectivity and a balanced perspective on life. Such perspective allows one to confront and deal with one's problems rather than be victimized by them.

Number four is honesty. It would seem silly on the face of it to be cultivating new spiritual values and not consider one's commitment to being open and honest, to oneself as well as to others. But beyond abstract concepts of right and wrong, dishonesty is bad for our mental health. A lie makes us a fugitive. It means looking over our shoulders in fear of being caught. Addicts have to tell lies to maintain their addictive lifestyle. The torment of each lie can be a provocation to further self-numbing with drugs. It is written in the Gospel of John, "The truth will set you free," and so it is.

Number five is the cultivation of at least one passionate, healthy, ongoing interest or activity, something that one can look forward to and count on to bring satisfaction. This interest may center on one's job, a hobby, spending time with family—the content of the passion, as long as it is healthy, isn't as important as its sustained ability to bring enthusiasm to one's life, a reason to get up in the morning. As anthropologist Joseph Campbell reminds us, our spiritual wholeness depends on our finding and following our bliss.

Number six is a commitment to altruistic activity—being of help to others with no expectation of personal gain. It is no coincidence that a basic tenet of Alcoholics Anonymous is that one's good fortunes will continue only as

long as they are shared with others. Thus, the twelfth step of recovery in AA is the suggestion to bring the program to other suffering alcoholics and addicts. Volunteering in hospitals, churches, schools, retirement homes, or other good causes, reflects the redirection of one's focus of attention away from oneself and toward selfless caring relationships with others. And if you need another reason to be altruistic, research over the past decade has shown that altruistic behavior also stimulates the release of endorphins in the brain—helping others makes you feel good!

Number seven is a daily prayer or meditation practice. For those who embrace a particular faith tradition, this may mean personal or public religious devotion. For others it may entail solitary, quiet times of meditation or contemplation. For many in AA it is daily attention to the presence in their lives of a higher power, as they have come to define that power. However constituted, it is this characteristic that represents the bedrock of spiritual discipline.

Number eight is the cultivation of the practice of being here now. "Be Here Now"—similar in connotation to AA's "One Day at a Time" or the Latin poet's "Carpe Diem"—represents age-old wisdom. It has become the mantra of the growing mindfulness movement, and instruction in the techniques of mindfulness, which have their origins in Buddhism, Taoism, and yoga, are increasingly sought out by people of every faith tradition. "Now" refers to this moment, right now. This moment is where we need to be, right here in this room. The most important thing you can do right now to improve the rest of your life is to be fully awake to this moment. This idea is essentially the same as the concept of spiritual awakening—coming alive to our connectedness to the life force. It is the message in Paul's warning to the Romans: "You know what time it is…it is now the moment for you to wake

from sleep." Unfortunately, many people seem to sleepwalk through life. When they are not actually asleep, they are preoccupied with the past or future and so they are asleep to the present. Recovering addicts can't afford to go through life asleep, for two important reasons. First, they are in danger of acting out of habit and picking up a drug. Second, they may miss the glimmer of new possibilities—the new, healthy, soulful reason to get up in the morning. Being here now is being open to the beauty, wisdom, and grace that can fill each moment with hope.

Number nine is an awareness of the transcendent in life. For people with a theistic faith, it may be a sense of God at work in their lives. For others it may be the experience of music or nature—a walk on the beach at sunrise, cultivating a window-box garden in the midst of the city, or caring for one's grandchildren. When moved by experiences that go to the core of our being, releasing our deepest love and sense of peace and fulfillment, we must acknowledge them and make them an essential part of our lives. Such experiences point us to the true center of our being.

Number ten is active participation in a caring community. All the power of the transcendent in life gets played out in our relationships with our fellow human beings. I have come to believe that no one heals, no one is restored to well-being in isolation. And there is no better place to heal and find new meaning than in a church community, especially a Unitarian Universalist one, where we support each other's unique growth in common pursuit of the sacred. Here we can learn to differentiate good and essential values from potentially disastrous ones. Here we hold one another gently through births and rebirths. Spiritual healing and growth happen in community.

So there are my ten characteristics of one large group of people who have worked hard and often successfully to achieve a peaceful and graceful life.* Whatever prompts you to follow a path of spiritual growth, I commend these strategies to you. May you be here now; may you experience the numinous in this now; and may you be in community on the journey. Amen.

*In case you didn't get all of these down as I was speaking, I will leave a list of the ten lessons so that copies can be made for anyone who would like one.
