

STEP TWELVE

On Trauma and Growth

*“We seek not just that within us that is uninjured,
but that which is uninjurable.”*

—STEPHEN LEVINE



“Restless, irritable and discontented” is a phrase from the Big Book that is heard with great frequency in the rooms of recovery. It is a point of connection for many alcoholics and addicts, shorthand reference for a common emotional experience. Yet it too is a symptom of our maladies, not a root cause. In fact, it might be reasonably proposed that disturbing emotional states are inevitable as long as we walk through our lives driven unconsciously by old ideas and decisions based on self.

If we are able to recall how we felt as children, it is very likely we will remember what it was like to be at ease with ourselves. Certainly, there were disturbances, but if we watch children carefully it will become clear there is for almost all of us a time before we were so ill at ease. This would suggest that we acquired our restlessness, irritability and discontent somewhere along the way. It would also suggest that a full

restoration to sanity would be to remedy those imbalanced emotional experiences. Of course, we are human and seeking to practice and make progress, not to find perfection, but there should be much room for improvement for us.

In Steps Four and Five, we acknowledged that underlying causes and conditions can be related to the presence of traumas in our lives, especially as children or through violence. To be clear, trauma is not necessarily the result of a single horrific experience or even a few, but can be the consequence of many low-intensity, invalidating experiences. For example, if you tell a little girl she is fat and stupid enough times, it can and does produce a traumatic effect. So too if a little boy is told over and over again that he is bad or dirty.

Pia Melody, who is in recovery on multiple fronts and who cofounded The Meadows, a residential treatment center, proposes something more profound. Her work with her own recovery and with thousands of recovering people would argue that all addiction stems from childhood stressors, specifically the experience of abandonment, betrayal, neglect or abuse. She says that children are born intuitively knowing when they are nurtured and loved. Further, we might then propose that the breakdowns in family and community systems that result in a child feeling unloved are the root cause of what we would label “restless, irritable and discontented.”

What of the idea that addiction is something genetic, a predisposition?

Most probably, some element is genetic, something different in how the addict handles substances or experiences in the body. Obviously even this is not a one-size-fits-all

proposition since degrees of predisposition are all too real. Yet if we were to take two children both with equivalent circumstances and expose each to either a high-nurturance or a neglectful family and community setting, it is very likely that we will see a pattern—that the child experiencing degrees of abandonment, betrayal, neglect or abuse is more likely to need relief that takes the form of an addiction.

We so often hear those who say they come from normal, loving families and communities. Yet when we look more deeply it is frequently the case that what they experienced as nurturance was in fact deficient. It may be their normal, and they may believe it is functional and healthy, but that can easily be attributed to how each of us bonds, how we normalize and the means by which denial takes hold within us.

This is not to place blame. Our parents, extended families and communities really did provide the best they had to offer. At that same time, we can say it was not sufficient. Rather than heaping blame upon any sources, the Twelve Step approach is to own our own reality. The challenges with addiction and developmental problems are ours and ours alone regardless of the causes. While we may not be responsible for what happened to us, we are fully responsible for its continuing effect on us.

What then of our understanding that alcoholism and addiction are a disease? There is no conflict here either. Whether the disease is innate or acquired, or both, it still meets the definition of a disease. It should also be noted that the disease is not limited to the body. It includes our emotions, psychology and spirituality.

In the past, this disconnect from ourselves has been

labeled shame, or stress, or even toxic stress. For some it is pronounced enough to be diagnosed as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. There are any number of diagnosable psychological disorders that are parallel.

To keep it simple, let's consider that restlessness, irritability and discontent are not our first nature, and that they are acquired. Furthermore, let's consider they very likely pre-date when we picked up a drink, or a drug, or a substance, or a process addiction.

One important qualifier is to acknowledge that for many of us addictions saved our lives. Since it was impossible to be with ourselves and our feelings, and in some cases awful settings, we needed relief. Alcohol or other addictions provided that relief. Then the addiction turned on us and began the insidious process of ruling and ruining our lives.

More recently, groundbreaking work has been done on what has been described as adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs.⁽¹⁾ In addition to abandonment, betrayal, neglect and abuse, research shows that poverty, hunger and violence in the environment can and do have deleterious effects on child development. Not only can these lay the foundation for addiction, but also for educational and economic underperformance, mental illness, and chronic disease. So too are the capacities for human relationship undermined.

A common response is to minimize or deny. Often it is asked that if this is true, why isn't everyone a mess?

Here is what we can reasonably conclude. If a child has sufficient nurturance, or resilience that is innate or acquired developmentally, the challenges of being human or being in

a deficient environment can be mitigated or offset. Unfortunately, addiction and other family and community systems are not typically well-grounded in providing nurturance or building resilience. It is also true that because of any number of poorly understood factors, one child can have a very different experience in the same setting.

In recent years, a most remarkable observation has been characterized by those who study these matters. Through means not yet well understood, the same conditions that can cause great damage such as Post-Traumatic Stress can be crucibles from which come Post-Traumatic Growth.⁽⁵⁾ For some, terrible circumstances are devastating and for others they are the seeds for personal transformation.

So the upside for those in recovery is that the challenges really can become opportunity. This is, in fact, the space in which Progressive Recovery allows for incremental growth and development.

*Cling to the thought, that in God's hands, the dark past
is the greatest possession you have.*

—ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

Without turning this review of trauma and growth into an overwhelming exploration, what conclusions might we draw?

First, that while addiction has a genetic component, the conditions of our upbringing matter a great deal. It is important to see there is a tendency to minimize or deny these latter factors, largely because they represent tender and unhealed parts of ourselves.

Fortunately, somewhere deep in our memories is a feeling

of wholeness that preceded our brokenness, also known as restlessness, irritability and discontent. With some deeper work we will likely see that those conditions preceded active addiction. And with some effective support we can find that the Twelve Steps can be applied to these oldest of old ideas.

That said, it is essential to see that much of this deeper work is experiential. Usually, the way these old ideas were formed did not involve our thinking selves because it occurred when we were quite young. So written inventory and discussions with a sponsor, mentor, coach or advisor may not be sufficient. In fact, speaking about them sometimes presents distractions rather than solutions.

Instead we may have to look to the therapeutic realm. And in the spirit of open-mindedness, we will need to explore to find solutions which are effective for us. This could include therapies such as eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR)⁽⁶⁾, neuro-emotional technique (NET)⁽⁷⁾, and emotional freedom technique (EFT).⁽⁸⁾ Sometimes energy healers can aid in releasing and letting go, for example deep tissue massage, Reiki or breath work. Not surprisingly meditation can be very useful, as are physical practices such as yoga and tai chi. As a final thought, one very practical option is a book, *Unattended Sorrow: Recovering from Loss and Reviving the Heart* by Stephen Levine, which has been instrumental as a practice guide.

To be clear, this is a matter of fact-finding, not fault-finding. It is important to understand that how you experienced your life may not be consistent with apparent facts. Remember, our experience includes our perception, and it is fully valid because it is our experience.

Lastly, it is so important to remember that these struggles have within them the seeds of our transformation. It might just be that the third and seventh steps have far more potential in them that we might ever imagine.

How We Lose ... and Then Find ... Our Way

It was early in the morning when a serendipitous email exchange between a sponsee and sponsor told the story of what happens to us. It involved a daily meditation from Father Richard Rohr⁽⁹⁾, who is much involved in the kind of restorative work that Progressive Recovery explores. Here are excerpts from Rohr's material as well as the interaction it produced:

... our first experience of life is not merely a visual or audio one ... it is primarily felt in the body ... we know ourselves in the security of those who hold us, skin to skin ... But we all begin to doubt this primal union as the split of a divided world slowly takes over ... we begin to see the fault lines in the world—and the rest of life will be spent trying to put it all back together again.

Sponsee: "Jeez, did you read Rohr's meditation?"

Sponsor: "Hell yeah! Everyone gets a fall from grace."

Sponsee: "I feel such grief for my self that got separated as a kid."

Rohr: "Hopefully, our parents' early gaze told us we were foundationally beloved. But when we inevitably

begin to see ourselves through eyes that compare, judge and dismiss, then we need spirituality to help heal the brokenness of our identity and world.”

Sponsor: “Isn’t this the heart of the need for a progressive restoration to sanity?”

Sponsee: “You mean like Jesus urging us to become like little children again?”

Sponsor: “Over and over and over again.”

Sponsee: “Bam! Keep coming back ... to being restored!”

Sponsor: “What are you feeling now?”

Sponsee: “I can’t stop crying.”

Rohr: “True spirituality is always bringing us back to the original bodily knowing that is unitive experience, which is why you cannot do it all in the head!”

Sponsor: “It’s an experience, isn’t it?”

Sponsee: “It’s so fucking beautiful!”

Sponsor: “So let’s keep coming back for it.”