

'Work in Progress' – by Cheryl R.

I have no other story to tell but my own. I could tell it like a bestselling novel and lure people in with tales of daring adventures, highs and lows, violence, crime, lovers, joys, failures, alcohol and drug abuse; all punctuated by humor. Then finally the triumphant rising from the ashes of my past – leading to my redemption as a human.

What I have learned though, over the past almost 16 years, is-while all those things are part of my story, I am doomed to repeat the errors of my past if I don't remain humble and learn from them. It's all about honesty.

If you're reading this and you're hurting, I know your pain – I felt it for the 17 years that I actively used drugs/alcohol before committing to a 12-step program that paved the way to the saving of my life. The pain I'm talking about is much deeper than people who don't suffer can ever realize. What was worse for me was knowing that I did it to myself. No one ever forced me to use. There were situations where I found myself wanting to fit in so badly, I would have done anything to be part of the crowd. The crazy thing was the loneliness I felt even when I was in those crowds. Jails, I have found, can be made out of more than just cement and bars.

To qualify myself, I did everything – and I mean everything – that I had to do in order to get drunk or high. My using was not a result of my environment growing up – I grew up in Brockton Massachusetts, where my Mom raised me well, and although my Father did drink to excess, I never saw it as bad or good – it just was. I started drinking when I was 17 years old. The booze (in the form of wine coolers) was provided by an older woman, and it was 'not enough' from the very start. There was no tragedy that brought on this impulse to drink, just a sense of longing that I thought I could fill by hanging around with older lesbians. After years of struggling, skipping school, and numerous suspensions, I finally finished high school and thought I was an adult – Ready to face the world and do all that I wanted! My life's goals took me as far as creating a monster with booze that actually consumed ME, rather than the other way around.

As a teenager, Mom had brought me to church faithfully – it was Methodist. I didn't hate it, but I knew deep inside that I didn't fit in either. After years of witnessing, as well as being the receiver of backstabbing, judgement (we were poor and less than) and negative attitudes and behaviors from the people in the church, Mom announced I could make my own decision if I wanted to go anymore. To be clear, I say this because it is part of my story, not because I hold any ill will against that church. I have been taught that having a resentment is like taking poison and expecting the other person to die. It took me years to get this through my head.

So of course, this allowance to make my own decision was the green light I needed to run as far away from God as I could. I was convinced by the way I was treated at church that God hated me because I was gay and I would never be accepted. I used this to fuel my anger towards the world and set out to find people who would take me as I was. I used my youth and beauty – batted some eyelashes; did a lot of flirting, kissing, and broke some hearts – to get all the booze I could want and the attention that goes along with it. I moved from wine coolers (which were nothing for me) straight to the hardest liquor I could find – The greater the proof, the more I wanted it, and that's where I stayed for the majority of the next 17 years.

Using became everything to me – At first, being eye-candy for the next woman to look my way, I had such fun; spent the weekends partying, getting into bars underage, shooting pool and dancing. Then it became Thursday through Sunday, then drinks at night at home – after all, I had to relax from my work day. At some point during the later years – I don't even know when, it was every night, then every day as soon as I got home, maxing out the credit cards to get the best I could get – not sharing it of course. Then came losing job after job. Fired not for being drunk, but for my bad attitude and behaviors. Sexual relationships switched every 2 years or so, always cheating with 'the next one' before I was done with the current one.

In those years of progression, there was so much instability and change. My Mom, Dad, and I had lost our family home when I was in my late teens, half of our household pets had to go to an animal shelter, and we were separated into two different households. When we got an opportunity to move to Florida from Massachusetts, we jumped into an old country squire station wagon with 4 adults and a multitude of animals, like the Beverly hillbillies making their way down south. My sister, who lived in the sunshine state, had promised there were many jobs around, and while I found that wasn't quite the truth, there were enough basic factory jobs to cover living in trailers and drinking all the time.

My attitude about life overall was uncaring towards what future problems I was lining myself up for – If something bad happened, I was a victim and not the instigator. If I was physically hurt even a little bit, I couldn't go to work. I once lived in a single size trailer whose floor was rotting in sections. My then girlfriend and I had 29 cats in the trailer, never cleaned after them, never really showered, slept on a mattress on the floor, ate nothing but ground turkey mixed with mac-n-cheese, and drank until I blacked out each night.

To say that my relationships with lovers were bad is an understatement – I gave out and received all manners of abuse – mental and physical. I allowed myself to be put down and walked all over, then I would do the same to others – always manipulating the truth and situations to get whatever twisted result I wanted.

For over 5 years while living in Florida, my family and I ate out of dumpsters – got the majority of our food out of them, and what we didn't I would fish out of the rivers with my then partner. I tried to get help from the state but didn't qualify, so we did what we had to. Even during those times, I drank at every opportunity I could. I couldn't stand not having it. It was my lover and best friend.

After many years, and another move to my current home in PA, I had destroyed as many bridges and people as possible, spread lies about others, lacked any work ethic, and had that huge bottle of booze under the driver's seat of my car. You know when you make all manner of excuses to 'have' to go to your car for something so you can get a quick nip? Not to mention the inability to put my legs out of bed in the morning without drinking first. This was my life – this is what I had allowed the disease of addiction to do to me. I had no hope, I had love from Mom, Dad, and current partner, but I remained unfaithful. I made so many promises that I never kept. My selfishness was beyond control and I walked around as if entitled to do as I please and act however I wanted.

In 2005, a woman came to work at the factory I am still employed with today. I knew she was 'one of my kind', and even though I wasn't really interested, there was a lull between lovers and I longed for fresh interests. One thing led to another and I asked her out for a drink. She told me she didn't drink, and asked if I wanted to see how she did that. I hadn't even told her about my 'issue', but I guess the boozy vapor fumes coming off of me told my story for me.

By this time, I was smoking dope with other people in the company, including one who had Hep C. I had enough money coming into the house that I could buy top shelf liquor and life felt good because no one really asked me for anything anymore. I had permission once again to do as I please. I pushed off household duties to my partner, so she did them rather than get into an argument with me. Worse than that, I made promises to my Mom and Dad that I never kept. They lived with us and while I wasn't avoiding them on purpose, my drinking and smoking were more important. It still hurts to even type these words.

I've been told God works in mysterious ways, and I know this to be true because He used my relationship weaknesses to get me to my first 12 Step meeting. I went because I wanted the next woman, I stayed because the opening readings at the meeting caught my attention and the seed was planted. I had finally found people who thought just like I did, understood when I felt crazy, and the only thing they wanted from me was to know how they could help.

It wasn't all roses and puppy dogs during my recovery – I made several mistakes, employed all of my defense mechanisms, continued to hurt people and burn bridges – Nothing changed until I changed. Even though I had not relapsed with drugs and alcohol, I had relapsed in my heart and spirit many times. The more I tried, the more it didn't work. It wasn't until I turned my will over to a Higher Power that I started to notice changes for the better.

I took the suggestions given to me by other members of the program – Got a sponsor, a home group, a commitment to make coffee at the meeting each week, and started working on step work. Over time, I felt better about myself. Drinking was no longer the first thing on my mind. It still bothered me, and while the disease tried to take hold many times, I 'stuck and stayed'. When I had 7 months clean, my Father passed away suddenly. The entire 12 step fellowship surrounded me and didn't leave me alone for one moment – even helped to support my Mother through the loss. I could never have stayed clean without all of their love and understanding. Even when I wailed in grief and screamed that I wanted a drink, people loved me, held me, took my keys, and saw me through that dark time.

God and I were still at odds during my first few years of recovery – We had a lot to work through. I wasn't rushing through my step work, although it helped me to better understand the reasons why I used, what the impacts were, and where I was headed. During these years, I met and fell in love with my wife, Trish. She was in the program and we didn't start our relationship on a good note – We had cheated behind the back of my then girlfriend (remember... progress, not perfection), and it took a long time of having to force ourselves to separate from one another, so we could see who we truly were as individuals and then come back together when it was right to do so.

Things were really looking up; the relationship was wonderful and warm like a favorite old sweater with holes in the cuffs. Work was going well, Mom and I were solid, I was keeping promises, had color in my cheeks, made meetings regularly, continued to have service commitments, but something was missing. I knew I had a Higher Power who was watching over me and had got me into recovery, but I still had a 'God' issue and wanted nothing to do with organized religion. A close friend of ours in recovery began to talk to us about the church he attended. It was a UCC church and he said we would be accepted there. I blew it off because life already seemed full enough and I could come up with a whole slew of reasons not to try it out, starting with my past church experience, Trish's experience as a recovering catholic, and all the hurt and anger that had left a bad taste in my mouth.

As time wore on, he literally would not let up. He told us stories of the accepting people that were there and how God accepts addicts, and it was ok to be gay there, etc. Finally, he invited us to an Easter sunrise service and we went to it simply so he would back off a bit. God had other plans but we didn't know it then. I admit, we enjoyed the beauty of the service and then the hot meal at the church afterwards. No one looked at us sideways or asked us why we were there. No one came rushing at us with a membership card or asked for any money. They fed us for free, followed by a nice service with a very warm welcome. I was looking for reasons to leave everywhere – Someone's talking about us behind our back, they don't want us here, this is all fake. The more I tried to see the deception, the more I failed.

We decided to try it again a little while later, after all, that one time had to be a fluke... but it wasn't. The same warm welcome was there, people remembered our names and didn't ask anything of us. The Pastor had the most beautiful smile and the music made me remember how much I had loved that one thing so many years before in the church of my youth.

Fast forward to now, Trish, Mom and I have been members of St. Peter's Tohickon UCC for over 5 years. In fact Trish and I were the first gay couple to be legally married in our church, and we are truly honored and humbled by the love and support we receive there. We still regularly attend 12 Step Recovery meetings, continue to do step work and be in service to others, both in and out of the fellowship.

I became part of the PSEC Addiction & Recovery Task Force because I know in the depths of my heart how life-threatening, disheartening, dirty, and low the disease of addiction can be, and what it's done to others. I've been to so many funerals of people who lost the battle, and have seen so many people walk in and out of the doors. I've prayed both for them and with them. I went to the funeral of the woman who introduced me to recovery. I've known the pain. I've cleaned all manner of drugs and paraphernalia out of members' homes on what we consider '12 step calls'. I've been the one to hide the keys.

All in all, I know that until an addict is done and really wants to change, it won't happen no matter how much their family and friends may beg, or a judge hands down a sentence, or a hospital brings them back to life. That's the simple truth of addiction. It wanted me dead, and just for today I continue to turn my will and my life over to God, who I now know loves me just as I am, with all my faults. I am a work in progress. As long as I do this every day, reach out to others for help when I need it, and give help in return, I will stay clean. If I can do it, I know you can too! If you believe it's time for a change, I'll be here waiting with open arms – We all will. Just reach out.

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