

PAMPHLET 82

JON

By
Tom Heuerman, Ph. D.
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The process of becoming a person begins with a mess.

C. G. Jung

I smiled to myself as I watched my son Jon read the dimly lit dinner menu to my almost 90 year old father—Scoop (see Pamphlet 58). Jon and Aubrey, his partner of several years, were in transit from Syracuse, New York to their new home in Las Vegas, Nevada. They stopped in Minneapolis, Minnesota on the way, and dad, my wife Melanie, and I met for dinner. I felt touched by Jon's patience, gentleness, and thoughtfulness with his grandfather. As I watched him point out the various steak options to my father, I reflected on his question of a few minutes earlier: "Was I a spoiled kid?"

My son's question took me back many years. The June day in 1986 was warm and sunny. Jon was 12 years old. He was in a good mood. He had slugged a grand slam home run in his little league game the day before. He was a hero. He and a friend rode their bikes across Highway 7 in Minnetonka, Minnesota—a suburb of Minneapolis. The boys went to the small grocery store to play video games and buy some candy.

As they headed for home, they had to cross Highway 7 again. Jon's friend went first: he crossed the first lane, paused at the median, and rode across the other lane. My son followed behind. He rode his bike to the median, looked, and decided to return from where he had come. He began to ride across the traffic lane. A Ford Bronco truck sped too fast around the curve in the road. The 17 year-old driver saw Jon too late. He hit his brakes, slid, and hit Jon on his right side. Jon flew from his bike and bounced 100 feet down the busy highway.

I stood in the doorway of a colleague's office at the Star Tribune Newspaper in Minneapolis, Minnesota. My secretary came up to me and said, "You have an emergency phone call." I rushed to my office and talked to our neighbor who told me Jon had been hit by a truck on Highway 7. An ambulance took him to Methodist Hospital. It took me 45 minutes to drive to the hospital. I felt calm and focused, my body filled

with adrenaline that numbed me. The adrenaline masked my deep fear for my son.

My wife arrived at the emergency room about the same time as I did. The hospital chaplain met us at the door and took us to a small room. We could hear Jon's screams on the other side of the wall. The chaplain told us the next weeks would be difficult, and we needed to support one another through this strenuous time. A nurse took us into the emergency room. Several doctors and nurses worked on Jon. Mostly unconscious, he moaned in pain. His face was bruised. His right leg had a compound fracture of the femur. Bone protruded through the skin of his right bicep. He had a broken rib and undetermined internal injuries.

Jon went to surgery and doctors made the first repairs to his arm and leg. More surgeries would be required. He returned to intensive care after midnight. As he slept, I went home to rest for a few hours. My wife stayed with our son. Alone, I wept for my broken child.

Jon regained consciousness the afternoon of the next day. His first words were, "I don't want to die." He didn't. He would, however, have a couple more surgeries and would spend the next 67 days in a hospital bed with his right arm and right leg in traction.

Our lives revolved around our visits to the hospital. I visited each morning on my way to work and returned after work for the evening. We spent weekends at the hospital. We tried to keep Jon stimulated. I bought box after box of baseball cards. Someone gave Jon a football autographed by the Minnesota Vikings. Someone else gave him a baseball autographed by the Minnesota Twins. We purchased a new sporty bike and brought it to the hospital. Our German Shepard, Kelly visited and slid along the tile floor as she pulled me down the hospital hall excitedly. We brought food from restaurants as Jon craved them. Jon's friends visited him. He sobbed as they left, aware of his lost summer.

In September of 1986 Jon came home in a body cast and a wheel chair. He began the seventh grade at home with a substitute teacher. After several weeks, still in a body cast and wheel chair, he went to school. Kids teased him. The teacher never turned in his homework so he failed some of his classes. We protested; nothing was done. Gradually Jon healed and life returned to normal.

Our dinners arrived. My attention returned to the present, and we enjoyed a great steak dinner. Afterwards we took dad back to the nursing home and visited his room. Scoop is our model for how to live a full life even as he approaches his 90th year. Jon and Aubrey began to ask him questions. He

came alive, energized by their thoughtful interest and attention. As they talked I recalled another phone call about Jon.

It was five years after the accident. I worked in my office. The phone rang. The Minnetonka, Minnesota high school principal told me that Jon had been caught with marijuana in his possession, and I needed to come to the high school. I made virtually the same 45 minute drive to the high school as I had made five years earlier to the hospital. This time adrenaline did not numb my emotions.

I felt angry and frustrated. I gave up. The past three years had been hell. It began innocently enough. My wife and I returned from a vacation. My parents had stayed at our home to watch Jon and his sister, Cari. Everything went great, they told us. Several days later I found out that Jon and a friend had spent days in his room drinking beer. This began a three year nightmare.

Months later, while on vacation in Monterey, California, the ringing phone woke us. A police officer back home told me a group of kids were drinking at the swimming pool of our town home development. The police came, the kids ran, and went into our home. The officer said they were in the bathroom in our basement. He wanted permission to go into the house and get them. I talked to my daughter. I told her to tell Jon to come out and surrender to the police. He and his friends refused. I told the officers to go in and do what was necessary to get the kids out. The police broke down the door and took five teenagers to the police station.

A couple of hours later the officer called back. They had finished processing the kids, and their parents had come to get them. He asked, "What should I do with Jon?" I replied, "Take him to "detox." His sister will pick him up when they release him. His mother and I will finish our vacation." Several more similar situations followed over the next couple of years.

The three years of his drinking had been emotional. I felt guilty as I am an alcoholic and had passed the affliction to my son. Angry exchanges filled our home often. I feared Jon would hurt himself or others. I pleaded often with Jon to stop, tried to warn him what could happen, and told him how his behavior hurt his mother and me. Once he looked at me and said in a challenging tone, "What's the matter dad, can't you take it?" This frightening teenager was not our son. He was not the son I knew and loved. This was the addicted son: angry, defiant, selfish, and grandiose. He cared only about his addiction. Jon took all our time and energy.

Jon sat defiantly in a room with the school drug counselor. The policeman wrote out a ticket and gave it to Jon. The principal said, "Jon is suspended

for five days. You can take him home.” I said, “He doesn’t have a home to go to. I cannot control him. Please find a treatment center for him.” The counselor arranged an appointment that afternoon.

As we drove to the hospital, 45 minutes away, I expected Jon to jump from the car and run away at every stop sign. He didn’t. I talked to the hospital admissions person. She said she could get him into an outpatient program. I said, “You don’t understand. Jon doesn’t have a home to go to. He has to be locked up.” Jon spent six weeks in a locked treatment center. He returned to school, transferred to an alternative program, graduated, and was the “comeback kid” of the year at the school.

Our recent evening together was coming to an end. We left the nursing home and went to our hotel. Jon and Aubrey came up to our room to visit for a short time. We talked about their move to Las Vegas. The West pulls Jon. After high school Jon was a real-life ski bum for 10 years. He lived in Mammoth, California, Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and Salt Lake City, Utah. He worked in the summer and skied in the winter often subsisting on macaroni and cheese. The Weather Channel was the favorite television channel. The myth of the West suits Jon: freedom, adventure, independence, and new beginnings. He and Aubrey love the mountains and the desert.

As I sat on the bed and listened to Jon and Aubrey, I thought “I am proud of who my son has become.” Jon: tall, strong, and handsome, has a great smile. He has a compassionate heart born of his own suffering. He loves Aubrey, his two Huskies, little kids, and old men. After years of struggle he found a profession and has a trade that fits with his love of nature. He earns his own way in life.

The answer to Jon’s earlier question was clear. Jon wasn’t spoiled. Life challenged him and he confronted life, his creativity emerged, and he formed his unique life. I don’t know why life asks more of some than of others. I do know that those who choose to meet life’s challenges head on emerge with a depth of soul and spirit and a deeper empathy for others than those less challenged or those who refuse the call or those who fall along the way. Perhaps those who life asks the most of have the most potential to return to life itself.

Jon struggled, he faltered, he broke our hearts, and he lost himself for a time. He stood alone at other times to be true to himself. More than once he had to reach far into his soul to find his deepest courage and authenticity. He took life’s most difficult journey and was enriched by his dark nights. He traveled with pride and determination, and he found himself. Jon has grown into a real man connected to all of life (see Pamphlet 81). We cannot control what life asks of us. We can, however,

choose how we respond to life's requests. I like how Jon responded to the challenges of his life.

Jon stood up to leave. We walked to one another and embraced. He said, "I love you dad." I said, "I love you Jon." With that he and Aubrey headed West on their next journey as my wife Melanie and I waved goodbye.