

PAMPHLET 70

CONNECTING WITH SELF AND OTHERS

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The root of all disturbance, if one will go to
its source, is that no one will blame himself.
Dorotheus of Gaza

I sat on the edge of the hospital bed and smoked Marlboros--one after another. I was alone in the cold room. My hands shook. It was a lonely Friday night at St. Mary's Hospital Extended Care Center near the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The third floor was an adult alcohol treatment center reputed to be one of the toughest and best in the country—a boot camp of human development. I normally got drunk on Friday nights. I was sober on this night, more than 29 years ago.

I just finished the book, *"I'll Quit Tomorrow."* The book outlined the dynamics of alcoholism. Each page was a piece of a mirror that reflected my life. I was shaken to my core—until that moment, I did not know I was an alcoholic. For a moment I was defenseless--my denial penetrated, and my delusions about my life exposed. I saw the impact of alcohol on my life, my work, and my relationships. The person I saw was not the person I started out to be.

A father of three young children, a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of Minnesota, and a 3-year special agent in the United States Secret Service, I was now 29 years old, unemployed, and broke. I was alone, scared, and depressed. I was in trouble, and I knew it.

I stared at the sterile and indifferent wall across from me. How did I fall into this abyss of despair, addiction, and self-betrayal? Could I find the courage and strength to save myself? Could I redeem myself? Could I again realize my possibilities? I could change or die, and the choice was mine alone. My "bottom" wasn't as low as some, but it was as far down as I wanted to go. I chose life.

Treatment was a combination of jail, college, and hospital. We got up early, made our beds, went to breakfast, did our assigned jobs, and listened to a morning lecture. Group therapy and lunch followed. More

group in the afternoons, private counseling sessions, and personal time. After dinner there was usually an outside speaker. Tuesdays were dreaded family day. Wives, husbands, and sometimes children attended daylong group sessions that were videotaped and reviewed. On the weekends you could have visitors, attend church, and AA meetings were mandatory.

Group therapy was the most difficult of the activities. Groups of about a dozen patients, a counselor, and a nurse or two sat in a circle. The counselor would ask, "Who wants to work?" No one ever responded so the counselor would pick someone out. I hated these sessions.

The staff often screamed obscenities and insults at patients. I felt threatened. I didn't get the process. I didn't know what they wanted. I wanted them to stay away from me. I didn't want to reveal myself to anyone. I didn't know who I was, and I feared the staff and patients would tell me. My defenses were back. Most others felt the same at first and tried to fake their reactions, which made the confrontations worse. In hindsight I learned a lot about compliance in group therapy. I would see much compliant behavior years later in organizations.

What the counselors wanted was authenticity--something alcoholics (and many in organizations) don't know much about. They wanted us to "get real." Honesty about myself came hard. I was "sincerely deluded"—I believed my delusions. Cut off from my values and my emotions and fearful of vulnerability and of judgments, it took me time to trust others. My shadow side was dark with pain, fear, anger, and guilt. I only slowly began to know myself. Of course I knew none of this then. I tried to appear nonchalant and get through the sessions without confrontation.

I hid out in my room most of the time. I read the books they gave us about alcoholism and Alcoholic Anonymous. I avoided time with the other patients. I didn't feel superior to them; I didn't think anyone would want to spend time with me. One day in group a beloved counselor named Bill Kelly asked me how I spent my time. I told him. He screamed, "Get your ass out of your room and get involved with the other drunks! I'll be watching."

Bill was short and heavysset. His dark skin and perpetual 5 o'clock shadow somehow matched the sharp anger he expressed to jolt patients to awareness. Bill's voice was not gentle; he screamed at people. He challenged patients regardless of their station in life. Bill knew he intimidated us. We knew he loved us. Bill confronted me aggressively in the group. I yelled back at him defensively. I wanted him to stay away from me. Later, alone in my room, I wept over who I had become. In

subsequent years I named two of my dogs after Bill Kelly who died of cancer a few years later.

I forced myself to go into the lounge and join groups of patients: black, white, yellow, and brown—women and men—alcoholics, pill pushers, cocaine addicts—rich and poor--young and old--fat and thin--ragged and well-dressed. Each was different. I feared rejection. Instead they accepted me and cared about me. I felt a sense of community not experienced before and experienced rarely since. All were equal in this place, and I learned that we are similar underneath our manufactured exteriors. I learned I am no better or worse than anyone else—then or now.

I began to share myself with others, as I could not in groups. I told of my shameful experiences, my fears of insanity, and my relief to know I was an alcoholic (at least I could manage this affliction). I asked questions of others, listened to their stories, and laughed with them--many stories in treatment are hilarious. I began to come back to life. Years later I would see the “walking dead” in organizations come back to life with a little respect and acceptance of them as people.

A dreaded family day approached. So far in two or three previous family days, I had not progressed. I didn't know how I felt, I could not express myself well, and I felt vulnerable and distrustful although I could not articulate those feelings. I felt humiliated by the whole group experience. Little boys are not raised to connect. A counselor wondered if I was so used to secrecy from the Secret Service that I could not open up. Bill Kelly called me an enigma. I didn't know what an enigma was, but I felt complimented.

The group worked on me, gently as I recall. They asked questions and I responded. A nurse seated on my right began to cry. She reacted to something I said, and she told a story of how she felt when a child. I observed, like I was outside of myself, as my right hand reached out and touched her hand while she spoke. I felt accepted and understood. I understood her—we connected. Her vulnerability gave me a dash of hope.

I felt a surge of joy and optimism. I looked at the counselor and said, “Can I hug my wife?” The counselor said, “You can do whatever you want to do.” I got up, walked across the room, and hugged my wife. What happened was like an out of body experience—my first spontaneous action in a long time. I reconnected with myself and with others; I would never again lose that capacity, and from that moment on intimacy would be as important to me as achievement was.

I was excused from the afternoon group led by Bill Kelly, and I entered the final phase of the treatment process—preparation for the Fourth and Fifth

Steps of AA. The Fourth Step prescribes a “searching and fearless” moral inventory of the harm I had done to myself and to others. The Fifth Step requires the alcoholic to share the inventory with another person. I worked on the 4th Step for a week. I listed behaviors, feelings, and attitudes I felt guilty about and ashamed of. I answered a list of questions designed to help me look at myself. My shadow began to come to light. My capacity for denial would never be the same again.

I was assigned to do my Fifth Step with a Catholic priest. A Lutheran, I had never talked to a priest before, and I felt intimidated. I sat across from him in the small room. I felt scared. I began to tell him things I never told another person. I thought to myself, “He must really think I am horrible.” I glanced up at him quickly. He looked bored, and I realized he heard this stuff and worse every day. I “passed” the Fifth Step. I felt relieved. I would be discharged a few days later.

Treatment—the most difficult and most spiritual experience of my life--challenged me more than any other event of my life; I had to face myself honestly. I was humbled by the experience, and by the power of authentic human connections. Treatment began my intentional life of self-development and commitment to live my values to the best of my imperfect ability—my existence depended on a value-driven life.

I would go on to work with countless executives as selfish, narcissistic, and self-deluded as the sickest alcoholic. None were aware of the impact of their actions on others. Take away the alcohol and it is the human condition within each of us that we must confront.

The headlines expose pseudo-leaders across all industries addicted to power, money, and the pursuit of a false sense of significance. All--mostly men--live disconnected from humanity. And they may well do more damage than the drinker. We need to tell the truth about disconnected men (and women who protect them) if we want to regain our collective humanity.

The spiritual awakening of the alcoholic mirrors the existential crisis of the quantum physicist (Pamphlet 67) and the moment of metanoia (a change of the inner person) needed for leadership today as each requires a temporary surrender of the ego, a re-ordering of the psyche, and a fundamental shift of perception. From this deeper and broader consciousness new mental models and new approaches to life and leadership emerge. Such a fundamental reordering of the self begins, for leaders, the journey to what Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great* calls “level 5” leadership characterized by the humility that comes with the realization of our connectedness and the tenacity required to change oneself.

My friend and colleague, Diane Olson, and I often talked of a residential human development center for leaders that would facilitate this inner shift. The program would focus on reflection, self-examination, and a shared humanity. People would explore their values, excavate their inner lives, and share vulnerability with other people. They would renew their spirits and their connection with self, others, and nature. Most of all they would learn to treat themselves and others with dignity. They would learn about relationships: intimacy, conflict, and repair.

Participants would gain insight into the beliefs that guide their lives and would understand their impact on others. They would take responsibility for their conscious evolution. They would learn to turn within for guidance and to replace false exteriors with authenticity. The study of living system dynamics would form the basis of a new, more natural worldview. They would learn to think in new ways and would develop new leadership skills.

These whole people would return to their organizations armed with thinking and relationship skills and the strength of character to lead from their values and authenticity in service of a purpose greater than themselves. And they would continue for a lifetime their journey to maturity.

Lots of people try to change the world. I think it better to change myself. The better I connect with nature, others, and myself, the better I live my life—the more human I am. And the better I live my life, the less I need to project my shadow onto others. Focusing on my own freedom, responsibility, and accountability gives me more than enough work to do. And that is how we will change the world.

RECOMMENDED READING:

“A Million Little Pieces” by James Frey.