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I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contained; I stand and look at them long and long.

They do not sweat and whine about their condition;

They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins;

They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God;

Not one is dissatisfied - not one is demented with the mania of owning things;

Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago;

Not one is respectable or industrious over the whole earth.

- Walt Whitman

Animals are more fortunate than humans in many respects. They live in here and now, and they are not driven to control every aspect of their existence. They do not look to authority for permission to accept themselves. They do not have to be taught to trust their own survival instincts. They do not contaminate the lives of one another with pathogenic rituals and social conventions. They are not cursed with the drive to answer all unanswerable questions. They do not find it necessary to explain their existence by inventing assumptions and myths which deny their very nature.

Our culture is steeped in such assumptions and mythologies. One of these assumptions springs from the Freudian myth that all problems are rooted in early childhood trauma, so I might as well begin with a few words about my own life in the early years. Looking back, I would have to say that I see nothing remarkable about my childhood. In fact, I was more fortunate than most. I was the second of two children in a family which was no more dysfunctional than any average American family of the days of "Leave It to Beaver." I had a loving and nurturing mother who was a housewife, a thoughtful and considerate sister with whom I got along very well, and a hard-working father who did his best to offer us a sleeve to tug. While my father went on to develop a few problems of his own with alcohol in his later years, he always saw to it that we didn't go without anything. I remember being quite happy and optimistic as a child. Life was good. It was fun and full of interesting things to learn and to do. I was in touch with my instincts. I was very much into being a kid. I cannot blame my deprived childhood for any of my personal problems.

In adolescence, however, I experienced many of the adjustment problems commonly regarded as being typical of the teenage years. My society seemed to be telling me that I must excel at school and sports in order to be worthwhile; but I was only average. My religion was pushing for spiritual perfection, and it seemed that I fell miserably short of their standards. My raging hormones seemed to tell me that I must find a girlfriend, but I concurrently felt awkward, self-conscious, and shy. Somehow I developed the bad habit of comparing myself to others and coming out second best: I was not as tall as this guy, not as smart as that guy, not as witty or popular as the other guy. And I was definitely not as good-looking and rich as the guys who always seemed to get the

girls. Whatever I tried in the attempt to compensate for my defects didn't seem to be enough. Something seemed terribly amiss.

Like the good Catholic boy I was trying to be, I took my dilemma to the parish priest. He introduced a new, moralistic dimension to my growing talent for self-deprecation: guilt and shame. He managed to convince me that the normal problems of adolescence were due to some inherited, impure nature. I guess it had to do with something called Original Sin, and being thusly tainted, I was incapable of knowing what was best for me. I was shocked and disappointed to hear that my awakening desires for sex and autonomy constituted grievous sin, and that my normal physiological reactions to the opposite sex were damnable offenses. My confusion was further exacerbated by learning that even to allow myself to be in the proximity of temptation constituted something called "the near occasion of sin", which was equally as damnable as the sin itself - whether I acted on my urges or not! I was told that the answer to this agonizing double-bind was a lifelong and endless process of surrendering my impure will to God, keeping inventory of my innumerable faults, confessing my unavoidable sins, and making endless reparations to atone for my inherent unworthiness. I must seek only to know and to do God's will, and of course, I must never question the authority of a priest. But something healthy in me had exuberance for life and seemed to affirm my own existence! That something wanted to be a human being, so I struggled to find some balance between preparing for the hereafter and living in the here and now. Believing that measuring-up favorably in both of these areas was absolutely necessary before I could accept myself, and that the slightest transgression would send me to hell for eternity, I really felt on the spot. It didn't seem possible to do all this stuff. Being a teenager wasn't as easy as being a kid. I definitely wasn't happy anymore.

Then, one day, an older guy who I looked up to invited me out to have a few beers. Why not? Nothing wrong with that. The whole world seemed to be doing it; my parents, my friends, even the priests. So I did it. But when the warm buzz crept into consciousness, something very significant happened. It was as close to magic as anything I have experienced. All those awful problems melted away. I wasn't self-conscious and shy anymore, but felt outgoing and witty. I felt as good as anyone, perhaps even better than most. Authority began to appear as if it might be phony and superficial. The fear of my own humanness began to disappear, and I immediately began to feel less sinful and more normal. Within a few weeks, I was going steady with one of the school cheerleaders. People began asking ME where the party was every weekend! I felt popular. I had an identity. I was happy again. I mistakenly attributed all of these new developments to alcohol, and I was convinced that people who didn't drink must certainly be crazy.

Whether it was genetic pre-disposition or kismet which made my early experiences with alcohol so powerfully reinforcing is a moot question. The point is that I was instantly hooked. The buzz was all that mattered. The next 15 years were a phantasmagoric blur of alcohol and drugs, the effects of which were probably exacerbated by the disillusionments we baby boomers associate with various spin-offs of the Viet Nam era. The bottom line is that, by age 29, I was depressed and near suicidal. I had just been expelled from a maritime academy, which I saw as my last stab at respectability in life, and my live-in girlfriend of three years had left me in disgust. I looked back at years of pain, lost relationships, and failure. I had either dropped out or been thrown out of every school I had attended. The only job I had been successful at was that of a bartender, and I was on the verge of losing even that. Broke and without a place to live, I was not "in denial." I knew fully well what the common denominator in all these negative experiences was, and I knew what I had to do. I just couldn't imagine life without the buzz, in spite of the fact that the magic was long gone. The only thing left in mood-altering chemicals for me was the welcome of oblivion.

So I quit. First alcohol, later marijuana. I quit the pot because I could see that it wasn't helping me to stay off of alcohol. I realized that it would take less energy to be clean than to learn to control my use. I stayed clean and sober for several months while supporting myself by bartending, and I had the good sense to avoid substance abuse counselors. I had heard stories about the cultish practices of people who went this route. I only wanted to quit defeating myself. I didn't want to join

a cult. But I still felt a lot of pain, particularly over the breakup of my most recent relationship, and I still felt as if I was a failure. Some of the awkwardness and self-consciousness of adolescence was still there, along with definite feelings of inferiority because I had allowed this thing to happen to me. I still felt that I had a long way to go before earning my own self-acceptance. Since I had a good experience with a mental health counselor earlier in life, I presented to my local mental health agency to work on these other problems. Unfortunately for me, I was assigned to a "recovering" counselor on their staff. I made the mistake of trusting his judgment - after all, he was a credentialed professional! He told me that my way was doomed to fail. There were many more things that must be done before I could be allowed to feel worthwhile, and if I didn't do all of them, I was certain to die from the complications of what he called my "alcoholic nature."

There is another prevalent cultural myth in our society which most people, and even many professionals unquestioningly believe. It revolves around 12-step recovery programs. In my own case, I "chose" the typical Minnesota Model, 12-step treatment at Hazelden after being told by this mental health professional that such programs were the proverbial "only thing that works". I was told that my only other options were "death, insanity, or incarceration". I was motivated and seeking help on my own - there were no problems with courts, employers, or family forcing me to deal with my situation. Yet, when I resisted the idea of treatment, I was told that I was in denial of my "disease," and incapable of knowing what was best for me due to some inherited nature. It all sounded vaguely familiar, resonating of the Original Sin thing. Then, on the strong recommendation of this counselor, I attended my first AA meeting to learn about the only known cure. There on the wall were the 12 steps. Now I remembered! It all came back to me, and I was overwhelmed by a dizzying, sinking, sick and hopeless feeling the likes of which is too painful to recall. There it was again: the sin, the guilt, the self-damning moral inventories, the confession rituals, the amends that must be made in expiation for being human, all the things I had come to detest more than death itself. But that healthy animal instinct in me still wanted to survive. Was this my only hope? Everybody seemed to be saying so!

There's an old saying I still somewhat believe in, that "the only way out of hell is straight through." So I went to treatment at Hazelden, only half realizing what I was in for. People with weak ego defenses revolving around shame and guilt are especially vulnerable to the kind of pounding, unyielding indoctrination, and peer pressure I was then subjected to. The not-so-subtle moralistic implications of the 12 steps scream messages of guilt and personal worthlessness to some people whether they are intended to or not. I was told to "get out of the driver's seat," and not to trust my own judgment. Whenever I managed to express a thought I was either told to shut-up and listen, or to stop "intellectualizing." I was told to admit my "powerlessness" over everything, and that my life was totally unmanageable. I was told I must surrender all vestiges of my destructive self-will, or die. I was told that my situation was not unusual, and if I only "let go," turning my decisions over to the Higher Power and to "the group," everything would be all right. I was told to inventory my sins, confess, and make amends. I was told that the promises of the Big Book would materialize if I would only try. That was all I had to do. Just open my mind and try - which in reality translated as: attend as many AA meetings as possible for the rest of your life, do everything you are told to do there, stop "enabling" any and all friends and family members who still used alcohol or drugs, and avoid all people and places where relapse might occur (i.e.. the "near occasion of sin"). What followed was a six year downward spiral of moral inventories, self-condemnation, shame, atonement, and bowing to external authority. This was supposed to restore my sense of self-worth and give me "serenity." It didn't. Such ritualistic self-flagellation is the exact opposite of mental health. Neither is it moral. An ironic note is that I picked up exactly what I needed at the Hazelden bookstore while in treatment, but I discarded the book because it contradicted most of what I was being told. The book was called "A Guide to Rational Living," by Dr. Albert Ellis.

I completed treatment and worked the AA program to the best of my ability, and by my sixth year of sobriety I had already been employed for three years as a counselor in substance-abuse program at the regional medical center. But those promises of happiness and serenity never

materialized. I had embarked upon a personal search for the loving God that I must necessarily find in order to achieve serenity, but I did not confine my search to 12-step literature. I had been exposed to science while completing my BS degree. I read a bit of philosophy, East and West, modern and ancient. An incredible sense of incongruity grew in me as objective observations failed to confirm all the "truths" I had been taught to believe. At some level I realized that "open your mind" all too easily means "suspend reason," and that the loving God I was looking for in all probability did not exist. The interacting system of courts, employers, treatment programs, and the medical-industrial complex of which I was a part began to look like a corrupt violation of individual freedom and dignity. I no longer believed in what I was doing, and I realized that, in order to continue in this vain, I would have to become very practiced at self-deception (so much for "honesty in the program!"). I read Ellis again, and this time he sounded pretty good. I tried to incorporate his "ten most common irrational ideas" into my aftercare program, and I left the matter of required AA attendance up to the conscience of each individual client. Being outspoken about such matters did not endear me to the director of substance-abuse programs at the hospital!

Around this same time, another significant relationship ended very painfully. As personal and professional pressures continued to build, for the third time in my life I felt as if I was at the edge of the precipice. I made the mistake of sharing some of my sense of despair with the physician on our unit, who then shared my feelings with the boss. The next thing I knew, "powerlessness and unmanageability" had landed me in a psychiatric hospital with a diagnosis of clinical depression. It turned out to be a 12-step program for "impaired professionals," and I was told that if I planned to get my job back, I had better shape up. I begged these people for a different approach to my problems, but I was shoved into a step-one group, in spite of the fact that I never relapsed. Why did recovery have to consist of looking back and atoning for past sins in a futile attempt to earn the right to move on with life? Didn't anybody ever deal with the problems of today, in the here and now, with an eye to the future? Instead, the counselors there told me I had been on a "dry drunk!" They insisted that I was depressed because wasn't working the steps correctly, and that I must accept a Higher Power! I was told by a born-again psychiatrist that my prognosis was poor, and that my only hope was to stop trying to do things "my way."

Throughout this whole experience, not one professional told me I had a choice! The best advice I got was from an uncle who asked me why I was listening to all these "professionals". The idea that I could live my own life and discover my own solutions filled me with motivation, hope, and optimism. My real recovery began that day. I left the hospital against advice. The freedom to die on my own terms was preferable to the lifestyle offered by these so-called experts. I was convinced that professionals, especially the 12-step variety, were the sickest, most dangerous people on earth. Determined to survive and to be as happy as possible, I set out to do the best I could with the only life I had to live.

Months later, still plagued by all those therapist-reinforced ideas of guilt, shame, and personal worthlessness, I remembered the book by Albert Ellis. Despite my learned hate of professionals, something in my gut told me I could trust this man. Unemployed and out of money by this time, I managed to find my way to New York, and he consented to see me. In just two 30-minute sessions, Dr. Ellis convinced me that most of what I was told was simply not true. He helped me to realize that even if I was the pathetic wreck that I had been taught to believe, I still had me! He then demonstrated how Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy could help me develop an effective philosophy by which to live. No more labels. No more prognoses. In terms of my own self-acceptance, I was the final authority. Vindicated, validated, and empowered, I was finally back in the "driver's seat". With true "gratitude", I frequently refer to this experience as becoming a born-again agnostic. It has been more than ten years since this truly spiritual experience, and while I am hardly the poster child for self-actualization, the rational, scientific, reality-testing approach to life I have chosen has made me more self-directed, self-assured, competent, socially interested, and happier than ever before.

I really consider myself to be fortunate, as the traditional approach to addiction care has most certainly put many people with values similar to mine into the ground! Since when are scientific and humanistic value systems inferior to religious values? Since when is the desire to remain in control of one's own life and will pathological? As Dr. Ellis was quick to point out to me, the very traits and values which the 12-step counselors were doing their best to destroy were actually the strengths upon which I could build my recovery. My struggle to hang on to my values was not "the disease" controlling me, it was the normal and healthy thing to do.

I believe my story illustrates the need for choices in addiction care. There are probably about as many ways to defeat addiction problems as there are people who want to. The more choices we can offer, the more people can be helped to reach their personal goals. I have been able to achieve many goals abandoned earlier in life, having by this writing worked as both a high school science teacher and merchant marine officer. I am currently working toward an MSW degree and the achievement of associate fellowship at the Albert Ellis Institute. As a student, I find it expedient to support myself working as a bartender, a profession which has offered a welcome safety net throughout the vicissitudes my sober years. Despite what our AA friends say about "slippery places," relapse has never been an issue since the day I decided to deal with my problems.

For the decade following my experience with Dr. Ellis I wondered: Why wasn't there a recovery program which utilized techniques like REBT and other cognitive-behavioral therapies as the foundation for recovery? Why can't people be encouraged and motivated to creatively seek their own solutions instead of looking for answers outside of themselves in the form of groups and Higher Powers? Why can't people just be taught effective skills to cope with the problems of living sober in a drug-using culture? Why can't they just be taught the cognitive-behavioral skills of emotional self-management? Why can't they develop new and rewarding lifestyles around interests other than recovery alone? Is there not more to life than going to meetings and "just not drinking?" For all those years the only advice I could, in good conscience, give to people looking for answers to their addiction problems was to stop using, to get a good mental health counselor, and to avoid substance abuse programs. You cannot imagine my excitement when I learned of SMART Recovery®!

SMART Recovery® helps to answer all of these questions for me in a most satisfactory manner. SMART® offers effective, scientific alternatives to each of the principles that traditional programs consist of. It uses some of the techniques that I learned from Dr. Ellis, and more. It offers groups where people can actually talk with other people instead of just mumbling parrot-sounding platitudes off into space. It offers a place for people to explore their ambivalence regarding substance abuse problems, rather than to be confronted with their denial. It empowers people with the choice to change their self-sabotaging behavior rather than teaching them to surrender to the inherent powerlessness of their disease. It teaches people to gain independence from their addictive behaviors by practicing the skills of self-efficacy, rather than encouraging substitute dependencies on groups and Higher Powers. It is founded upon scientific research, and favors reason over blind faith. It teaches people they can defeat addictions and get on with their lives.

At a more personal level, SMART® has greatly enriched my life. I no longer feel alone in the manner by which I chose to deal with addiction problems. I have met great friends with whom I have much in common. My mind continues to be opened, and my thinking de-provincialized, as I hear about the ways in which others have found solutions in the context of their own situations and cultural values. At the same time, my readings from the list of recommended books reinforce something Dr. Ellis tried to teach me. It is the most important thing I will ever learn, and yet it is so easy to forget in the bustle and confusion of this nutty society. It is the principle of Unconditional Self Acceptance: I'm OK because I'm alive and have the capacity to enjoy my existence. I am not my behavior. I can rate my traits and my behavior, but it is impossible to rate something as complex as my "self." My self consists of innumerable traits, not just this one. I strive for achievement only to enhance the enjoyment of my existence, not to prove my worth. Failing at

any task cannot make me a failure. I can choose to accept myself even if I am unwilling or unable to change my "character defects" because there is no law of the universe that says I can't. My approval of myself cannot come from pandering to any external source or bowing to any external authority. My self-acceptance can only come from me, and I am free to choose it at any time.

When I heard of SMART Recovery®, I was more than happy to learn how I could become a coordinator. I want so much to spare others the kind of pain which results from being forced to conform to rigid conventions which deny our nature and violate basic criteria for mental health; principles such self acceptance, self-direction, flexibility, scientific thinking, and the acceptance of ambiguity and uncertainty as an unavoidable aspect of the human condition. In my life, it took only a relatively brief period of time to recover from addiction. It took a decade to recover from "recovery." While I may never be as placid and self-contained as Whitman's animals, once I re-discovered that I didn't have to beg anyone for permission to live, I was free to experience what I instinctively knew as a child: Life is good! It is fun and full of interesting things to learn and to do! Serenity is not found by caving to superstition, conventional or otherwise. We cannot impose meaning on human existence through the invention of rituals and myths in the vain attempt to deny our mortality or to explain the unexplainable. The meaning we seek is not handed down to us from some authority, nor is it something we "find." Meaning is something we create as we endeavor to live life to its fullest, regardless of our circumstances. As Carl Sagan often said, we make our world significant by the courage of our questions and the depth of our answers.

I often wonder how much closer I would be to the achievement of my personal and professional goals today had SMART® existed way back when?

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