Recovering Character

Praise for *Recovering Character*

In this wonderfully readable book, Peg O'Connor draws on ancient and modern wisdom to illuminate the path from active addiction to flourishing in recovery. She reveals how self-deception, perfectionism, and shame keep us trapped, and shows how to intentionally compose our character through virtuous action and genuine friendship.

Compatible with any recovery approach, this philosophical reflection offers profound insights for anyone struggling with addiction, navigating recovery, or seeking to live with greater integrity and purpose. Here, you'll learn what it truly means to belong to yourself.

~Candice Shelby
Author of *Addiction: A Philosophical Perspective*

Stopping drinking or drugging is a great relief and achievement. But for many of us who lost aspects of our integrity, as well as a clear vision of what a good and successful version of our self could be, there is an enormous amount of self-repair and self-reconstruction that needs to take place to be healed.

Peg O'Connor's new book is an extraordinarily wise and sensitive exploration of how addicts can undertake the project of renewing and rebuilding—in some cases even constructing a robust flourishing self for the first time. Rebuilding character is the most important part of true recovery and O'Connor is a masterful guide to this essential part of the process. A must read for recovering addicts.

~Owen Flanagan
Author of *What It's Like to Be an Addict? Understanding Substance Abuse*

Praise for *Life on the Rocks*

O'Connor is a gifted writer who has a most unique take on addiction and recovery. She makes *Life on the Rocks* accessible and fascinating, using practical insights—not only from the wisdom of philosophers but also from personal experience—to put a new spin on old clichés about what it takes to live a rich, meaningful, and joyful life beyond addiction.

~Anne M. Fletcher
Author of *Inside Rehab and Sober for Good*

Through a series of short reflections that draw upon the work of our great philosophers, *Life on the Rocks* offers helpful, illuminating insights into the experience of addiction and recovery. Peg O'Connor explores the moral import of addiction without ever "moralizing." She keeps her thinking close to life and far away from pretension, using accessible language to convey truths that our rationalizations keep hidden from us. She's a philosopher with whom Socrates would have enjoyed conversing.

~Jerome A. Miller
Co-editor of *Sobering Wisdom: Philosophical Explorations of Twelve-Step Spirituality*

Praise for *Higher and Friendly Powers*

A philosophical tome of practical relevance. A rarity!

~ Hans Durrer
Author and Addiction Specialist

Many addicts don't believe that it is necessary or possible to be saved from addiction. We are just too low, or wretched or lost to touch something "high enough" to rescue us. This is the very old problem of spiritual salvation. And so many alcoholics reject Alcoholics Anonymous because they don't believe in God.

But what if our salvation turns on us simply realizing the possibilities and chances of a world that does not reject our attempts to explore it? What if these chances never forsake us even in our darkest hours? What if this is the higher and friendly power that aids in our rescue?

O'Connor with the help of William James explores these questions and recasts the meaning of being saved from addiction. If you pick up this book, I promise you will need to read it to the end.

~ John Kaag
Author of *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds: How William James Can Save Your Life*

Recovering Character

Overcoming Addiction and Belonging to Yourself

Peg O'Connor, PhD

NEW YORK

LONDON • NASHVILLE • MELBOURNE • VANCOUVER

Recovering Character

Overcoming Addiction and Belonging to Yourself

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Editing by Adele Booysen, DMin
Blue Thread Coaching & Editing

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Interior Design by:
Amit Dey
amitdey2528@gmail.com

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For John
who has been by my side
since the day I was born

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Introduction

When people develop addictions, we lose ourselves in myriad ways. We may lose relationships, commitments, values, principles, aspirations, and even the will to live.

Addiction affects our character to such a degree that we may no longer recognize ourselves. In many ways, we no longer belong to ourselves; we belong more to addictive substances and behaviors. We may even belong to other people and their views and expectations of us.

Some of us understand all we have lost and may still lose while others will have a much harder time realizing the toll.

Addiction can provide an (unwanted) opportunity for a person to confront the most basic existential dilemma: *Shall I live or shall I die?* Those who choose the former have a herculean task ahead of them. They must ultimately answer the question, "*How* should I live?"

It turns out we have to stumble and bumble our way to that answer. It most likely will not be a straight and level path to or in recovery. The path may be steep, rocky, slippery, and nearly impassable at times. But our choice to live that question means that we need to keep going.

When we are struggling with addiction, we often don't realize what we're up against in our own selves. So, before we can begin to recover our character, we need to have a sense of what we've lost.

When we begin to see how our familiar ways of thinking, acting, and being in the world hinder us, we will begin to see alternatives before us. Inevitabilities suffocate us but possibilities resuscitate us; they are the air we breathe. But when we feel as if there are no viable options available to us and that there is no way out of the mess we have made of our lives, some of us will collapse into ourselves while others lash out at the world.

To have a small crack of possibility open before us can be life-saving. In recovery, we come to belong to ourselves, which is a moral stance toward our own selves and to others.

We intentionally compose our character, and it becomes our masterpiece.

We become better able to take others into consideration while not allowing substances or other people to have dominion over us.

We acquire for the first time or rehabilitate vital moral goods such as self-love, self-knowledge, self-trust, and self-forgiveness.

We become far better at caring for ourselves and for others.

These are tremendous achievements for people struggling with addiction. In cultivating our character and coming to belong to ourselves, we become more free and more responsible. As such, we may be able to live well—even flourish.

To flourish isn't to feel pleasure and happiness all the time. Rather, flourishing is a way of living that is stable and durable, enabling us to feel the pain and suffering that are just parts of our lives but not lose ourselves to it. And when we flourish, we can also experience great joy and pleasure but not lose ourselves to it.

People who flourish will be okay even if they cannot imagine what being okay looks like.

Early in recovery, we may feel that trying to change our relationships to alcohol, other drugs, and behaviors such as gambling, scrolling TikTok, eating, and having sex is all burdensome; that these behaviors have taken too much from us and that we're no longer in control.

Having to change when we do not really *want* to change becomes even more burdensome—especially when others are pressuring us to do so. We may come to believe we *have* to change because of those external constraints or consequences such as losing our job, our spouse, or our family. This indeed is a burden to bear, especially when you are the one who has to give up so much. It may seem like a terribly unfair exchange or an extortion even.

Over time, many people shift their attitude about the work they do in recovery. Instead of it being a burden and something that they

must do, it becomes something they *get to do* because they are no longer under the influence.

Struggling with addiction and working in recovery give people the opportunity to become more aware and appreciative of who they are and how they are in the world. That's an important part of what it means to belong to yourself.

My hope is that *Recovering Character* will provide useful concepts, examples, and insights from the discipline of moral philosophy. People struggling with addiction are some of the most philosophical people whom I have ever met. After all, how to live a good or even slightly better life is a core question of philosophy.

At the end of the day, philosophy is not so much a field of study as it is an exploration of living the great questions of life. As Socrates claimed in his trial where he was facing the death penalty, the unexamined life is not worth living. I would temper that statement to say that examining life makes life worth living.

Recovering Character is compatible with many forms of treatment and recovery but has no allegiance to any of them, which broadens its appeal. People must decide for themselves what may work as a program of recovery. That's also part of what it means to belong to yourself.

Each essay is meant to stand on its own and they can be read in any order. For those who like more structure, there are four parts in this book. The first part explores what addiction and recovery are understood to be. Those essays provide some context, concepts, examples, and arguments that help to make sense of a range of experiences that constitute addiction and recovery. (Spoiler alert: There is no agreement on what such a range of experiences even are.)

The second part focuses on forms of self-deception that many of us addicts suffer. Self-deception is a serious impediment to any attempt to change behaviors. It subverts vital moral goods—especially

self-knowledge. Here, we consider the usual suspects of denial, minimization, and rationalization along with a stable of unusual suspects such as perfectionism, procrastination, and shame. The latter can be both a cause and a consequence of addiction.

The third part grapples with attitudes and behaviors that are accelerants when it comes to addictions. Some of these—impatience, resentment, and indifference—contribute to people becoming more resigned and fatalistic about their lives.

What unites the second and third parts are the ways that people can lose themselves or come to belong to unmet expectations, resentments, grievances, and anxiety as these opportunistically attach to any- and everything.

The fourth part begins with exploring what it means to lose the plans of our lives, how we can begin to get them back, or how we can form them for the first time. Those essays offer a composite sketch of how we can begin to compose our characters, cultivate relationships, handle daily grinds, live with our own inconsistencies, forgive ourselves, and come to more fully belong to ourselves. When we do these things, we begin to flourish. And we all deserve to flourish.

PART 1

What Are Addiction and Recovery?

1

What Is Addiction?

I use the terms *addicts* and *addictions* quite regularly. The medical community and many in the treatment field prefer to use the expression *substance use disorder* (or SUD, for short). Both sides have valid reasons for preferring one term over the other.

Many believe that *addicts* and *addiction* still carry enormous stigma that arise from the view that addiction is a moral failing.

In this view, some people will be understood to lack the will or even the willingness to curtail or stop their dangerous behaviors. As such, addicts can be viewed as people who have made a series of bad choices that have brought about terrible consequences not only for themselves but also for others who are caught in the fallout.

No one would willingly adopt a label that is a source of shame. In fact, shame is corrosive and debilitating and may keep many from seeking help.

As a result, some bristle at those at Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and other 12-step program meetings who introduce themselves as alcoholics or addicts. Being an addict seems to be an identity, and those who worry about being called an addict or alcoholic (or calling themselves that) want to draw a distinction between who they are as a person (their identity) and a condition they have.

Also, calling ourselves an addict or alcoholic could reduce all the complexities of a person to a single dimension. We would find this objectionable in other areas of life, so why then should someone willingly do this? It seems disempowering, which is the exact opposite of what recovery is supposed to bring.

I appreciate these concerns, and I share them. However, the medical diagnosis of an SUD still carries stigma. Referring to addiction as an SUD is intended to signal that it is a medical condition on par with other medical conditions.

SUD is a disease though, technically, it is classified as a mental disorder. As a disease, SUD might be like Type 2 diabetes, which in part arises from dietary and lifestyle choices.

There is a general assumption that people should not be blamed for medical conditions, but there's always some slippage depending upon the disease. We do, in fact, lob judgments at people with Type 2 diabetes who continue to eat sugary carbohydrates. Likewise, one of the first assumptions people make when hearing someone has lung cancer is that the person must have been a smoker. Thus, in the court of public opinion, not all diseases are equally deserving of sympathy and understanding.

SUDs as diagnoses are products of the field of psychiatry, which tends to locate disease or pathology within a person. With SUDs, the problem organ is the brain. Certain neurotransmitters have their usual functions and levels disrupted or even hijacked by drugs. In other words, people with SUDs have addicted brains.

Diagnosing someone with SUD may have been intended to remove the stigma associated with an addiction, but it has had the opposite effect. Oddly enough, such a diagnosis objectifies or reduces a person to a body part. Just as it is objectionable to reduce a person to a disability, it is objectionable here as well. Objectification flattens people's complexity.

The clinical language of the medical field can also obscure the messy social dimensions of addictions. At times, I wonder if addiction isn't merely a condition of individual people but of communities. How many addicted individuals does it take to say a community itself is addicted?

This may seem an unanswerable question along the lines of "How many angels can fit on the head of a pin?"

Some take it as a given that addiction is only a property of individuals and their bad luck or bad choices. However, people who have

fewer social determinants of health are more likely to develop addictions. As such, social and economic stressors contribute to the vulnerability of people to addiction. Plus, there are fewer resources for prevention and for treatment. It becomes a matter of where we focus our resources.

With these objections in mind, I prefer the rawness of the terms *addict*, *alcoholic*, and *addictions* because what you see is what you get. These terms have a certain power that can be double-edged. I refer to myself as an alcoholic and, in the appropriate contexts, I will introduce myself as such.

I don't say, "Hi, I am Peg and I have an SUD." Nor do I say, "Hi, I am Peg and I am a SUDser." I also will not say, "Hi, I am Peg and I am an addicted brain."

I don't have an addicted *brain*. I am an addicted *person*. I am a person with an addiction who lives in a very messy, complicated, confusing, beautiful, challenging, and always changing world.

I have lived my way to being able to say all of this loudly, clearly, and proudly. But I didn't start here.

Each of us has our own starting point. Some will be more comfortable with the language of having an SUD, while others will not want to identify as having or living with that diagnosis. Each of us gets to choose how we identify, which is also a way we come to belong to our own selves rather than to the labels that others or we ourselves may place on us.

Having said all of this, how do I understand or define *addiction*? A good definition has to have enough elasticity to include a wide variety of cases. At the same time, it must have enough rigidity to exclude some cases. This can be a tricky balance to strike, but here I go.

Addiction is one way that a person can lose themself (as many of the essays in this book will explore). The loss can take multiple forms depending on the individual, the substance they use or behaviors in which they engage, and the contexts in which they live.

Addiction is a condition that imposes some limitations on people. Based on a wealth of data from my own experiences, I am certain that I cannot drink socially. I may be okay for a while, but I have good reason to believe that my drinking will pick up steam like a runaway locomotive. This certainty is bedrock for me and enables me to impose limitations on my own actions. I don't go into bars even if you tell me that it's a restaurant that serves drinks. I know a bar that sells food when I see it, and I am not going in it.

As I have gotten older and spent more time living in recovery, I've come to see that there is freedom within limitations. Too often we assume that having limitations imposes constraints that make us less free. This is true to some degree, but it obscures an important dimension of freedom.

Many philosophers would say that absolute freedom of choice is utterly terrifying; we humans would overload on the possibility and choice. I get overwhelmed trying to select a particular Triscuit cracker I want now that there are about 20 versions of that classic cracker. Getting overwhelmed by choices often leads to bad decisions.

A less trivial but non-addiction example may help to explore the seeming paradox of finding freedom in accepting limitations. As a young tennis player who had a cannon of a serve, I always went for big serves to get free points. I wanted to serve as many aces (unreturnable serves) as I could. This was a high risk because I might miss both my first and second serve, but if I served an ace, it had a high reward.

Now as a 60-year-old with a tweaky shoulder from trying to serve all those cannons for decades, I don't try to serve any aces; instead, I hit serves at 60% capacity. In accepting my limitation, I free myself from an unmeetable expectation that I should always win my serve. I also get to play more tennis because I am not on the injury shelf for as long with a sore shoulder.

A defining feature of addiction is that there are always negative consequences. This is a necessary condition. Addictions take time to develop. While early use may bring some benefit, at some point, the costs to a person become greater than the benefits.

Addiction is a multilevel condition with personal, interpersonal, and broader social dimensions. On the personal level, it is the person—not their brain—that is addicted. Within a person, it is a biochemical condition where drugs and certain behaviors affect functions of the brain but also different organs and systems.

Addiction is a full-bodied condition. My hangovers lasted days, often causing terrible nausea, shakes, and blurred vision among a host of physical ailments. When not drinking straight out of a bottle but out of a glass, my right hand always held the glass and swirled the contents around. I still catch myself doing that when served seltzer in a short glass. It brings me right back. The smell of beer turns my head while the smell of red wine turns my stomach.

There are important psychological dimensions to addiction as well. How we feel about ourselves and the beliefs we hold are all affected by our use. Addiction shapes our sense of self and how we see ourselves in the world.

For some, addiction is a spiritual condition, where drugs and behaviors try to fill a void or create meaning that seems to be missing.

Addiction is also a moral condition in which certain moral goods such as dignity, self-respect, care for our own selves and others, friendship, and flourishing are harmed. Many of the essays in this book will focus on losing, gaining, and regaining those moral goods.

Addiction is also an interpersonal phenomenon. We humans are social creatures who are always in multiple relationships with family, friends, colleagues, neighbors, and other community members. Some of these are intentionally and freely chosen; others are a matter of circumstance or chance.

For many, the use of alcohol or other drugs made social interactions easier—at least at the beginning. Most of us learned how to use with others. We may have had drinking or using buddies, and many of our social interactions may have revolved around our use. When we progressed past a certain point, others may have cut us off, or we pruned people from our lives who questioned our use.

Addiction is a political phenomenon as well. By "political" I don't mean electoral politics but the way that power flows through all the dimensions of our lives and communities. Power shapes the choices that some people face.

We are all free to quit paid employment, for example, but if we need to work to support ourselves, our families, or because we need insurance, we are free in theory rather than in practice. Also, we may feel compelled to adjust our careers or other significant life choices because of what others want for us or what society expects of us. Thus, we face all sorts of political or power pressures each day and try to make the best decisions possible.

Sometimes, we are caught between a rock and a hard place on the political level, and this may lead to unhealthy or bad decisions on both the personal and interpersonal levels.

In one sense, addiction is an equal opportunity condition; no one is immune to it. No one can be "addiction-proofed."

In another sense, addiction is a very unequal opportunity condition. Some will have more social, economic, or educational protective layers that enable them to head off a problem before it gets really bad or to mitigate the bad consequences of their use. Others who lack these protective features and insulating layers may pay a much steeper price for their behaviors.

All of these dimensions—personal, interpersonal, and political—overlap and crisscross, creating a very dense fabric of tangled issues. This dense tangle can contribute to the development of an addiction.

Case in point: Consider a single mother who works a full-time job but is barely scraping by. She could pick up more shifts but would lose any additional income to daycare expenses. She could leave her child with a neighbor but that may not be the safest option because the neighbor doesn't seem responsible.

What makes her a better mother? Being with her child more but being financially vulnerable so that missing one car repair may cause a cascade of trouble? Or having more income but leaving her child in a less-than-ideal situation?

Let's imagine this issue torments her, and she comes to believe she is a bad mother no matter what she does. To her, having a glass of wine at night helps to take the edge off. Over time, her consumption slowly but steadily increases, until she's having a bottle of the cheapest stuff every night.

It doesn't take long before she has a thick and sticky layer of shame about herself as a person and as a mother. Yes, she is making personal choices, but her options are fundamentally shaped by dynamics well beyond her control.

This should help make it clear that our context frames our choices. Our context makes our choices more or less attractive and more or less available.

Many academic disciplines and research programs have something to offer insofar as an understanding of addiction goes, though none is able to capture the complete picture.

In the case above, the single mother might benefit from a savvy social worker who could help her navigate assistance programming.

A therapist might be able to address issues of self-esteem and self-worth.

A feminist moral philosopher might be able to help her to see why she as a woman and as a mother holds herself to unmeetable expectations that others have put on her and that she herself may have adopted. And holding unmeetable standards but fully expecting to meet them is a classic double-bind. Whatever course of action she chooses, she is damned.

Thus, the concept of addiction is as messy as addiction itself. This shouldn't be surprising. It may even be a cause for some optimism.

Is there one common feature to all the different forms of addictions or SUDs? Is there one element or trait that appears in every type of addiction? I tend to think there is none. Rather, addictions have a family resemblance to each other.

Look at a family portrait: What ties all the members together isn't one shared feature but several that crisscross and overlap. Not all family members share one exact same trait, but between them they share a constellation of them, including eyes, cheekbones, jawlines, hair color and texture, height, and bone structure, for example.

The same is true with addiction. And the same is true for recovery.

2

The Bill Always Comes Due

William James (1842–1910) captures the hazards of excessive alcohol consumption in a pithy, attention-grabbing way, noting that, "The whole bill against alcohol is its treachery. Its happiness is an illusion and seven other devils return."[1]

While James's comment is about alcohol, it can be extended to other drugs, ultra-processed foods, and behaviors like gambling and TikTok scrolling.

These substances and behaviors can bring so much to us at first. There's a tingle of excitement cracking open a bottle of beer, striking a match, or tearing open the bag of chips. That tingle lets us know we can feel something.

There's comfort in the rituals of our use; we perhaps feel as if we create some order or have some control in our lives. We may feel connected to others. A smoke break brings people together. Sharing a bag of cannabis edibles makes us nostalgic for swapping Halloween candy when we were kids. Those flashing lights of the slot machines promise that next time there will be a payout.

Plus, we want to be people who have a lot going for us. We want good memories and friends. We want to be winners too. We tell ourselves that our use of substances helps all of this to be true, and we may even feel more connected to our own selves, especially if we feel as if we need to mask parts of ourselves or pass as something we are not.

A warm, fuzzy feeling might replace the dread we always feel, and it lessens the ever-present angst. The release that comes from that first shot, inhalation, or bite tells us that at least one thing right now is okay.

This provides a sense of security, which may be poignantly felt when so much else in the world is insecure. We may feel a lightness or euphoria that pulls us out of the drudgery of our ordinary life and helps us believe that *maybe* things can be better.

For all these reasons, alcohol, other drugs, and food feel like friends. Best friends, really.

These friends seem to give us so many things that we didn't even know we were missing. Once we experience them, we wonder how we lived without them for so long. We surely would not want to live without them now. Plus, these substances are generous friends; they're always there for us and make no demands. Until they start asking for something in return. (And oh, they will.)

At first, we may not even notice. The requests may start small: Stay for a while and have a little more. Have a drink before going out with friends. Just finish that box of Hostess cupcakes because there are only three left. Buy an extra pack of cigarettes so that you don't have to do it later. Have an extra cannabis gummy because it was a stressful day. You deserve it. You're already down $500 at the tables, so an extra $100 doesn't make a difference.

We have an incentive not to notice—or at least to minimize these changes. Though these substances have been our friends, now our experiences with them are changing. But no one likes losing a friend, especially one who has been so helpful and such a source of many goods such as connection, warmth, security, lightness, and support.

After all, these friends have made us feel more like ourselves or the people we always thought we were meant to be. Losing them would feel like losing parts of our own selves that we have only just discovered.

We may tell ourselves we will lose those good things if we change our use. This is a reason why so many people are reluctant to change even when they come to see that their use comes with a bill made hefty by compounding interest.

There are seven devils who are coming to collect.

Discomfort may come first in the form of a hangover, fogginess, enervation, or overstimulation. The discomfort is psychological too; on some level we are unpleasantly surprised by these feelings and sensations. These feelings may be so vague and amorphous that we can come up with a list of other possible causes. Some will convince themselves they are being overly sensitive. This alleged sensitivity may help to fuel further use.

Discomfort invites **regret**, wishing we had not overindulged. We may even kick ourselves because we know better. Regret is mostly backward looking: We look at something we did or didn't do and wish it could be otherwise. While it is harder to write regrets off as owing to someone else's actions, regrets can quickly become uncomfortable when they attach to our actions.

We may quickly slide into **disappointment** that we have acted in these ways, especially when it becomes clear what happens when we do. Disappointment comes from the judgment that we have somehow failed to live up to our own standards and expectations. We look at our actions and see that they are not up to par. At this point, disappointment and its accompanying judgments attach more to our actions but not yet to who we are as persons. Disappointment may also be mirrored by others. As we see that others are more disappointed in us, some of us tend to become more disappointed in ourselves while others strike a more defiant pose.

Discomfort, regret, and disappointment each represents a progression of recrimination. At first, a particular act may cause discomfort. Regret follows from continuing to consume substances or engage in kinds of activities. Disappointment comes from not only continuing but escalating those behaviors.

The next four devils become even more damaging.

Self-loathing is an acceleration of the dynamics of self-recrimination and self-flagellation. Now our entire character is under scrutiny, and we have more damning reasons to beat ourselves up. We start to see ourselves as weak and flawed, as failures because we are not able to exert better control over our consumption and behaviors. We are

failures because we see ourselves as no longer up to scratch. We miss the mark by a mile. We've become the people we always swore we would never be.

Around our substances and behaviors, we start to experience **dread**. Dread is the erosion of our sense of agency and control. We find ourselves doing the same things even—or especially—when we really don't want to do so. We may not even like the effects anymore, yet we still want and consume those substances with reckless abandon. There comes to be a sense of inevitability about our actions.

Yes, we are the ones making choices, but we may not even feel like ourselves anymore nor know who we are. We may begin to feel **disconnection** from other people as we try to hide our use and its effects. We may also feel disconnected from our own selves, especially the parts we pruned as our use accelerated. We may try to hide from the selves we have become. We're alienated from our own selves and others, which can be both a cause and consequence of a deep loneliness. In our loneliest hour, those devils have even more power.

The seventh devil, **fatalism**, is the near total destruction of our agency, of the sense that we can deliberate, make plans, have goals, and take effective action. We come to believe that nothing we do matters. It is hard for us to admit that we have done some awful and harmful things. It may be easier just to say that bad things just keep happening to us. Nothing we do ever goes well or makes a difference. Why even bother trying to change? We may as well just give up.

Alcohol, other drugs, and foods high in the trifecta of sodium, sugar, and fat can become false friends. False friends are right by our sides during the good times. It isn't just that they are *missing* during our darkest hour; they *bring* it.

Some might object that these are all negative addictions. Aren't there also positive addictions? Many people love to cook, play or perform music, meditate, dance, knit, work out, or play pickleball. They say

that these activities are healthy, effective, and fun ways to settle down after a long hard day. They provide pleasure that other activities may not. I've even heard some refer to these pleasant activities as healthy, constructive, or positive addictions.

One professional philosopher whom I know once described herself as having just this sort of relationship with philosophy. I had a full body cringe when she said that.

The term *positive addiction* was advanced by psychiatrist William Glasser. While his focus is primarily on running and meditating, he offers many additional examples drawing from the experiences of others.

Glasser claims that positive addictions "strengthen us and make our lives more satisfying." They also enable us to "live with more confidence, more creativity, and more happiness, and usually in much better health."[2]

Positive addictions, unlike their negative cousins, enhance life by bringing a host of positive consequences. Glasser provides six criteria that must be fulfilled for a person to have a positive addiction to an activity. They are:

- It is something noncompetitive that you choose to do and you can devote approximately an hour per day.
- It is possible for you to do it easily and it doesn't take a good deal of mental effort to do it well.
- You can do it alone or with others, but it does not depend upon others to do it.
- You believe that it has some value (physical, mental, or spiritual) for you.
- You believe that if you persist at it you will improve and—this is completely subjective—you need to be the only one who measures the improvement.
- The activity must have the quality that you can do it without criticizing yourself. If you can't accept yourself during this time the activity will not be addicting.[3]

I offer two examples of activities that fit these criteria but lead to what most of us would say are absurd conclusions. The first is washing dishes by hand and the second significant alcohol consumption. (That these criteria allow for both of these possibilities show the conceptual confusion behind so-called positive addiction.)

Let's imagine a sink full of dirty dishes. Dishwashing does not dominate a person's life; it stays confined within a time frame. Some need to wash dishes immediately while others allow the dishes to pile in the sink like the leaning tower of Pisa.

Dishwashing is cordoned off from other areas of life as well. While a person may be ultra-competitive in all other aspects of their life, competition isn't a part of dishwashing. Only in the oddest circumstances would there be a wash-off where the winner is the one who conquers the biggest pile most quickly and thoroughly.

Dishwashing is not a heavy mental lift. Knowing to wash dishes from the least to most dirty is a reasonable approach. It makes sense because the water won't get gross too quickly. Hence, washing glasses before greasy pans makes the task easier.

Plus, there is value in creating neatness and order in a kitchen, especially after a complicated meal with many dirty dishes. A sense of order may be restored when the sink is empty; this order brings pleasure.

Another person is not required to do the dishes, though having someone to help dry and put away may add to the pleasure. But someone else who questions your washing choices would detract from the pleasure of the task.

The judgment of whether a person is improving is delicate; they must not adopt a critical attitude toward themselves. One measure of improvement is how long the activity takes or how often something needs to be rewashed. But in general, people do not criticize themselves for needing to scrub longer or harder or rewash a pan.

Those who meet all six criteria and avoid any self-criticism can have a positive addiction to dishwashing.

Now on to the second case. Let's imagine someone who works very long hours so really only comes home to sleep before heading off to work again. The only "free" time the person has is an hour before bed, when he downs several large shots of whiskey.

His drinking is contained to that hour, and no one is harmed by it. It really doesn't take much effort to pull out the bottle and pour the shots without spilling a drop. It has value for him because he sees it as a reward, something he deserves for putting in all those long hours.

When the alcohol starts to hit him, he feels immediately relieved and more relaxed. He believes that the more he is able to drink, the greater the relief he will experience. Feeling more relaxed is an improvement.

He may direct no negative criticism at himself. On the contrary, he may think he deserves praise for being able to manage a demanding job in the ways he does. Based upon Glasser's criteria, the man has a positive addiction.

Do we want to accept the conclusions that washing dishes by hand and the daily heavy consumption of alcohol are positive addictions? Both of the conclusions follow from applying the criteria, but they are unsettling. The issue is the criteria being so broad that too many activities fit the bill but not enough are precluded. This points to a deep conceptual confusion.

There's nothing wrong with a person identifying healthy and fun behaviors as pleasant and improving the quality of their life. The more people identify these activities, the better. Glasser's criteria provide a good way to distinguish healthy and pleasant activities from ones that are not. It provides people with a way to assess the activities that contribute to a healthy and happy life and jettison those that do not.

I wonder, though, why call healthy behaviors that contribute to happiness positive addictions? What is gained by naming them addictions? Is there some positive value in being seen as an addict (of the right sort)? Is there some important reclamation work to be done with the word *addiction*?

I admit that I cannot conceive what is gained by naming healthy behaviors addictions. When I have heard people talk about their positive addictions, I often hear wonder and appreciation that are clothed in dedication to a practice.

I love having healthy and pleasant activities in my life like that, but I have also had addictive activities. When I compare my drinking and my increased consumption and tolerance along with all the increasingly negative and harmful consequences to my regular workout routine that fulfills Glasser's criteria, I have the sense of comparing apples to car tires. The dissimilarities between the two practices are far greater than any similarities, which makes it difficult to see each of them as an addiction.

I also worry about the implications of the wide-scale adoption of the notion of positive addiction. Its adoption would underscore a distinction between the right and wrong sorts of addictions or addicts. This would mean "positive addicts" would be seen as morally praiseworthy while the rest of us would continue to be painted with the brush of moral blameworthiness.

To be fair, many already draw a distinction between the right and wrong sorts of addicts. In US culture, being an alcoholic is more acceptable than being addicted to crystal meth, for example. Suffice it to say, it is better to undermine the distinction of right and wrong addictions or addicts rather than support it.

Oddly enough, some people in recovery are reinforcing this distinction. I have heard people say they are addicted to their recovery program. They clearly meet Glasser's criteria and can show the ways that their lives are enhanced.

Some even say that they experience a kind of pain or lack of pleasure when they are not engaged in their program. But here, too, I do not believe that *addiction* is the most accurate or appropriate description. One can have a deep allegiance to something that enhances lives, but this does not make it an addiction.

Words or concepts can only be stretched so far before they become meaningless. The word *addiction* is typically used to differen-

tiate normal behaviors from those that are not normal, well beyond excessive, and bring significant physical and psychological negative consequences.

Stretching the word too far entails that it can no longer be used to differentiate these sorts of behaviors. In doing so, the word *addiction* loses meaning. And this is too important a concept to lose.

3

Severe Addiction and the Destruction of Imagination and Hope

To say severe addiction strips away or erodes a person's agency or their ability to act freely is a viable candidate for statement of the most obvious.

Work with enough clients, be connected to people in the deepest throes of addiction, or live with your own, and you'll see that rational capacities become increasingly compromised. Means–ends thinking may go on the fritz. Patterns of justification and explanation defy any regular sense of logic (but may make sense to others struggling with addiction).

In the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the alcoholic is compared to a jaywalker.[4] Since *jaywalking* is one of those words that has gone by the wayside, let me offer a preliminary definition.

To jaywalk is to step into a road or cross it without regard for traffic and without following the law. A jaywalker is the person who runs across a busy street or doesn't look one way or the other before stepping out. Jaywalkers don't wait for the walk lights at intersections. They've never met a crosswalk they want to use. More and more people are jaywalking because they are too busy looking at their phones to notice when lights change or cars are zooming.

More people are also "drunk walking," with nearly 10% of total pedestrian deaths involving people under the influence in 2023.[5] Unaware of our surroundings and failing to heed traffic lights and stop signs, we misjudge speed and distance. We act more rashly and recklessly.

In *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the jaywalkers and people with a passion for drinking share a penchant for bad decisions with dangerous consequences. Despite the ramifications, the jaywalker keeps darting out into traffic. He knows he should change but…

Each time the jaywalker is hit, the injuries become more severe. He pledges to stop but does not. Or cannot. And finally, he loses his job, his partner, and much of what he values in life. Even so, about everything else in life, the jaywalker may be fully reasonable.

For many people struggling with addiction, this is an accurate description. We know the risks, yet we still keep doing the same things. Our actions seem incomprehensible to others and even to our own selves. It is as if some passion or compulsion takes over our higher-order thinking.

We find ourselves drinking, using, or behaving in ways that we don't even like anymore. As such, the jaywalker comparison highlights we might experience a compulsion over which we seemingly have no control. And when we believe we lack control, we think there is little we can do to change. So why even bother to hope?

Another way to understand those of us who develop addictions is as hitchhikers. To hitchhike is to stand by the side of the road in order to catch a ride somewhere else. The familiar gesture of hitchhiking is putting one's thumb up.

Many people use alcohol and other drugs to escape from something. It might be shyness and awkwardness. It may be an unstable family. Or abuse. Or feeling different. Or depression or anxiety or so many other things.

People find release and escape in alcohol and other drugs. We hitchhike and catch a ride outside of ourselves and our present situations to someplace better. It may actually be better for a good long while. Those who give us rides become our new best friends; we can't imagine they may turn out to be false friends. Many addicts will say just this.

For sure, there are times when jaywalking and hitchhiking are reasonable choices. I am going to dart into traffic if there are obstacles

along the sidewalk. And I may need to hitchhike when my car breaks down, I have no cell service, and it is dangerously cold. These are very exceptional cases. Jaywalking and hitchhiking are potentially very dangerous. Our reason for engaging in these should prevail against our doing so regularly and with abandon.

We often become unable to engage in means–ends deliberation when our reason fails us. We have a goal or sense of what we want (an end) but when it comes to thinking about the ways to reach it (the means), we don't do so rationally. We need our reason to help cultivate and tend our abilities to hope and imagine.

Means–ends deliberation requires that we be able to imagine both our goals and various ways to realize them. Hope often supplies the motivation to act on the ends by means we can imagine. These are vital to our well-being.

Humans are beings who can imagine and hope. These two capabilities belong to what philosopher Annette Baier calls "essential arts of personhood."[6] Severe addiction can destroy these, but their destruction often goes unnoted. Furthermore, their destruction may significantly accelerate an addiction and become a serious impediment to reducing harmful use, being in remission, or in recovery.

Imagination has fascinated philosophers for centuries. More recently, hope has become an important topic in moral psychology. Imagination is the ability to consider things not as they are but how they *could be*. Imagination may involve possibilities in the past, present or future. It enables us to consider actualities and do all sorts of interesting things to them.

Imagination takes things we have encountered or know and can alter them in numerous ways. It can power our dreams and goals, which in turn provides motivation to make them real. At other times, we don't want our imaginings to become real. Consider the fact that many of us can imagine worst-case scenarios in a millisecond.

People struggling with addictions may be very adept at imagining those scenarios. Others will be equally adept at flights of fancy where they are able to stop using easily and instantly, and all the troubles that plague them disappear.

Imagination is so very powerful because of its relationship to our agency—that is, our ability to act in a deliberate way.

Hoping—or more specifically *hoping well*—is equal parts gift and skill. Hoping is also an important component of human agency. We humans learn how to hope not unlike how we do with a host of other activities. We can do it well or we can do it poorly in at least two ways.

Philosopher Victoria McGeer describes "wishful hope" as a failure because it relies on external forces or realities to realize hope.[7] A wishful hoper is one who doesn't really act enough or responsibly to bring about what they hope for. Someone who hangs around waiting for good things just to come their way is a wishful hoper.

"Willful hope" is more complex since it involves questionable action. A willful hoper is a person who invests all their energy in their hopes regardless of the cost to others. They may even try to bend external reality to their hopes. In this sense, they fail to be responsible to others because their hopes always carry the day.

People who struggle with severe addiction may be prone to either of these two failures of hoping. The person who wishes the urge to use will simply go away overnight and all their problems be solved is a wishful hoper. Willful hopers are perhaps a little harder to identify when it comes to addiction. The person who blames their drinking on a stressful job, nagging spouse, and demanding children and then quit their job and abandon their family fits the profile of a willful hoper because they assume everyone else is responsible for their problems—as is everything else. If all these things change, their problems will evaporate.

To hope well is, at minimum, not to hope wishfully or willfully. Hoping well involves having aspirations that are appropriate—they don't require others to make them come true, nor do they require us

to trod over the aspirations of others. Hoping well involves acting in a responsible way to make the hopes actual.

Someone who hopes well uses their imagination to consider options and scenarios and then to take deliberate actions. Hoping well is a balance of recognizing limitations, making effort, and acting in ways that are responsive and responsible.

Imagination and hope are fundamentally connected—we must be able to imagine possibilities before we can even hope for them. Only when we can hope can we imagine ways to make the hoped for possibilities actual.

Imagination is a species of rational thought. When our imagination is compromised (able only to imagine the horrific or unable to imagine something positive), we will have a much harder time acting and living differently.

William James clearly understood the relationship between imagination, hope, and the possibility of a person radically changing their life. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), James uses the term *conversion* to mean a radical transformation of a person's "habitual center of personal energy."[8]

That center of personal energy is the most defining part of a person. It includes the interests, commitments, and behaviors around which a person's identity revolves. For a young professional athlete, it will be his sport. For a parent, it may be the well-being of their children. For a struggling addict, it will be the substances or behaviors of choice. A conversion shifts that center or axis, and this opens new possibilities.

For James, conversions happen by a variety of means; there's no need to posit a divine being who changes a person. A person can change himself under the right sort of conditions. James writes, "Two things are in the mind of a candidate for a conversion: first, the present incompleteness or wrongness… which he is eager to escape from; and second, the positive ideal which he longs to compass."[9]

A person who is eager to escape a life in which they are actively addicted still has some hope. They can see that their life has gotten off

the track they had earlier set it upon, and they may not even recognize their own life.

What's crucial is the quality of their hope. Are they wishfully hoping, willfully hoping or hoping well? What kind of actions are they willing to undertake to get themselves out of that "present incompleteness or wrongness" of their life? The first move, James claims, is to say no to that present way of living.

As a person becomes more severely addicted, they face more obstacles in imagining "the positive ideal." Perhaps they've gotten habituated into always imagining the worst-case scenarios. They have plenty of material or experiences to draw from producing negative or horrifying imaginings.

Without some positive experiences and material, imagining a positive ideal is difficult if not impossible. Where might those positive experiences and material come from?

Many of us really don't know how to live when not in altered states. As much as we know and even accept that we cannot go back to our old life, we're not sure how to live here and now. Our grasp on sobriety may seem tenuous. We may lack hope about our abilities to cope. We may be unable to imagine how life would be sober. We may not believe that someone like us will be able to do this. So, what do we do? We can hitchhike because we do need to catch a ride somewhere else.

Hitchhiking in recovery has multiple forms. I may need to hitchhike on someone else's belief in me that I can go another hour not drinking or using. You may need help imagining a sober life, so you look at someone who used with you but has fundamentally altered his life. Someone else may be unable to see any positive character or moral traits in themselves but can listen to others describing how they see them.

Our stories are often the vehicles for helping people move a little further down the road. We can generously offer them as such, as we can charitably listen to others' stories and continue to learn.

At times, we provide the rides while at others, we need them. We are hitchhikers *and* drivers. Some of us will disbelieve when others want to hitch a ride with us. We might question their judgment, but

we may suspend our disbelief when we realize that we can be of service to others.

Someone who develops an addiction later in life might be able to draw from their experiences before their addiction became so severe to generate a positive ideal.

Imagination allows us to draw from the past and chart a course for a future. A person might be able to hope well in the present by drawing from the past. But not everyone will have positive experiences that can function this way.

One of the reasons why mutual support groups can be so helpful to people trying to stop using is that they can see others who shared an addiction but have altered their use. In hearing stories about a person's transformation, this may be the material for another person's imagination. Someone else's positive ideal may function as his own in the beginning.

At some point, that person may be able to imagine possibilities for and of themselves, begin to hope well for them, and take concrete action to realize that ideal.

Doing this embraces that positive ideal with a resounding yes.

4

Who Gets to Say They Are Sober or in Recovery?

What does it mean to be sober or in recovery? This has become a live question as more people identify as being in recovery or having sobriety from the use of one substance while still using other substances occasionally, without any of the challenges that are typical of an addiction or an SUD.

Someone who identifies as an alcoholic might use cannabis products in a recreational way. Someone in recovery from a heroin addiction may enjoy an occasional glass of wine. Others who have past struggles with a substance may now be able to consume it with no troubles. All of this gets lumped into a phenomenon called "California sober." For as many people who cheer this view, there are just as many who jeer, and others who are simply confused.

The confusion stems, in part, from the common usage of those terms, which has been shaped by AA and its 12-step model. For many decades, AA and its 12-step model have dominated in- and outpatient treatment centers, leading to almost 75% of treatment involving the 12 steps. While the 12-step model does not explicitly require abstinence (the only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking), it is strongly recommended throughout the literature and the fellowship of AA.

In many ways, thanks to AA and the 12 steps, abstinence, sobriety, and recovery are conceived as different but tightly related activities.

There are no formal definitions, but typically, abstinence is categorically saying no to a substance. Before, consuming the substance

was a primary activity, now *not* consuming becomes a primary activity. Despite saying no, the substance may still play a huge role in a person's life and may still be front and center but in a different way.

With sobriety, the substance is not the axis around which so many of life's goals or activities revolve. Sobriety changes a person's relationship to the substance and the role that substance plays in their life.

Finally, recovery is having the skills, arts, and willingness to change one's life in ways to make different meanings and values. Recovery is a way of life.

For a "classic" or "old-school" AAer, abstinence is the first and necessary step to creating sobriety and living in recovery. And a classic AAer would deny that a person who uses other substances is sober and in recovery.

This view of abstinence → sobriety → recovery will remain dominant only if the 12-step approach does. But there are also other approaches to treating SUDs gaining more traction in research, public policy, and popular thought.

Harm reduction advocates for lessening the negative uses and consequences through a variety of means. Abstinence is one method among others that include the use of medically approved substitutes (Suboxone and methadone for heroin, for example) and lowering or lightening consumption patterns. Harm reduction is the catalyst for more people identifying as being in recovery while not abstaining from all substances.

There's deep suspicion in some corners of recovery communities about the use of medically approved and administered substitutes. For those who believe complete abstinence is the only path to sobriety and recovery, reliance on a substitute such as Suboxone or methadone is not only not abstinence but is still active addiction.

The most uncharitable view is that a person is just switching addictive substances. This is terribly unfair. If the use of medically approved substances can stave off withdrawal effects or reduce cravings and therefore enable a person to function more fully and healthfully in their life, to be more responsible and engaged with themself

and others, they are living a very different life from before. Are they sober and in recovery? I believe they are.

The move by the American Psychiatric Association to put SUDs on a spectrum also questions the commonly assumed relationship between abstinence, sobriety, and recovery. Someone may be diagnosed with an SUD depending on the number of criteria they meet. There are 11 diagnostic criteria for SUDs, and a person has a mild SUD if they meet two to three criteria. Someone who meets four to five has a moderate SUD, while a person who meets more than six has a severe SUD.

Interestingly, the term *addiction* is nowhere to be found in these diagnoses, perhaps because it carries too much stigma. However, the word is still widely used by medical and treatment professionals and in the legal system. It is also alive and well in popular culture.

So, who is an addict? A person with a mild SUD? Moderate SUD? Or should the term be reserved for those who have a severe SUD? There is no clarity on this question.

If someone scores a three, makes changes to their consumption, and later doesn't meet a single criterion, were they ever addicted? Do they still have an SUD? Are they a former SUDser? Let's say their substance of choice was alcohol. Is an occasional glass of wine a slip or a relapse? I believe slip and relapse are the wrong categories.

It gets more complicated with moderate and severe SUDs. Imagine a person who meets five criteria for an SUD. They, too, change their consumption patterns and their relationship to alcohol. Their life gets better, and they have reduced the harm in their life.

Let's say they no longer meet any criteria for an SUD. The same questions that arise above are at play here. There's no clarity. Let's imagine they walk their criteria back to a three so they are still in the range of a mild SUD. Are they sober? In recovery? Many would say they are not because they are not abstinent. I think it is more complicated, though.

If they have changed many of the dynamics and dimensions of their relationship to the substance and the role it plays in their life, they are able to do so much more to meet many of their major responsibilities in life and are living better. They are recovering parts of their self and life that they had lost due to the significant consumption of their substance.

How about the person who meets seven criteria for a diagnosis of a severe SUD but walks it back to a moderate SUD? That represents a significant reduction in harm and surely counts for something. Compared to how they were before with a severe SUD, they are more capable of participating in life. They have far fewer days of using or use far less than before. Compared to before, they are sober more often. Does *sober more often* equal *sober*?

One size never fits all, whether it is a pair of stretch pants, the supposed universal television remote, or an adjustable wrench. Why would we assume that there is only one method or a single program for recovery when it comes to addiction?

Many people do assume there is only one path, especially if they themselves have become sober on that path. With the best of intentions, they may exhort others to follow that same path. This view has a companion, namely that there are no viable alternatives. Combined, these two views produce a belief that if people fail with this method, perhaps they are not trying hard enough.

This is an unwarranted and devastating conclusion. To avoid that conclusion, we need to change some of the underlying assumptions about what addiction is. We would do well to keep in mind the following insights.

Each person's addiction has its own trajectory. People begin to use and abuse alcohol and other drugs for particular reasons and these reasons may have a stranglehold on a person. Some are just looking for fun while others are seeking release from trauma, grief, depression, or anxiety.

This is not to say there aren't commonalities to people's addictions. Where there are commonalities, it is important to recognize

differences between people with the same addictions. Some may have other physical or psychological co-occurring conditions, which means some treatment methods may not be effective.

Addictions vary dramatically in the sorts of pleasures or highs or other effects they produce. The brain responds differently to different substances and behaviors. The frenetic high that is produced by cocaine is different from the beyond-mellow of heroin, is different from the dissociative effects of ketamine. Different drugs affect different parts of one's psyche as well as the body itself. This matters in terms of what treatment options might be more effective.

Medication-assisted therapies (MATs) are evidence-based practices for treating some addictions. Campral may reduce cravings while Vivitrol blocks the "rewarding effects" of alcohol. And Antabuse is a deterrent—a person who drinks while taking Antabuse will become terribly nauseous. Medications such as methadone or Suboxone are effective for people who are addicted to opioids. (Those medications are themselves opioids, but they do not produce the euphoria of heroin or pharmaceutically produced opioids.)

MATs are often greeted with suspicion because they cause people to maintain a physical dependency. However, not all forms of physical dependency are bad. Asthma inhalers, for one, keep many of us breathing well. Just like inhalers, MATs reduce harm to the individuals who are struggling, their families, and even broader communities.

With regular, controlled, and safe dosages, a person becomes more stabilized and functional. And stability and functionality are hallmarks of recovery.

While much of the focus on drugs and overdoses has been on the opioids, methamphetamine deserves as much attention. At present, there is no effective medication for this type of addiction. There is, however, a form of treatment called contingency management (CM) that is proving effective.

CM works by offering rewards for a negative drug test. The rewards may be affirmations ("Great job!") or small monetary ones

(winning a $5.00 gift card). The rewards may increase the longer one is able to have negative test results.

While some worry that is rewarding bad behavior, part of the reason CM may work is that people begin to see themselves as being capable of making changes. They start to cultivate a sense of self-worth, which is often a very early casualty with addiction. They may be able to imagine and hope for a better future.

The context in which one lives and is trying to be sober matters enormously. If a person's choice of drugs has been a matter of opportunity and accessibility, so too may be their choice of treatment options. One approach is not objectively better than the other; the measure of goodness is whether it works for a particular person.

Some people will have access to first-rate medical care; they may have insurance that will pay for in-patient treatment with medical staff to manage withdrawal.

Others may need and want the nearly cloistered nature of in-patient care, and still others want to figure out how to become sober in the place where they live and work.

Some people may want to become sober in the company of others who have lived the same struggles. There are various self- and mutual-help groups that do this. If there is any slight glimmer from the pandemic, it is that many mutual-help programs have a more robust online presence. This includes AA, Women for Sobriety, Rational Recovery, SMART Recovery, Moderation Management, and LifeRing who now all offer online meetings.

Some people may prefer to do this work privately on their own, while others may do so in the privacy of a supportive family and friend network. Others may seek help from a psychologist, social worker, licensed alcohol and drug counselor, or religious person. Each of these is a wonderful place to start.

Access and opportunity may be the first consideration, but they need not be the only or the last.

People who have been in recovery—even or especially those with long-term sobriety—may find themselves needing to recommit to their sobriety. For some, this will be redoubling their efforts with a method that has been tried and true for them. Others will need and want something new or different. Since we as people are constantly changing, our needs in recovery will as well. There are more options now than even 20 years ago, but we must continue to multiply these options.

Addiction treatment is not a zero-sum game. If one approach works, it does not take away from the effectiveness of another. With so much riding on recovery, we need less tribalism and more tolerance for exploring and creating new ways to be in recovery.

PART 2

The Many Faces of Self-Deception

5

The Usual Suspects of Self-Deception

Self-deception is often easy to recognize in others but far more difficult to recognize in ourselves. We have an investment in seeing and understanding ourselves and our circumstances in certain ways, yet we lack perspective. But with others, we may have a better perspective—one that is not colored by an investment in seeing that person or his circumstances in a certain light.

A lack of self-perception combined with needing and wanting to see ourselves and our circumstances in certain ways is why self-deception is potentially so dangerous and debilitating when it runs too deeply or in too many directions.

So, when it comes to addiction, we may seem completely unreasonable and incomprehensible to people who don't struggle. Often with grief and concern tinged with frustration if not exasperation, people not addicted wonder how an addicted person can be so wrong about their use and not see the devastation they may be wreaking. How could a person be so devastatingly and destructively self-deceived?

Philosophy has not always been helpful when it comes to the topic of self-deception. In philosophy, many of the discussions of self-deception draw from or play off against a narrow conception offered by Bishop Joseph Butler in *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel* (1726).[10]

Butler defined *self-deception* as intentionally maintaining contradictory and not just inconsistent beliefs. Two beliefs contradict when one belief asserts something (call it "p") and the other asserts its exact denial (call it "not-p"). A contradiction can never be true. Examples include:

- I believe the earth is flat, and I believe the earth is not flat.
- I believe I will achieve my goal, and I believe I will not achieve it.
- I can control my drinking, and I cannot control my drinking.

Keep in mind that in the 1700s (when Butler coined his definition), there was no conception of a sub- or unconscious where beliefs could reside. Rather, the mind was understood as something like an open room in which the light of reason could illuminate all its contents.

Given this picture, the person who held contradictory beliefs would be seen as failing in some way because they are *intentionally* holding onto something that cannot be true. And blame attaches to the intention.

In the addiction literature as well as in our ordinary ways of thinking, this old account of self-deception still has some life. This account creates a layer of blame and justifies negative judgments about people struggling with addiction. The joke, "How do you know an addict is lying? His lips are moving," still garners laughs. While there has been some shift or reduction in blaming people for their addictions, being self-deceived about the addiction carries blame that replenishes the blame pool.

More contemporary treatments of self-deception have rightfully targeted the intentionality requirement of Butler. Jettisoning the intentionality requirement makes possible more nuanced accounts of self-deception that are more congruent with common-sense experiences.

One move is to replace the necessity of intentionally holding contradictory beliefs with a tendency to treat evidence in a motivationally biased manner.

When we are motivated to believe something, we tend to operate with some confirmation bias. We look for evidence that supports our belief and tend not to give as much weight to evidence that would challenge that belief. Furthermore, we incline toward what is close at hand. People more readily accept as evidence what is right before

their eyes, especially when it supports their belief. Thus, self-deception involves motivated (false) belief.

In the case of the person struggling with an addiction, they may be motivated to see their drinking as regular or normal. It isn't even a problem, so it certainly is not an addiction. They have a stake in seeing themselves in a certain way. They may have some signature moves.

The first is the "companion in guilt," move, pointing toward others in their circle (people ready at hand) who are doing the same things as they are.

If this isn't effective, they draw attention to those who consume more than them or who have experienced significant losses as a consequence of use.

They may point to the fact that they have stopped for some periods of time as evidence against them having an addiction (confirmation bias).

They may not recognize that some of their friends who drank just like them have quit because that might challenge their belief.

The addict's self-deception is fueled by the motivated false belief that they do not have a problem. Many people who have struggled with alcohol or drugs or behaviors such as gambling often say they had a voice inside them whispering, "I have a problem."

The voice may get louder after an epic blowout. It may get louder when a person feels a drabness or disappointment about the monotony of their daily use. Sometimes it is others who have expressed concern about the addict's behaviors and health, and they internalize those voices too.

Very few people easily and quickly accept the conclusion that they have a problem. To the contrary, many of us struggle mightily against it and craft a variety of arguments to demonstrate we don't have a problem.

Many of these arguments rely on misdirection, moving the focus onto someone or something else and away from our use. We tend

to invoke the usual suspects of self-deception: denial, rationalization, and minimization.

- Denial is a willful ignorance about one's own self or about a situation of the world. People may tend to manipulate or manufacture reality to square with their beliefs and actions.
- Rationalization creates justifications excusing people from their actions and how those actions contribute to a situation.
- Minimization involves the reduction of the seriousness or the extent of an action or a situation.

Here are six of the common arguments I've heard—and have made some myself:

"My friends drink or use more than I do." The misdirection here is toward what our friends are doing rather than what we ourselves are doing. If our comparison pool is people who use more than we do, and if we'd have a problem only if our use is the worst, then we don't have a problem. If it ever appears we are using the most, we'll find a new comparison pool. Problem solved.

"I only drink beer or wine, or I only use marijuana." The misdirection is to drugs and behaviors that people assume are more dangerous, addictive, or are illegal. The implication seems to be, "Be glad I am not using heroin or meth. Those kinds of drugs are illegal and they drive illegal activity." Beer, wine, and marijuana are legal (or becoming legal in some places in the case of marijuana), so they can't be a problem. And if they can't be a problem, we don't have a problem.

"I only use on weekends or holidays." The misdirection here is to all the other times when we are not actively using. We're not sitting in a darkened apartment during productive work time. This approach conveniently neglects the fact that there are aftereffects of using that may extend beyond time of use. It also makes it seem as if weekends and holidays matter less than other times.

"I am too successful and high-functioning to be an addict." The misdirection is to something that is going right or well in our

lives. There may be other areas in life not going so well—our marriage may be on the rocks, our relationships with our parents and siblings may be badly frayed, or we might have no social life.

We make one area weigh more than all the others combined, and it sets the standard for measuring our alleged problem. This also assumes that there are plenty of people to whom we can point who are less successful or less high-functioning as examples of "people with a problem."

"I haven't hit rock bottom like so-and-so." The misdirection is to people who have identified certain losses as intolerable to them and prompted recognition of their problems. Pat lost his wife and kids. Kelly lost her dream career. Joe got convicted and is looking at a prison sentence. These are "people with a problem."

However, each person's rock bottom is better understood as their "misery threshold." A person's misery threshold is deeply subjective; it is how much suffering they are willing to tolerate before they make a change.

If we act as if there is an objective rock bottom where certain losses happen, then so long as we are not arrested, still work, have a family, and our dogs love us, we don't have a problem—and we certainly don't have to quit.

"I have stopped for extended periods of time." The misdirection is to periods when we have stopped rather than the periods when we have started up again. This is a potentially devastating misdirection even for people who have been sober, in recovery, or in remission for a long time. We tell ourselves "people with a problem" can't stop, but *we* can stop for days, weeks, months, and even a year or more. Therefore, we cannot have a problem.

People who have stopped for a period of time experience what I call "abstinence afterglow." We've done the hard work of abstaining from alcohol, drugs, or other behaviors. We've settled the question once and for all. We proved we don't have a problem. Not only do we feel vindicated, we feel as if our hard work has put a protective aura around us.

During such a time of afterglow, we are impervious to the bad effects of alcohol and drugs. After all, we are invincible. Having convinced ourselves we don't have a problem, we can start drinking or using again. If our use gets a little worrisome like before, we've shown that we can stop. However, stopping in the past is no guarantee of stopping the next time.

No one wants to have a problem, let alone be "people with a problem." But if a little voice is whispering quietly or whisper-shouting, or if someone raises the question, we owe it to ourselves to explore seriously whether we do, in fact, have a problem. And recognizing these various misdirecting maneuvers is an important first step.

Understanding self-deception as motivated false belief gives addicts and people who live, love, and work with us at least two fronts on which to work. The first concerns motivation and the second the falsity of the belief.

To overcome self-deception, understanding motivation (the horse) comes before recognizing the falsity of a belief (the cart). So long as motivation remains opaque to a person, it will be very difficult for them to convince themselves or to be convinced by others of the falsity of a belief. Confirmation bias runs far and wide when it comes to gathering evidence about whether someone has an addiction.

If a person can begin to understand what is motivating them to hold certain beliefs and views about themself, they gain crucial knowledge. But motivations are often complicated and mixed. To explore them with intention and care is an important first step.

Addiction is, in some sense, a habit. A habit is done automatically without conscious intention. When we slow habitual actions by asking *why* we are doing something, we take ourselves out of the autopilot mode.

There are many ways to begin to understand our motivations. Our friends and families often see our motivations more clearly than we see our own. It is perhaps a matter of trust or a leap of faith to accept their insights.

We can also see our own motivations in reading about others' experiences. This, in part, explains the popularity of memoirs of addiction—they resonate with readers' experiences. We learn about ourselves when we see our experiences in someone else's.

The same happens when a person hears something familiar in the stories of others in different support or self-help groups. People who may be very different from each other in all sorts of significant ways may share commonalities about why they did what they did and how they started to do things differently.

It is true that each person is subject to self-deception in the sense of motivated false belief and confirmation bias. This may provide some common ground for people who just cannot understand how people could be so self-deceived about their addictions.

6

Some Unusual Suspects of Self-Deception

The previous essay explored some of the more common forms of self-deception. These forms focused on the inconsistent or even contradictory beliefs that people struggling with addiction may hold. However, there are other forms of self-deception that largely go unnoticed. I call these the "unusual suspects," and they can accelerate addiction as well as hinder recovery.

We need a more expansive definition of self-deception to account for these elements. Here's my working definition:

A person who suffers from self-deception has a lack of perspective and knowledge about themselves and the world, which affects their ability and willingness to act and take responsibility for what is properly theirs. Self-deception is more than holding inconsistent or even conflicting beliefs; it is a living attitude and engagement with the world that can be full-bodied.

Lacking perspective and knowledge about ourselves and the world is not unsurprising. In fact, it is quite common regardless of whether we suffer from self-deception or not. The challenge is that some of us have a much harder time gaining both.

Good or accurate perspective requires the right distance. From far away, a large building can appear quite small. But looking at something too closely makes it blurry, even pixelated such as when we zoom in on a photo.

The same is true when it comes to perspective of self. Not seeing matters accurately is a high hurdle to clear for gaining self-knowledge because we cannot distinguish appearance from reality.

A lack of perspective and knowledge also hinders us in identifying what our responsibilities are and what are not. Some people will see themselves as having very few responsibilities, while others assume responsibility that is not theirs. In the responsibility economy, those who take too little benefit from those who take too much responsibility.

How then can we judge what's needed for accurate perspective? In many ways, socialization and education can help. Others can fact-check our knowledge claims. If I say, "The Eiffel Tower is 20 feet tall," other people and trusted sources can correct me. Thus, in matters where others can offer correctives and confirmations, it is much more difficult but not completely impossible to generate and maintain self-deception about those matters.

When the matters are unique to a person, such as claims about their self-knowledge, moral goodness, their character, hopes, dreams, and shortcomings, it is far more difficult to provide a counterbalance. This is where damaging forms of self-deception can take root.

Because we are social creatures, self-deception is as much a social production as an individual one. We may enlist others either expressly or tacitly to conform with our views of how the world is. But others may gaslight us, utilizing a variety of means to get us to question our grasp of reality. In doing so, they may make us think that we are misguided, deluded, or crazy.

Self-deception erodes autonomy and harms a person in many ways that may go unnoticed. The word *autonomy* literally means "self-rule." Thus, people should be able to make choices and act freely based on their commitments, principles, and goals when they are sufficiently mature and so long as they don't hinder another's legitimate autonomy.

Autonomy presumes that we can imagine, hope well, and intentionally direct our behavior. But when something external has dominion over us, people are harmed. Likewise, a person forced to do something against their will is not acting autonomously.

Autonomy isn't a blank check, however. We often put age and maturity restrictions on all; a five-year-old may *want* to drive a car but

they are neither rationally mature nor physically capable of driving a car responsibly.

We also put restrictions and limitations on all of us as a kind of tradeoff to guarantee security. I may really love driving in the middle of the road at a high speed, but I agree to abide by traffic laws so that we are all safer. If each of us could drive wherever and however we wanted, we'd all be at much greater risk. In this manner, autonomy is a balance between freedom and responsibility.

Self-deception can involve either an overestimation of our abilities, qualities, efforts, and willingness or an underestimation of them. Each of these arises from a lack of perspective about ourselves. Sometimes the overestimation and underestimation aid and abet each other, creating a thick weave of self-deception.

The first "unusual suspect" is **procrastination**. Consider a person who knows that he has an SUD. He can clearly describe his drinking patterns, increased tolerance, and feelings of withdrawal, and he can chart the adverse effects caused by his drinking. He's taken more online quizzes than he can count and has told his friends that he knows his drinking has progressed down the spectrum to full-blown disorder.

This person knows he is an alcoholic and that he needs to do something about it. He has an accurate perspective on his drinking that supports his knowledge that he has a problem and fortifies his desire to do something about it.

Today, he makes himself a promise that he will get help tomorrow. Tomorrow, he makes the same promise. Each day he promises anew to take action. This is procrastination.

Having a desire to change may be necessary but not sufficient to change. What's needed is having a will to change. Willingness is what activates a desire. But if we are unwilling even for a second, a chasm may open between the knowledge of what we must do and the actual doing of it. One moment of hesitation can grow into a lifetime of not fulfilling a desire or need.

Procrastination is not idleness—people who procrastinate can be some of the busiest people you'll ever meet. This man may tell himself that such a monumental decision requires the utmost care.

He needs to explore whether in- or outpatient treatment would be best for him. He wants to make sure that everything is all set with his family and workplace. The man who promises to get help can tell himself that he is gathering more information, getting his affairs into order, making arrangements, etc.

He can keep turning all the considerations he can possibly identify over in his mind. Repeatedly. He can begin to manufacture other concerns that warrant consideration. He can tell all his family and friends everything he's doing.

All of these are good and necessary things to do, but if he keeps looking at more options and raising other considerations, he may never take that final step to get help.

This person has an investment in seeing himself as the sort of person who does something about a problem. He may even see himself as the sort who grabs the bull by the horns. He is doing many things. In fact, he may be a whirling dervish gathering facts and "taking care of business." He may even begin to feel resentment toward others who aren't appreciative of all he is doing to get ready to get help.

All this activity may make it very hard to have an accurate perspective on his willingness as he is mistaking busyness for willingness. Put another way, he overestimates his willingness. He isn't exercising his agency to get help, which in turn means that he isn't fully taking responsibility.

As Soren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) notes, procrastination is like sewing without tying a knot at the end of the thread. We make the motions but don't actually sew.[11] The practical consequences are quite different: The seat of your pants will still be split. And the man with the problem is still drinking.

Our procrastinating man seeking treatment for an SUD may also embody another "unusual suspect" of self-deception, which is

perfectionism. The two often go together with very bad effect. Perfectionism often gets a pass because people who are perfectionists are regarded as hard working, meticulous, rigorous, and fully dedicated to whatever it is they are doing. Perfectionism is a trickster.

There are at least three forms of perfectionism, each of which involves overestimation. These are perfectionism as overestimation of

- actual abilities,
- potential abilities, and
- how much a person controls the world.

These forms can cause a person to have a great deal of resentment and unhappiness in their life. Left unchecked, perfectionism can result in a person harboring huge resentment directed at others. Perfectionism can also result in a person making the judgment that he is a moral failure.

Perfectionism as overestimation of actual abilities. Perfectionists set the bar impossibly high yet operate with the expectation that they will be able to clear it in all their actions. Some people tend to chronically overestimate their abilities while others tend to chronically underestimate theirs.

The underestimators and the overestimators lack perspective on what they can and cannot do. They just plainly get it wrong about their abilities and don't even know it. That's self-deception.

Based on inaccurate assessments of their actual abilities, people set their expectations for achievement. If under-estimators expect to clear any bar, it must be one set so very low that anyone would trip on it. (This is the opposite of perfectionism that might be called, "Not even good enough.")

It is the over-estimators who are more prone to perfectionism. There is often a significant distance between what we expect ourselves to be able to do and what we are actually able to do. Our expectations may color our assessments, which may tend to widen the already existing gap between actual abilities and expectations.

If that gap is acknowledged even for a bit, the characteristic move to close that gap is to begin to consider our potential abilities, which is another form of perfectionism.

Perfectionism as overestimation of potential abilities. Every person spends some amount of time imagining what it is they might be able to do. Oftentimes, there is a chain of reasoning that runs along like this: I am able to do *this*, so I will be able to do *that* because they are similar.

In some cases, this comparison and subsequent conclusion that a person will be able to do that is justified. However, when the types of activities are very different, it becomes more difficult to make good comparisons and draw well-founded conclusions.

Imagine that a person is very good at doing that first activity and has had great success with it. She is able to meet the standards she sets for herself there. When that person tries the new activity, she expects on some level that she will be able to replicate her success. She makes the mistake of assuming that abilities translate across activities, so she overestimates her potential abilities.

This overestimation results in her having skewed expectations that she cannot possibly meet. Yet she expects herself to meet them because she understands herself as a type of person who has met the highest standards before.

Complicating the matter of perfectionism even more is the fact that being able to do something perfectly is not simply a matter of capacity and willingness. Yes, each of these plays an important role and their absence may make it impossible to accomplish a goal. However, their presence does not guarantee success.

There are all kinds of factors and limiting conditions that have nothing to do with you or me personally that affect our achievement. This leads to the third form of perfectionism.

Perfectionism as overestimation of how much a person controls the world. This is the view that a person should be able to control all factors that affect her activities and achievement. This is another failure of assessment in the direction of overestimation.

Rather than a person's will, actual abilities, and potential abilities being the site of the mistaken assessment, everything else in the world is the subject of mistaken assessment. More specifically, the perfectionist who believes that she should be able to control all the factors and conditions that contribute to her achievement makes a catastrophic error in judgment.

By expecting to control everything, she puts herself in an impossible situation where there are at least two outcomes. One is that she will resent anything and anyone whom she sees as thwarting her actions and achievements. That resentment may well become toxic. The other option is that she directs her focus inward and makes the judgment that she is a moral failure. Regardless of which path she travels, her agency is deeply compromised.

Perfectionists make themselves the exception to the rules or standards that apply to others.

One strain of perfectionism will manifest in a sense of superiority. These perfectionists tend to think they leave the rest of us behind with no chance of catching up.

The second and more common strain of perfectionism, especially for those of us who struggle with addiction, manifests in blameworthiness, self-recrimination, and inferiority. The inferiority strain often involves overestimators overestimating what they are responsible for.

Taking responsibility for what is not properly yours will lead to more blame and self-recrimination. If we see ourselves as pretty much responsible for everything, including matters well beyond our control, we will always fail. This will reinforce our view that we are worthless.

One final dynamic of perfectionism that harms people is turning wants and needs into a series of shoulds and obligations. A perfectionist with a "shoulding" habit turns everything into obligations, which carries the potential for catastrophic failure. It is impossible to meet all the demands created by our goals and wants.

Some of those demands will clash because the desires or goals that spawned them clash; we often are not consistent in what we want.

Practical considerations will also limit how many of the shoulds can be met and met well.

We cannot be in two places at the same time no matter how much we think we should be able to do so. People struggling with addiction may be especially susceptible to this dynamic because we believe if we can do all these things, we must have some value to others and to ourselves.

We may also believe that in meeting impossible demands, we are atoning for all our past transgressions.

7

Global Shame Is the Most Dangerous Form of Self-Deception

The most pernicious form of self-deception is global shame—complete shame about who a person is and everything they do. This type of shame extends into every dimension of life. More than any other form of self-deception, it keeps us trapped in very unhealthy and harmful ways of seeing ourselves and our places in the world. At its worst, global shame destroys important moral goods such as agency, autonomy, dignity, self-respect, and flourishing.

Global shame is not an emotion, nor is it just low self-esteem or a negative self-image. These are inadequate to the task of capturing the ways that some of us have been steeped in shame. Shame becomes second nature to us, and we meet the world and act in ways that stem from shame and then reinforce it. This makes shame more of a way of living than an emotion or psychological state.

Shame gets its hooks into us first from other people around us. None of us is born ashamed but the actions, attitudes, and judgments of others—especially when we are children—make us feel ashamed. We take on those judgments from others and make them our own. Others most surely can shame us, but we become adept at shaming ourselves. We can punish ourselves without interruption.

Shame is toxic. *Toxic* derives from the Greek *toxikos,* which pertains to arrows and archery. While an arrow piercing may kill on its own, some arrows are dipped in poison so that any wound would cause death.

While the poison dimension remains of the word *toxic*, I want to reclaim the original "poisoned arrow as weapon" element. Judgments intended to elicit shame fly as an aimed poisoned arrow.

While some might say they are offering these judgments to help a person change their behavior or course-correct and meant no harm, the harm is done. Shame as toxin works though an entire person on emotional, physical, social, moral, and spiritual levels. Moreover, this leaves room for the ways in which a person can be in a toxic relationship with their own self. Each of us can shoot ourselves with those same arrows. When we do this, no one needs to shame us because we live and breathe that shame every day.

People who are steeped in global shame operate with heightened confirmation bias. Each of us operates with the assumption that "someone like us" (insert all negative judgments) can only bring about harm or injuries to others. Every act confirms our inadequacy or culpability, which exacerbates shame.

We believe everything we do and everything about us is bad, wrong, or hurtful. This reinforces our view that someone like us doesn't deserve forgiveness or to be treated well. This is global shame firing on all cylinders.

Imagine Pat, a person who is deeply concerned with doing the right thing. The failure to do so may become a source of unending self-recrimination. Pat is in recovery after a long history of drug abuse. She feels a crushing weight of shame for so many of the things she did in her using days.

Pat wants to atone for her past transgressions. She feels as if she should do penance for the rest of her life. She just wants to make up for all the bad things she did to others while she was using. She put her partner and their children through hell. But when she's honest, she realizes that she and her partner never really should have stayed together because the relationship was too volatile.

In any situation, Pat looks at multiple alternatives and tries to identify what is the right thing to do. Most of us would say Pat is

doing exactly what we all should do; she's a role model for moral deliberation.

But what if Pat keeps running different scenarios, all the while interrogating her intentions, imagining different consequences, identifying her moral duties, and wondering how each option extends care.

She may settle on option A only to see there is an equally good argument for option B. She settles on that option until option C seems just as right or good. Just off on the horizon is option D…

The challenge is Pat cannot choose all these options; some may be practically incompatible or impossible. Still, Pat turns herself inside out trying to ensure that she chooses the best and right act. But she is unable to choose any of them because she believes that any choice she makes will be the wrong one *because she made it*. She may believe that she will once again make the wrong choice because she always does. Someone like her always does. As a consequence, Pat doesn't act.

It might be tempting to judge Pat as having a "clean hands" problem. People who worry about making mistakes—and, thereby, dirtying their hands—often will not act in the absence of a guarantee that their hands will remain clean.

The focus is not on doing the right thing for the sake of others. Rather, the focus is a person's fear of harm or damage to them (dirty hands). The fear of making a mistake and the associated "contamination" is what keep these people from acting in situations where some act is required.

There's a difference between the fear of making a mistake and wanting to do the right thing. A person who fears making a mistake may not have a care in the world to do good or right things; they just want to avoid the negative while not necessarily adding something positive.

Pat has an abundance of concern for wanting to do the right thing, especially after all the wrong things. She knows her hands aren't clean; she can always see her filth. Her not acting may make situations worse.

Pat's inaction may appear to be a matter of callousness and indifference. Callousness is a shortage of concern and care, while indifference is their complete absence. This isn't Pat's problem; hers is the exact opposite. Pat's inability to act springs from an overly scrupulous concern to do the right thing. Being overly scrupulous can be a hindrance to action.

Many situations demand immediate if only partially informed actions. Acting without assurance that this is the best option is in many cases much better than not acting at all. Many situations admit of multiple possible right actions while some very wrong actions stand in clear relief. Not picking an obvious wrong action is minimally a right action.

Are there some actions that are better than others? In most cases, yes. At some point, the concern to do the right thing must turn into doing a right thing. This isn't to say Pat should act without deliberation. Rather, it is to claim deliberation must come to an end in a timely manner relative to the situation.

By always deliberating but not acting, Pat may be committing a moral wrong. For someone motivated by the concern to do right actions, this realization is especially painful. It amplifies self-recrimination.

In her desire to make up for all her past mistakes and to be a better partner and mother, Pat may find herself apologizing all the time. She becomes a knee-jerk apologist.

It seems as if there are three types of people in the world when it comes to apologies. The three types constitute a spectrum:

- There are those who apologize very little if at all,
- those who apologize appropriately, and
- those who apologize for nearly everything.

People in this last category apologize even—or especially—when they have nothing for which they need to apologize. They apologize for their very existence. People steeped in shame are often in this cat-

egory. All these apologies undermine a person's worth and dignity. It is not surprising there are gendered dimensions to apologies.

A study in 2010 found that women apologize more than men.[12] Women self-report committing more offenses or engaging in behavior that warranted apologies than men did. Are women simply misbehaving more than men? Not exactly.

The study found that men and women have markedly different thresholds of what constitutes an offense deserving an apology. Women have a lower threshold while men have a much higher one. In other words, women see more acts for which they must apologize than do men; they see more of the things they do as wrong, out of line, inappropriate, hurtful, etc.

A man and woman may do exactly the same thing but regard it differently; she will see it as an offense that requires an apology and he not.

The study found that men and women apologize for an equal proportion of their offenses once they are recognized as such (approximately 81%). It is just that women understand themselves as having a greater number of offenses that they need to make right; 81% of a large number will always be greater than 81% of a much smaller one. This is part of the reason women are vastly overrepresented in the "apologize for everything" category.

Another reason for women's overrepresentation is that women assume responsibility for too many matters that are not properly their own. Women are expected to be more emotionally and socially attuned to others—a high degree of caring and social labor falls to women. Women and men both internalize this expectation, and that leads to the apology gap as well. This expectation is always present in the paid and unpaid work women do.

Consider a mother in a two-parent household; let's imagine it is still Pat. Various sociological studies have shown that women, wives, or mothers tend to function as the equivalent of the air traffic controllers in the family. They know the kids' schedules, friends, teachers, appointments, etc.

When her teenage daughter forgets the musical instrument she needs for school, as the mother, Pat may apologize. What exactly is she apologizing for and to whom? She may feel herself responsible for the initial disruption (not having done a "going out the door" inventory) and for not being able to fix it (she is not able to scuttle her own schedule to bring the instrument later).

Furthermore, Pat may feel responsible for her daughter's unhappiness at not being able to participate in rehearsal, and that may affect the quality of the band's performance later in the week. As she keeps extending her alleged responsibility, Pat increases the number of apologies she believes herself to owe. Now she owes apologies to the members of the band, and their parents …

Saying "I am sorry" becomes something of a habitual response. William James describes habits as folds in a piece of paper.[13] For some people, the habit of apologizing becomes second nature. Given that women are often charged with the task of being the peacemakers and attending to the needs of others, it may start to be easier to apologize for matters rather than saying, "This isn't fair or right or healthy." It may be easier to apologize than to ascribe responsibility in the proper direction.

The habitual or knee-jerk apologist runs a great risk of losing herself through all her apologies. She sees so many of the things she does as offenses or wrongs and takes responsibility for things that are not properly hers.

Left unchecked, the person who over-apologizes to such a high degree will never see herself as deserving or worthy of an apology. Relationships in which one person always apologizes and the other rarely or never does are not healthy.

Apologies—genuine and appropriate apologies—are vital for maintaining good healthy relationships. They are important instruments for engaging in moral repair.

Moral repair, as Elizabeth Spelman describes it, aims to restore, rehabilitate, renovate, reconcile, redeem, heal, fix, mend, and make better.[14] To apologize genuinely to another is to recognize their dig-

nity and humanity. Genuinely apologizing is also a way for a person to restore their own humanity and dignity when they recognize a wrong they have done.

The challenge is teaching and learning how to apologize. It takes experience and wisdom to recognize when one owes a genuine apology. It takes even more experience and wisdom for some to recognize they deserve an apology.

Apologizing well is a skill that can only be acquired by practice. Even without assuming responsibility for things that are not properly ours, each of us has ample opportunity to practice.

Will Pat ever be able to forgive herself? I grant that some people forgive themselves too easily and quickly. When they feel the tooth of remorse or the pang of regret, they let themselves off the hook.

Denying their responsibility, minimizing their role, shifting blame, and engaging in revisionist history are some of the characteristic moves of the speedy self-forgiver. This is not genuine self-forgiveness because there's little self-reflection about how their actions have harmed others or themselves. Nor is there much reflection about how these experiences and their responses to them might make them better people in the future. Nor is there any effort to repair damage.

These people seem more concerned with removing negative emotions such as remorse and regret by wiping the slate clean. They treat themselves and their actions like an Etch-a-Sketch toy. Give it a good shake and all the troubling experiences and the negative emotions they raise just disappear.

Genuine self-forgiveness can help restore our sense that we have moral worth and dignity even if we have made significant mistakes and caused great harm to others or to ourselves. It all comes down to what we are willing to do in the present and future.

We must acknowledge what we've done, repair as best we can and as circumstances allow, and commit to doing better in the future.

The bitter irony is that the people who perhaps most need and deserve to forgive themselves cannot. The necessary reflection and acknowledgment can be very difficult because some people are bur-

dened by forms of self-deception. Self-deception makes it difficult to identify when self-forgiveness is appropriate.

Let's imagine Pat finally leaves her partner after many years. She feels as if she has really let herself down having stayed for so long. She's wasted too many years with someone who not only didn't make her a better person but tore her down.

Why is self-forgiveness appropriate, and what might it look like for her? Self-forgiveness is appropriate because it is a way to restore dignity, which is often damaged in toxic relationships. Self-forgiveness is a step in rebuilding—if not building for the first time—the sense that a person matters.

What might the acknowledgment, repair, and commitment that are crucial for self-forgiveness look like for Pat? She needs to acknowledge the history of the relationship and what patterns developed anew or continued from past relationships. She needs to acknowledge her feelings and reasons for staying along with her reasons for leaving. She needs to acknowledge what was beyond her control and what were her partner's responsibilities. This is a very hard thing to do.

The repair work takes several forms. One important step is to reframe. Pat may have a tape running through her head that she did all of this to herself by choosing to stay for so long. She sees her harms as self-inflicted.

If she were to reframe particular decisions, that may help to reframe the broader picture. For example, she may come to see that she had very few options—and each of them bad—to choose between. While a rock and a hard place are both options, neither is a good one.

Pat may reframe her actions in light of those choices and realize she did the best she could in difficult situations. In fact, she may see she was rather clever in coming up with third options in many situations. Something like this may help Pat to see herself as having a little more worth than she thought she had. This can be a huge achievement in healing and redeeming her sense of worth.

The commitment to a better present and future self builds on the acknowledgment and repair work. The commitment to being a better person in the future must involve the commitment to treat ourselves better by valuing and respecting ourselves.

It is a commitment to break old patterns of self-deprecation and denigration that aid and abet self-deception. When we do this, we are less likely to tolerate others trying to define our value and worth for us.

Self-forgiveness does not happen quickly and easily. It can be scary for sure, but it can also be uplifting and liberating. When you can forgive yourself, you come to belong to yourself. This is an idea which I will return to in Belonging to Yourself—the final essay in this anthology.

PART 3

Ambivalence, Impatience, and Anxiety

8

Ambivalence and Becoming Indifferent to Yourself

Each of us is full of inconsistencies and inconstancies. Looking back at our own lives, we would not see uniformity but diversity and multiplicity. The philosopher Montaigne (1533–1592) notes, "We are entirely made up of bits and pieces, woven together so diversely and shapelessly that each of them pulls its own way at every moment. And there is as much difference between us and ourselves as there is between us and other people."[15]

Many of these inconsistencies and inconstancies are harmless and benign. So what if a classical musician has a fondness for disco? Who cares that a person who never found a subject interesting has become a keen student of it later in life? There may not be much at stake with some of these inconsistencies, so we allow them to stand.

But in those cases where the inconsistencies involve core or vital parts of self-identity, the stakes can become staggeringly high. These cases may become intolerable and a source of great suffering.

Imagine you are a person who dedicates your life to your career. It isn't just that you practice law, teach, treat people's health, bake, or care for others' spiritual needs. You are a lawyer, teacher, physician, baker, or minister. Only those commitments and choices that advance your life's goals and solidify your identity are worth pursuing. All other options and choices are either relegated to the second tier or rejected outright. Marriage? No. Kids? No.

But then, either gradually or suddenly, you find yourself not just wanting a partner or kids, but you start taking action to make those

things possible. You still want all the same things as before even as you recognize that in practice if not principle, they are now incompatible and inconsistent with who you were before. Even more strongly, they may be contradictory.

You may begin to feel equal pulls toward career and marriage or children. You are truly ambivalent. The word *ambivalent* comes from the Latin *ambi*, meaning both, and *valentia*, meaning strength or vigor. While it can seem to imply that being ambivalent means you don't care, that is not the case. There is nothing wishy-washy about ambivalence. Nor is there anything passive about it.

You don't suffer these simultaneous opposing feelings passively as if two people were pulling you in opposite directions. Oh no. You pull yourself. And you push yourself. You are the pushmi-pullyu of Dr. Dolittle. That's part of the special torment of ambivalence. You do it to yourself and you know it. The ambivalence is conscious.

Much of the treatment in philosophy and psychology conceives ambivalence as a matter of conflicting desires or attitudes. A person feels positively about something and negatively about it at the same time. A person wants one thing while not wanting it at all.

Philosophers often talk about this as first- and second-order desires or beliefs clashing. I may look at the chocolate layer cake and really want a gigantic piece. That's a first order desire. My second-order desire might be, *I don't want to want that cake.*

But treating ambivalence as purely a mental or affective state obscures the fact that ambivalence is a full-bodied complication in living. Put more directly, ambivalence is trying to act—to live—in contradictory ways simultaneously. In its most extreme form, ambivalence is launching all-out warfare against crucial parts of your *self*.

When parts of your *self* with which you closely identify are in open warfare with one another, the results can be utterly exhausting and devastating. Ambivalence doubles the chances that you feel like an abject failure. That's another dimension of ambivalence's torment.

Here's another example to highlight the embodied nature of ambivalence. You don't want to gamble anymore. What started as

fun social gambling has become something else. You regularly find yourself playing longer than you intended and start to resent the fact that others can bet normally and then just walk away. They never have any bad consequences while yours are starting to pile up like the used plastic bags from the grocery store.

You may have a first order desire, *I want to gamble,* while the second-order desire is clamoring loudly, *I want not to want to gamble.* You just want to be able to place a bet normally.

But here's the thing: Your wanting to gamble may not be a purely psychological state. Your body may be craving gambling's effect. Your heart may start beating faster when you pass the casino or log in to some of your betting apps.

So, you may start sweating because you do not trust yourself at that very moment; you have to force yourself not to turn into the parking lot, or you have to put your phone away. You make yourself drive home a different way so that you do not pass that casino and save yourself from having to make the excruciating decision again. Yet you do still want to gamble. This is torture.

One way that people might try to resolve ambiguity is to engage in "if-only" and "what-if" thinking. Many people are vulnerable to the allure of "if only…"

Some of us utter that expression and inhabit that attitude when things do not go the way we anticipated or expected. We tell ourselves that things would have been better if only… We can create a really long list of things that had they been different, we would have achieved our desired result.

The phrase "if only…" is the spandex of rationalization. It can stretch as far as we need it to in order to accommodate the list of considerations we want to include. We use the phrase to rationalize why something has gone differently from what we wanted or expected.

The danger of "if-only" thinking is that it may breed too much regret or function to deflect or displace responsibility. At times, the

"if only" may attach to a person's actions from their past. It can also attach to the actions of another. And finally, it may attach to factors and considerations that are largely beyond their control.

An "if only" may be accompanied with regret or resignation, or it may be conjoined with defiance and accusation. Some cases will help to demonstrate the dynamics of "if only."

Consider a person whose career aspiration was to become a certified public accountant (CPA). She took all the necessary courses in college and worked in the office of a CPA. She studied for the series of exams she had to pass to become certified.

But she also had a husband and child. As a family, their income wasn't enough for daycare, so she and her husband decided it would make more financial sense for her to stay home—at least for now. The "at least for now" lasted 15 years.

She may tell herself, *I would be a CPA if only I hadn't made that decision to stay home.* In this case, "if only" attaches to one decision that gets lived for 15 years. It is a pivotal one that becomes the repository for her regret.

While she may have loved her time as a full-time mother, she also mourns the loss of a dream. And the further removed a dream is from reality, the greater regret may become.

This case also provides an instance of an "if only" attaching to considerations that are far beyond the control of a person. She may believe, *If only daycare expenses hadn't been so great that they outstripped my income.* Or, *If only my husband earned more, I would have stayed at my job and passed my exams because that would make the best financial sense.*

The reality is that daycare expenses are often well beyond the reach of many people, and few employers offer on-site and affordable daycare. Thus, if only the economic world were not organized in a way that forced people out of the paid work force.

"If only" can also be hurled at others in the hopes of deflecting responsibility. An active alcoholic might say to his partner, "If only you weren't so emotionally needy that you put everything on me. Drinking is the only way to get away from you and your neediness. If only you'd get more of a life, I wouldn't drink."

The accusatory form of "if only" is common in relationships of abuse. An abuser claims and may have convinced himself that he would not have hit his partner *if only she had kept her mouth shut and kept the kids quiet too. She just kept pushing and I finally snapped.*

Making the "if-only" accusation is one of the quickest ways to offload responsibility for our own decisions and actions on to another. A person might tell himself that he really isn't the author of those actions because another person *made* him drink or hit someone, for example.

Or the rationalization may be that *I wasn't really myself because I was overwhelmed by resentment or anger. The resentment and anger made me drink or hit. But that's not really who I am.* This person will be unwilling to take responsibility for his actions.

There can be a positive role of "if only" in some cases. An "if only" may alert us to something we have lost or compromised, which in turn may prompt us to experience some regret.

Regret in life is inevitable and, in some cases, healthy. If we've gone down one path and regret it, that may cause us to choose differently in the future. Regret may prompt us to do certain things differently when given the opportunity.

Regret is always backward looking but can have a profound effect on the present and future if we learn from it. The woman who wanted to be a CPA may decide that she will go after that dream *now*.

The challenge is to keep "if-only" thinking in proper perspective and scope. An "if-only" world is what philosophers would call a "counter-factual world." That is to say, it is a world in which things

are different from how they are in fact. It is an imaginary or possible world that differs from the actual world.

A person who lives too much in the world of "if only" faces a significant risk. Taken to great lengths, an attitude of "if only" keeps a person from living their actual life and instead moor their boat to a future possible life that may never be.

There is another use of an if statement that can cause a great deal of suffering. We all play the "what-if" game. "What ifs" often are playful exercises of our imagination. *What if I won the lottery? What if I meet the person of my dreams? What if I decide to chuck this lousy job with a lousy boss and finally pursue my passion?*

Imagining good things in the future can be downright pleasurable and important in making decisions. When we can imagine things differently in the future, we might become more willing to act differently in the present.

The "what-if" game can also run toward the slightly scary and downright frightening. Our imagination fires at full force but the playfulness flees the scene when we start thinking about bad future consequences. *What if the step breaks on this ladder while I am painting? What if I do lose my job? What if my partner or child dies?*

For many people, this "What if…" train stops only at a station called Worst-Case Scenario.

People on a high-speed train become governed by *fear-thought*, an expression introduced by 19-century wellness author Horace Fletcher.[16] Fear-thought is a near enemy to forethought.

Forethought is when people look to the future, identify relevant concerns and considerations, weigh and prioritize them, and then take action in light of the analysis. Forethought is prudent and absolutely necessary for survival and flourishing.

Fear-thought may at first look like forethought, but it quickly goes awry. Fear-thought takes reasonable fears and other considerations but amplifies them exponentially. The person who is governed

by fear-thought becomes swamped by fears that are overblown, imaginary, or remote.

The fear of bad circumstances and consequences becomes more important than what's really happening or likely to happen. Fear-thought in one area of life can quickly spread to all others. In its most extreme form, people may be equally terrified of acting and not acting.

Some "what ifs" are scary just because the situations are so far beyond our control. For example, in most situations, I have little control over a step breaking on a ladder. Yes, the most conscientious people would examine a ladder before climbing it. (These are the same people who regularly check the air pressure in their tires). But still, I may not be able to see a hairline fracture that would cause a step not to bear my weight.

I also have no control over losing my job in an economic crisis. And no matter how much I might do to keep the people I love safe, there are infinite potential dangers in the world: I cannot control that an intoxicated stranger gets behind the wheel of a car miles away and causes a crash, nor that cancer cells are rapidly multiplying.

There are "what ifs" out of our control that bring possible good things, and they're fun to imagine. But the "what ifs" out of our control that bring negative consequences tend to be more frightening.

It shouldn't be surprising that "what-if" and "if-only" thinking can lend themselves to procrastination. They will never be able to resolve ambivalence. In fact, they may make it worse by increasing the force of each side.

The challenge we face is how to fruitfully imagine realistic possibilities and pair them with a willingness to act.

At times, ambivalence is overcome by transformation whereby a person moves fully to one side. They resolve the tension by definitively choosing one part of their identity over another.

Many people would argue that the person who commits to sobriety actively chooses a non-drinking self over a drinking self. Another

possible way to address ambivalence is to synthesize the two sides into a third option that allows both pulls to be directed at a compromise.

Many women who struggle with the pulls of career and family often try to find a compromise. The challenge is that much of the compromise rests on factors that may be beyond their control such as a flexible work schedule, good childcare, and a cooperative spouse who contributes equally to all the domestic labor.

Embracing some ambivalence may be liberating—as counterintuitive as that claim may seem at first glance. Accept the tension and the limitations that may come from it and find some freedom.

People in long-term recovery, especially when they are attentive to and intentional in their own recovery, might be people who embrace ambivalence. Their present selves may want nothing more than to preserve their recovery, but there still remains a sense of identification with the people they were when they were using. That sense of identification with long-ago actual or imagined selves still exerts a pull.

There's freedom in not expecting yourself to be perfectly seamless. It's liberating to be able to acknowledge and accept your past self. Trying to disown it will only make it a stronger adversary for your present self—plus, it will raise the stakes.

Perhaps from sheer exhaustion of living with the tension of ambivalence, some people will no longer care about either side. They may no longer care what happens or what they do. People who reach this point run the risk of becoming indifferent to their well-being and life in general. Some will also become fatalistic, believing that nothing they do matters one single bit.

Have you ever met a person who, in the face of a bad event, has a weary resignation and usually says something along the lines of, "This was bound to happen"? Sometimes, they might claim, "There's nothing I could do about it." The person may make an even broader claim,

"There's nothing *anyone* could have done." This person is a fatalist, someone who is resigned in the face of events taken to be inevitable.

Acceptance and resignation are often mistaken for each other. Acceptance involves activity and agency. For example, I accept the fact that I may not get the job for which I am applying. My acceptance, however, is active. I make sure I prepare fully by studying the department's curriculum, creating an interesting teaching demonstration, and giving an engaging job talk.

Acceptance requires that I act in ways responsive to a changing reality but that I do so with the recognition that my actions will not guarantee the outcome. I cannot control external factors (better candidates and budget constraints, for example), but I can control my attitude. This, too, involves a choice.

By acting in deliberate and responsive ways to my reality, I may change some of my reality. I exercise my agency when I make choices, act on them, and manage my attitude.

Resignation is troubling because it results from a lack of clarity about what is in our control and what is not. When we lose sight of what we can control (our effort, attitude, willingness, responses to situations, etc.), we tend to assume we have no choices and little to no control over what happens.

Continuing the example above, if I applied for the job when I had a burst of optimism but then become resigned to my not getting it, I might not prepare for the interview to the best of my ability. Even if I did get an interview, my resignation would seep through and probably be apparent to members of the department. I may even tell myself that no matter what I do, I won't get the job.

In doing so, I shrink my realm of choice and become more passive. Put another way, choice seems illusory to me because I believe no matter what I do, the outcome is inevitable. This is fatalism.

We humans tend to take greater care for and place more value in matters where our actions make a contribution. In the absence of contribution, why bother and why care? This is where indifference enters the frame.

A person is indifferent to their own self when they have a complete lack of interest and concern about themselves. Indifference to self is a consequence of fatalistic resignation. Indifference to self is a process that may move slowly at first but then rapidly accelerate. It does not have an immediate onset unless something truly catastrophic happens that causes an existential concussion.

An existential concussion occurs when something happens in our lives that deeply unsettles or rocks our world view or our most firmly held beliefs so that we can no longer make sense of the world or our place in it. We lose the ability to make sense and meaning, which is profoundly alienating.

How might a person start to recognize this in their own self or in that of others? It is often easier to recognize a trait or world view in another than it is to see it in our own self. (There may even be a paradox here: A person needs to care at least a bit about *not caring* for their own self.)

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* William James recognizes some people have sunk so low, they decline to participate in much of regular social life, further isolating them. Others may start to ignore and marginalize them so that they are not part of the regular flow of life so much so that they need help or even rescue. James says the first thing that must happen is "making them feel some decent human being cares enough for them to take an interest in the question whether they are to rise or sink."[17]

A person who is indifferent to their self no longer cares whether they rise or sink. Such a person cannot generate the care for themself and instead need to draw some energy and concern from someone else.

I describe this as the moral equivalent of a jump start. Each of us may provide that jump start for someone else and not even know it. In other cases, it will be more obvious.

If reaching indifference to our *selves* is a process, so too is reaching states of non-total misery, some happiness, and tranquility. Starting to have a tiny shard of concern for our own selves—even if we are borrowing it from someone else—will be a significant achievement.

In feeling that concern, we exercise our agency, which may change our attitude toward self.

9

Impatience and Resentment

You have encountered them: the person behind you who honks just as the light turns green. The customer who gets annoyed by the person counting the exact amount of money for a purchase. The person who pushes their way to the front even though there are ten other people in line.

We tend to despise these people, mentally and sometimes verbally hurling insults and complaints to them. We may say to ourselves, *I'll never be like that,* but sometimes we find ourselves doing something similar. Some of us may try to justify our actions while others will admit we are behaving poorly.

There are important differences between a person who is impatient occasionally or episodically and those who are consistently impatient about all matters both large and small.

All of us can be impatient at times. We may feel unwell, be in a rush to help a friend, or are just plain hungry and tired and want to get home. If our state of mind and circumstances prompt us to act in an impolite manner or less than our best selves to others, most of us recognize our behavior merits an apology or correction.

Microbursts or smaller and infrequent instances of impatience can teach us about ourselves. Offering an apology can make a relationship—even with a stranger—better.

The impatient person, on the other hand, runs at a high level of impatience all the time. They are constitutionally impatient; impatience is woven right into the fabric of their being. They tend to be impatient with anyone or anything that interrupts their plans or dashes their expectations.

The issue is they personalize anything and everything and make the judgment they deserve better. They want to bend reality to meet their expectations, needs, and wants. An example helps to illustrate.

Imagine John, who is a manager at a very small branch of a bank. He's got a 45-minute commute in heavy traffic. He's the guy who speeds up and waits until the last minute to merge from a lane that is ending. Those who cut him off or have the same aggressive merging technique infuriate him; he sees their actions as putting him behind. After all, they've taken his spot in traffic.

John has many responsibilities at the bank, and in his estimation, he meets them well. He's applied for a position at a larger branch. He tells himself, *It's my turn and my promotion,* which explains his anger when a colleague gets the promotion.

Feeling wronged and impatient for his deserved rewards, John becomes even more blunt with colleagues and customers. Impatience and resentment fill his work life and spread into other areas of his life.

People struggling with addiction can be very impatient people as well. We often are a potent mix of anger, resentment, fear, and a hearty dose of grievance. The seven devils of discomfort, regret, disappointment, self-loathing, dread, disconnection, and fatalism are our constant companions, riding shotgun in a minivan with us in heavy traffic. (Let's hope we don't meet John at a merge.)

Impatient people tend to be angry people in large part because they assume they're always being wronged or slighted. Having anger and grievance as a habitual center of personal energy is exhausting, especially when it is combined with confirmation bias.

Such grievance-based persons have an investment in seeing how the actions of others bring bad effects onto them. It makes it nearly impossible to see that they themself may be the authors of their suffering.

This exhaustion is often unrecognizable to impatient people. That exhaustion is clearly harmful, but it is only one of several harmful

traits that come from the impatience that is woven into the fabric of some people.

Those who are the recipients or objects of another's impatience and anger can be harmed. The degree of harm depends in large part on the nature of the relationship between people, the frequency, and the level of impatience.

In the context of a work relationship, friendship, or committed partnership, the impatient person can inflict significant harm. The impatient person, however, may not be able to see that.

Furthermore, they may become more impatient when someone points out their behavior and its harmful consequences. Their unwillingness or inability to perceive the harm they cause others is equally matched by their inability to recognize how they are harming themselves.

Montaigne astutely noted, "We ruin ourselves by impatience. Illnesses have their life and limits, their maladies and their good health."[18] The word *ruin* implies damage that goes far beyond harm.

I tend to agree with Montaigne. Troubles do have a life span and resolve, dissolve, or otherwise go away when they run their course. When we try to expedite that course with short cuts, half measures, or dubious means, we are acting with impatience.

When we try to interrupt, deflect, or shape conditions and circumstances that are well beyond our control, we are acting with impatience. When we rail against something happening to us that can happen to anyone else, we are, in effect, claiming, "We don't deserve this. Everyone else might have to endure this. But we don't."

Here, our impatience has a thick undercoat of arrogance and superiority.

The ruination of our lives follows not only from bucking against nature, fate, and everyone else but also from setting ourselves above them. We separate ourselves (or others separate from us because we become so unpleasant and inflict harm) from much of what it means to be human. We may tell ourselves that we don't owe anyone answers to their questions, nor do we owe them justifications for our actions.

Impatient people often become callous toward others, telling them they can simply leave if they don't like it. When we believe that we are superior to others, it justifies our impatience. But this sets us up for constant disappointments and thwarted expectations. Disappointment, grievance, and resentment drown everyday pleasures and joys. This, Montaigne would say, is a ruinous way to live.

Impatient people often have great difficulty setting appropriate and legitimate expectations. In the context of a committed relationship, honesty is a legitimate expectation. The same holds true for a sponsor or sponsee relationship in recovery as well as an accountant and client.

My students have a legitimate expectation that I will be prepared for class. Legitimate expectations are grounded in an important sense. They arise out of particular contexts in which the parties have a shared understanding of the nature of the relationship and shared goals. Legitimate expectations are tethered to reality in an important way—they neither float freely nor fly in the face of reality.

Even in cases where expectations are legitimate, they may not always be met. I may not be prepared for a class because I spent the previous day in the emergency room with my mother. And in a committed relationship, one person may misdirect their partner about a surprise party.

Disappointments may follow from legitimate expectations not being met, but they can be mitigated or alleviated. I can explain to my students what happened and offer to meet outside class or delay a paper's due date. And the surprise-planning partner may need to hear that their spouse found whispered conversations or conversations suddenly stopping to be scary and suspicious.

Disappointments and dashed expectations may prompt some resentment, but it should have a relatively short life. Holding on to it or cultivating it signals that something is far more amiss in the relationship. Disappointments can provide opportunities—wanted

or unwanted—to revisit the expectations and the relationships which they have in their lives.

Less legitimate or inappropriate expectations tend to be untethered from reality in some important ways. Expectations are tricky because they involve both emotional content and cognitive content. Often, the emotional content sprints far ahead of the cognitive.

What we wish and hope for becomes what we expect. We await and look for what we wish, hope, or imagine. This wishfulness smothers the rational or cognitive dimension, resulting in untethered expectations. These untethered and inappropriate ones generate huge resentments.

Take, for example, an extended family that has a rotation for hosting big family events. Cathy is slated to host the next one. When her sister hosted, it was a smashing success. Everything was great—the food absolutely delicious, the house festively decorated, great play with the cousins, and siblings kind to each other.

Cathy expects her gathering to be just as spectacular. The food will be great (even though she can't really cook). The house will look beautiful (even though her idea of decorating is festive dust bunnies). The cousins will play well (even though they're a year older), and the siblings will be kind to each other (even though they had a blowup over caring for an elderly parent).

Cathy knows her hosting shortcomings and that there are developmental differences between the cousins. As for her fighting siblings, she knows they are not the sort to give up a grievance and will regress to their least-attractive teenage selves. She knows all of this, and yet her wishes power rich and vivid dreams about the event. She's awaiting every lovely thing she has imagined.

There are multiple sets of expectations running in this all-too-familiar scenario. It isn't a festive event. Cathy has expectations of other people to act in ways that she thinks will be appropriate. She is trying to manufacture a situation for people to act in ways that she knows (on some level) they will not. Cathy will direct her resentment at other people but there's more than enough left to direct at herself.

She might stop to consider the expectations she has put on herself. In some sense, Cathy does the same thing to herself that she has done to others. She knows she hates to cook, yet she expects herself to create a culinary masterpiece that will be featured in a Netflix special. Will Cathy resent these expectations or resent the fact that she could not meet them? Most likely, she will resent both.

People who are in recovery can also be impatient and form expectations that will not be met. It turns out that some of us in recovery want to feel better *now*. We may have believed that our addiction was "the problem." Once the problem was addressed, everything should be fine.

What we tend not to recognize is that many of us began to drink, use other drugs, gamble, or play video games because we were looking for something. Some of us wanted an escape, a connection, security, or simply to feel *something*.

These reasons may still be fully operative, and some might even have been supercharged during our addictions. Here, too, we may be impatient. No matter where we go, there we are, even in recovery.

Our impatience extends to other people. We want people to forgive us on our timetable. We may tell ourselves that we have been putting in a lot of hard work that should be obvious to everyone. That should make people trust us. We may tell ourselves that we have let go of our anger and resentment that had powered our addiction, so others should let go of theirs. We may remain susceptible to "if-only" and "what-if" thinking, which may sap our willingness to engage in the hard work of recovery. It surely will make it harder for us to see that we are still riding the impatience, expectation, and resentment carousel.

How can we get off that amusement park ride? We can find guidance from the ancient Greek philosopher, Epictetus (ca. 55–ca. 135). He advises, "Seek not that the things which happen should happen as

you wish; but wish the things which happen to be as they are, and you will have a tranquil flow of life."[19] This involves clearly understanding what is in our control and what is not.

Our wants and desires are within our control. We can choose how we respond to them; we can act or not act on them. We are not powerless when it comes to corralling our desires. Adopting this manner of living short-circuits the impatience–expectations–resentment loop and positions a person to appreciate what actually happens.

In the case of the impatient person new to recovery, they might focus on where they had been when they were at their worst. They may consider that their addiction took time to develop, so it is reasonable to think recovery will take some time as well. When they start to fire up their expectation generator, they might remind themselves what is in their control. Their attitude and efforts are, but so much else is not.

While even their best efforts may not bring the results they want, they might consider that there is victory in effort. In making an effort, they demonstrate that they still have enough self-care and interest in their own well-being, which may have been in short supply when they were close to indifference toward themselves or had resigned themselves to living with an active addiction.

In those efforts and in moments when they do pay off, they may start to see the possibility that they can be a better person. Events do not have to define them; they can begin to define themselves. When they do that, they take more control of their happiness.

10

The Anxiety and Loneliness of Not Taking Up Space in Your Own Life

There's a deep abiding loneliness that comes with addiction, other mental health conditions, and experiences of trauma. More accurately, there are different forms of loneliness that may be both cause and consequence of these forms of suffering.

One form is the loneliness of losing relationships with others that have been the warp and weft of our identities. Many people start to withdraw from relationships lest their struggles become known to others. They may fear losing the respect of important others or revealing themselves to be less than what they are taken to be.

Those others may be the ones to end relationships, finding it too difficult or painful to remain connected. Some relationships fray over time, while others seem to rupture suddenly and result in what can feel like a catastrophic loss. If those relationships have been an axis around which a person's life turned, their loss and subsequent loneliness can be profoundly alienating.

Addiction, trauma, and mental health challenges can also wreak havoc with a person's relationship to their own self. People can suffer great loneliness from losing themselves or losing the plans of their lives.

The loneliness of losing relationships to others is connected to losing our very selves. Our partners, parents, children, and friends are parts of our material, social, and spiritual selves, William James claims.[20] These dimensions crisscross and overlap, weaving the fabric that we typically think of as a self or a person.

Being a self or a person is a dynamic process; we are always under construction, in a manner of speaking. Our material self most obviously includes the body but also our family, possessions, and even clothes.

A person has as many social selves as people recognize, James asserts. Each of us identifies more closely with some of these social selves than with others. We also tend to rank them; being a good parent is more important than being a good employee for many people. The spiritual self is the house or center of intellectual, moral, religious, and political interest. It directs our attention and willingness to act.

When we lose any one of these material, social, and spiritual selves, we miss the people we used to be in those relationships or with those interests. When we break off relationships or when important others do that to us, we also lose parts of our *selves*. And when we lose important material goods such as a house for which we worked and saved long and hard or pawn an heirloom because we need money, we lose parts of our *selves*.

We become lonely for our own selves when our spiritual selves shrink and shrivel with increased alcohol or drug use, for example. Interests that enlivened us matter less and important commitments become harder to care about or meet.

The loneliness for what we once had or how we once understood our very selves to be or hoped it to be is agonizing, especially when we regard our *selves* as being responsible for this loss. This is the loneliness of losing one's self and knowing it.

People may be able to identify certain points when they lost important parts of their material, social, and spiritual selves. They may be able to recall the exact moment when they made certain decisions that derailed the plans of their lives. The loneliness of losing their self and knowing that it happened is often a source of significant regret.

There is another way in which people experience a loneliness from losing themselves. In this case, they do not recognize the loss. Consider a person who seems to have it all. They have a successful career, a loving partner, good family relations, and a community of friends.

They even have a fabulous dog. They have hit many of the benchmarks they set for themselves. "This," they say, "is happiness."

Yet one morning, they awaken with the thought, "I am a mouse running along the trim board of my own life." They find this horrifying because it means that they are living on the margins of their own life. How can that even be possible because they are, to the best of their knowledge, happy.

To realize that you are not at the center of your life—yet you are the one living it—is most certainly a torment. Your own life feels completely foreign to you. Even more to the point, you may not even recognize yourself. This is a special torment.

Happiness, at least happiness of a certain sort, is deceptive. Kierkegaard wrote, "Deep, deep within the most secret hiding place of happiness there dwells anxiety… for despair the most cherished and desirable place to live is in the heart of happiness."[21]

How can happiness be the best place for despair to hide? We feel such utter despair, Kierkegaard offers, because we have lost our *selves*. As Kierkegaard so insightfully observes, "The greatest hazard of all, losing the self, can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all. No other loss can occur so quietly; any loss—an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc.—is sure to be noticed."[22]

We might only notice it when our regular rational defenses are down, and an insight comes unbidden like a mouse around the trim board.

People have hopes and even expectations for what a good life for them will be. It may involve having a family, a successful career, deep friendships, and warm relations with family. We recognize that we cannot meet the really big goals quickly or in a few steps, so we set intermediate goals along the way. We take care of business in a way; we have set a course, and we are going to reach our destinations.

Each of these goals involves not just making commitments but meeting them and even turning them into obligations. Through

meeting these commitments and obligations, we take on roles and identities. In the process, we may lose our own selves.

Part of the problem, Kierkegaard might say, is that by becoming so focused on the intermediate goals, a person begins to function on autopilot. Autopilot lends itself to a check list or a "get 'er done" mentality of being in the world; check all the items and one should be happy. Admittedly, there are all sorts of instances when autopilot is very useful. However, some people function on autopilot in those areas of life that are supposed to have the most meaning.

Relying on autopilot in too many aspects of life makes a person a stranger in their own life. They are fulfilling important roles (good parent, successful employee, best friend, etc.) perhaps quite well, but something is amiss. Something has been lost.

This is a cause of despair because we as people become alienated or divorced from our own goals and aspirations. We no longer pay attention to the reasons for the goals we set for ourselves. We lose sight of why certain roles or parts of our identities are so valuable. This may be especially true when we are so good at fulfilling our roles.

One of the tricky dynamics is that we convince ourselves about what our happiness must involve as well as what it cannot involve. We decide in advance that certain things—an opposite sex partner, family, career, whatever—will make us happy. It may not even be a possibility that someone could love a person of the same sex or find fulfillment in doing work that too many others in society might find beneath them or not challenging.

We lock ourselves into certain conceptions of happiness. It becomes very difficult to revisit and revise those conceptions perhaps because of other commitments we made along the way. Before we know it, decades may have passed. We do all the "right" things, and we are happy, yet we feel as if we are skittering on the margins of our own lives.

Each of us must come to understand what we're up against in our own selves. Humans are vulnerable to certain forms of self-deception, often believing that what *should* make us happy will do so. A great

career, a loving supportive family, financial security are just some of those things.

We might be capable of convincing ourselves that we are happy or fulfilled. But what if this happiness doesn't fit or fulfill us? If this happiness has come as a consequence of our gradually, unintentionally, and consistently trading off or denying important parts of our material, social, and spiritual selves, it is no surprise that we are lonely for our *selves*, not realizing we're missing. We become lost or wake up some morning not knowing who we are anymore.

Addiction is one form this loss of self may take; we may be no longer consciously aware of what we are losing. This is a cause of deep loneliness. The losses of these selves with their accompanying loneliness may not only be disorienting but debilitating.

Loneliness is not just an emotion or a feeling. It is a living attitude affecting every dimension of a person's life. These forms of deep abiding loneliness may cause an existential concussion, in which we become far less able to make sense of our *selves* and our place in the world.

With an existential concussion, a person loses their primary framework for making sense and meaning of their actions and the world around them. A person who loses their religious faith may have an existential concussion. An atheist may have an existential concussion if they start to countenance the idea that there may be higher power.

These concussions can be thoroughly disorienting. In their most serious form, a person becomes unable to see any meaning or value in the world. There's nothing lonelier than this.

Loneliness from others and our own selves as we skitter around the trim board of our lives is likely to produce anxiety. Anxiety was a philosophical concept before it was taken up by psychology and psychiatry and turned into a pathology.

Kierkegaard argued that anxiety is part of human nature. Anxiety arises where possibility and actuality come into contact and when the

present touches the future. Anxiety is a product of having the freedom to make choices and act, and by doing so make a commitment to one's identity, ways of being in the world, and standing in relation to other people.

We can learn something valuable from Kierkegaard, namely that anxiety can cause inaction, which is, in its most basic sense, a loss of freedom. What is possible may never actualize and we may lose the present by tending to an imagined future. We become immobilized and unable to meet needs and realize goals and aspirations.

We may suffer from Kierkegaardian anxiety if:

We become less able to prioritize matters. Everything that needs to get done becomes the same size to us. Cleaning out the linen closet and doing our taxes become equally weighty even though there are far greater penalties for not filing our taxes. We begin to lack perspective about what we must do as opposed to what we might like to do. As a result, too many matters begin to slide, which only makes it even more difficult to prioritize.

We are governed by "if-onlys" and "what-ifs." This means we spend too much time imagining and then giving weight to what isn't really the case. We might tell ourselves, *I would join the gym if only the boss didn't require so many hours from me. And what if he thinks I am not committed enough to my job?* This may send us down a path of not only not joining the gym but working even harder to convince our boss of a belief he doesn't even hold.

We consistently second-guess ourselves. Second-guessing ourselves is, at rock bottom, not trusting ourselves. We might be afraid to make any decisions because we don't trust our decision-making ability. If we do reach a decision, we may feel as if it will be the wrong one because we made it.

This may prompt us to disregard the knowledge we possess or to go against our intuition and gut instinct. Lacking trust in ourselves leads to a kind of confirmation bias: Everything that doesn't go well or turns out badly will count as proof that our decision-making ability is flawed. To avoid making a bad decision, we make no decision.

We seek to control everything in the hopes of managing our worry and dread. This may properly belong under the "if-only" heading, but it can stand on its own too. There's a saying, "It's much easier to put on slippers than carpet the world." Wearing slippers and carpeting the world are two different ways to make walking easier. Putting on the slippers is an action that allows the further action of walking. Trying to do the impossible—controlling everything or carpeting the world—hinders doing the possible.

While it might be tempting to run from anxiety or try to eliminate it entirely from our life, that would mean rejecting part of our human nature. Anxiety can provide an (unwanted) opportunity to assess not just particular choices we are making but, more holistically, the way we are living our lives.

Most fundamentally, anxiety turns our attention to what Kierkegaard calls our greatest task in life, which is to become who we are. We become someone when we *act*. That is to say, we form our identities by having and acting on our principles, commitments, hopes, and dreams.

Inaction is unfreedom; it keeps us from standing in right or good relation to ourselves, our friends and family, and most importantly for Kierkegaard, to God. As Kierkegaard recognizes, there is great despair in "not willing to be oneself." [23] In other words, great self-inflicted suffering follows from not being who we are.

Whether we are trying to be someone different by denying parts of our *selves* or trying on different personae, we never come to have a stable and durable self. In some ways, we may be a complete stranger to our very selves.

Kierkegaard recognized that many people are frightened to fall off a cliff. A sudden storm or loose gravel may cause a person to accidentally fall. This is beyond their control. But what about the person whose fear isn't falling off the cliff but rather jumping?

What if I jump off this cliff? I am standing right here on the edge, and I realize I could just jump right off. Or if I don't find myself near cliffs often, I may have the same sort of realization driving along the road

at a high speed. A flick of my wrist could turn my car off the road or into concrete barriers.

Terror often shoots right through a person when they realize what they *could* and *may* even do.

To be clear, Kierkegaard is not talking about people with suicidal thoughts or what we now call suicidal ideation. Rather, Kierkegaard is interested in those circumstances when people recognize their agency or freedom and their responsibility when they contemplate what they could do.

When we confront what we could do, we are most free.

A few more examples may help. One friend worried about standing on the cliff with another person and pushing that person off. (I vowed never to go hiking with her.) Another friend worried that she could just drop her newborn. One person with long-term sobriety realized that she could just pick up the perfectly chilled bottle of beer and drain it. Having these thoughts does not make us terrible people nor do they indicate we are moral failures. They also do not predict future actions.

In those moments when we realize what we *could* do, some act presents itself as a real possibility or viable option where we hadn't seen one before. In that moment, we see that we have been making choices on some level and can make a different choice. With this realization, we confront our freedom to choose and the responsibility for our choices.

Most of us spend a huge amount of our lives running on autopilot, which serves us well in many situations. Autopilot involves being proficient and efficient in many activities such that intentional thought and deliberation seem unnecessary. Habits and ways of thinking and acting become so deeply ingrained they are second nature.

Running on autopilot is very energy efficient. However, it doesn't belong in all aspects of our lives. People who run too much on autopilot fail in some fundamental way to take responsibility for all the choices they make because they no longer see themselves as making choices. They may be so caught up in the roles they live—some of

which are vitally important—that they lose themselves and their sense of freedom.

How are we to learn from anxiety and begin to see that we do have freedom to take up space in our own lives? The first step in becoming who each of us is and moving away from the trim board of our lives is to notice when and where we function on autopilot.

Then we need to recognize when autopilot is appropriate and where it contributes to the loss of self. We need consciously to rouse ourselves for even brief moments in order to ask why we are doing something and how it matters.

We need to examine the goals that we set for ourselves, especially if we haven't really thought about these issues since we were in our twenties and our fifties are quickly ticking past.

We need to ask how the commitments we meet and the roles we play reflect or deliver on those values and goals.

Such reflection can have multiple consequences. Some people may recognize that their values and goals have changed; fulfilling certain commitments and playing certain roles do not make them happy. Others may see that they need to rebalance their values and goals by downgrading some while elevating others.

For some people, such reflection may cause them to rededicate themselves with greater intention to what they are already doing. They will meet the same commitments and perform the same roles but do so with new meaning and importance.

PART 4

Composing Your Character and Belonging to Yourself

11

Losing the Plan of Your Life but Starting to Make a New One

Epictetus claims, "If it should ever happen to you to be turned to externals in order to please some person, you must know that you have lost your purpose in life."[24]

There is something quite right about this claim. When we become too much of a people pleaser and too much of what we do aims at currying the favor of others, we lose our direction in life. When turning "outward to want to please another" becomes habitual, the opinions of others matter more than our own opinion of ourselves.

More to the point, we may not really have an opinion of ourselves; we hold others' opinions as our own. We start to see ourselves primarily in the reflections of others. We've lost the plan of our life.

The problem with reflections is that they are always inaccurate; they are distortions. Mirrors provide good examples—and funhouse mirrors the most obvious, because they have the greatest curves.

A concave mirror curves inward, making a reflection appear short and wide. A convex mirror curves outward, stretching the image tall and thin. The greater the curve, the greater the distortion.

Convex mirrors are more likely to be hung in fitting rooms at clothing stores, which explains why pieces of clothing look so different once you get home where you most likely have a plane or flat mirror.

A plane mirror provides a more accurately sized and proportioned image, but it is backward.

The persistent people pleaser internalizes these reflections and takes them as accurate. It is hard to have a plan of life based on funhouse mirrors. When we give others the power to chart our course by influencing our opinion of ourselves, we surrender a crucial dimension of our autonomy. The danger is that most people do not realize they are losing their autonomy; its loss can happen slowly over time, choice by choice.

The challenge is noticing the loss when everyone—including ourselves—is aiding and abetting that loss. We may catch glimpses that are sporadic and fleeting but enable us to see the distortions as distortions. Even for a brief moment, we may see both the possibility and reality of being different from how other people view us. We interrupt that quiet loss.

We need to put some limits on Epictetus's claim, however. As social creatures who are both dependent on and interdependent with others, pleasing others must play some role in our lives. The difficulties are identifying the right sort of others whom we want or ought to please and striking the balance between pleasing those others but not ceding too much authority over us.

How do we learn to identify the right sort of people to trust and want to appropriately please or impress? This is often a matter of trial and error. Some of the most important lessons may come from our mistakes; we learn to learn from them.

People whose trust has been violated early and often will become distrusting of others, which may cause them to hold others at arm's length or to remove themselves from the regular traffic of social life. Some will distrust their abilities to be able to discern the trustworthy from the untrustworthy.

Trust is easily lost and difficult to regain. This is true for others but especially true for trusting in ourselves.

How do people begin to trust others and themselves? We need to learn how to take good, healthy, and right interest in ourselves. We need to stop being mice who run around the trim board of our own lives. We have to take up space in our own lives on our own terms. It seems strange to say that people need to take an interest in themselves.

In this age of social media, people tend to overshare the minutiae of their lives. Everything a person may do becomes post or status update worthy—what they are eating, reading, or watching on television, when they are waiting in an airport, and what their dog is doing. (I plead guilty on this particular charge.)

It seems as if many people are taking a ton of interest in themselves. They are also assuming that others will share the same interest in and fascination with them. As we all know, that is not usually the case.

Oversharing on social media doesn't make a person better or happier; it may make them less happy because they become even more reliant on the approval of others. Their self-esteem or worthiness may now be quantified in the number of likes or views their posts receive.

Oversharing the mundane matters may make it harder to share the important ones well, appropriately, and responsibly. Oversharing makes it really difficult to apprehend the relationship between the forest and the trees.

There are all sorts of ways that people can take interest in themselves, but they are not all equal to the task of helping someone to become a better person or living in recovery. Having a concern to become a better person is one of the most crucial forms that self-interest can take; it is necessary for well-being. Call this self-interest aiming toward moral betterment (SIAMB).

SIAMB is antithetical to selfishness because it tends to be as much other-regarding as self-regarding. The roots for SIAMB are found in

ancient Greece; a person's moral character is inseparable from the relationships they have with particular others.

By doing more generous and trustworthy things with or for friends, for example, a person becomes more generous and trustworthy. Their character improves. This is far from selfish; selfish interests are those that aim toward the primary or sole benefit of a person without much concern for the effect on others.

Some people have an extraordinarily hard time making this distinction between SIAMB and selfishness. For example, many women have been socialized to put their interests far behind the interests of their husbands, children, parents, complete strangers, the neighbor's pet ferret, etc.

When they do act in ways that involve putting their SIAMB toward the top of the queue, they may face the accusation, "You're being selfish." This accusation is a powerfully effective tool of control and manipulation because it taps into deeply gendered norms. It is even more effective because women often internalize this view and can deliver the devastating judgment early and often.

Others who have been abused and traumatized may also have a hard time taking the right sort of interest in themselves. This may also be true for people who have moved down the spectrum of substance use disorders.

To be able to see that a person has a legitimate interest in themself requires that they see themselves as having moral worth. One of the most debilitating effects of abuse and trauma and severe addiction is that one can lose the sense that they are a moral being and as such has a certain dignity and autonomy that should be respected by others. And by themselves.

Respecting their own dignity may seem as possible to them as dancing a waltz on the moon.

Much rides on people being able to take the right sort of self-interest for their own well-being. Without SIAMB, people tend to self-abnegate; their concerns will recede so far into the background that they may become foreign, unrecognizable, and even hostile.

Not having an ample reservoir of appropriate self-interest may also lead to a person giving up on their life; they'll take fewer and fewer actions on their own behalf because, well, why bother? Ultimately, they may lose their will to live.

How do we begin to cultivate SIAMB? I wish I had more definitive answers instead of impressionistic suggestions. Here are five possibilities, some of which will be more familiar from earlier chapters.

First, consider the various forms of self-deception and how you are susceptible to some or all of them. When we operate under the burden of self-deception, we really are not able to see ourselves and our lives clearly. The various forms of self-deception tend to lock us into ways of seeing our situations and how they could be different were we to act differently.

Among the many harms of self-deception is the destruction of imagination; we become unable to envision possibilities, which hinders us from making changes.

Second, compare your present self to your past self with available photos. These photos may provide opportunities to relive important moments; they may dislodge memories kept in remote corners of the mind. These photos remind us of *where* we used to be, *with whom* we used to be, and *who* we used to be. They also remind us of what we used to look like, and this may prompt some harsh self-evaluations, at least at first.

When we who are older see photos of our younger selves, the old judgmental habits might kick right into gear. The initial assessment will be negative; we will notice what we have lost. Some people may avert their gaze at this point. Older women might look more closely at the photo and see a different *person*. This is where it gets really interesting.

When you are 50, seeing a photo of your 20-year-old self can be like looking at a total stranger; you may not even recognize yourself at first. Looking at that photo longer, you may not concentrate on your looks, but what you were doing, hoping, feeling, etc. at the time.

Photos are tricky; they capture and preserve a moment in a stream of moments. We take that one moment to be the truth of us at that time. What happened five minutes before or after the photo is lost.

Yes, the 20-year-old may be smiling and laughing in that photo and looking tan and in shape, but the 50-year-old self knows that she was really unhappy and struggling at the time. Her looks didn't make her happy.

Or the 50-year-old knows she was really happy then, but what made her happy at 20 is really different from what makes her happy at 50. Her looks didn't make her happy, but her optimism and willingness to take some risks made her happy.

How might we at least interrupt the cascade of negative comparisons many of us make to our past self? A crucial first step is acknowledging the extent of the comparisons. Comparisons become habitual; they are folds in a piece of paper.

What's the equivalent of flattening the paper and weighing it down to remove the folds? Doing something repeatedly. Every time a person makes a negative comment about their present self in comparison to a younger self, they need also to note something positive. They might say to themselves, *Yes, I was in great shape then but now I have work I love.* (Yes, this is a mechanical exercise, but that's what it takes to form new habits.)

Third, look around you to see that others are less well off or suffering more than you. This may help to spark gratitude for what you do have. So many of us always look to others who have more than us and feel as if we have been slighted or cheated. We feel grievance because we assume everything is a zero-sum game.

If someone else has something, it must be at our expense. We often don't recognize that we may be in the "have more" comparison pool for other people. Seeing that others have it tougher than you is

not to deny or minimize your own suffering, but it is to put it into a new perspective.

Those who have suffered greatly and made significant changes in their lives or who bear burden with grace or feel great joy can inspire us. They may provide the motivation for us to begin to make changes in our own lives.

Fourth, spend time with people who make you feel like a better person. Or if this seems like too much of a stretch, spend time with people who don't make you feel like a bad person.

For example, spending time with people who gossip regularly makes it easier to do. Dissing others is the fiber of bad connection—not good will or pleasure in the company. Gossip harms the people talked about and those who do the talking.

George Eliot (1819–1880) eloquently captures the harm, writing that "gossip is a sort of smoke that comes from the dirty tobacco pipes of those who diffuse it; it proves nothing bad but the bad taste of the smoker."[25]

Gossiping about others is a poor substitute for genuine connection with others. On the other hand, people who help you to feel better about yourself can provide inspiring reflections of yourself. The right sort of people never hold up funhouse mirrors to you.

Striking the balance between wanting to please others and maintaining our autonomy is difficult but unavoidable. We must learn to suffer what we cannot avoid. As Montaigne astutely notes, "Our life is composed, like the harmony of the world, of discords as well as of different tones sweet and harsh, sharp and flat, soft and loud… [A musician] must know how to use all of them and blend them together… So too must we with good and ill, which are of one substance to our life. Without such blending our life cannot be: one category is no less necessary than the other. To kick against natural necessity is to reproduce the mad deed of Ctesiphon, who, to a kicking match, challenged his mule."[26]

This is related to his claim about our troubles and ills having a life span. These are just parts of life. Each of us will have good times, boring times, and troubling times. The flavor of life will be bittersweet;

those two flavors blend together to create a new one. Even within that balance or harmony, there are different tones and textures. This is true throughout all of life for all people.

To accept that opposites create a balance and harmony may be a stretch for many. To realize that we compose the harmony out of these inconsistencies and contraries by having dominion over our attitudes, judgments, opinions, and actions is equal parts daunting and liberating. The key is accepting what is in our control and what is not.

Not one of us will be perfectly consistent; that would be an impossible bar to clear. On important matters, we need to be more consistent than less. We need to accept this and make our peace with it.

Pleasing others and maintaining autonomy now that you have taken the right sort of interest in yourself are natural and social necessities; they are unavoidable. To habitually reject one in favor of the other is to undertake the kicking contest with the mule.

In this contest, the object being kicked is you. While you are busy kicking yourself, the mule is kicking you too.

12

Don't Let Others Sobersplain Your Addiction and Recovery

sobersplain (verb)

1. To act as an authority on the subjects of addiction and recovery when a person has experienced neither.
2. To act as an authority on someone else's sobriety just because a person is themself sober.

John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* (1859) observes that it is part of human nature for each of us to assume we are right about the goodness or rightness of our beliefs, values, and knowledge and then project these onto others.[27]

We expect others to act as we do because, well, we are right. Often with the best of intentions, people who wish well and want the best for others who are actively addicted or struggling with recovery feel licensed to make recommendations, claims, and judgments about what a person *must* or *should* do. Sobersplainers tend to do just this by making a lot of "you" statements.

Sobersplainers in the first category—those who have never been addicted—offer a carousel of shoulds and oughts to people struggling. One of the more common offerings is, "You need to hit rock bottom and lose it all before you can change." This is often accompanied by the claim, "You need to go to counseling, treatment, or AA." If met with any resistance to these recommendations, a sobersplainer may lob the charge, "You are in denial."

Sobersplainers in the second category—people themselves in recovery—often tell others, "You need to go to more meetings; you need to recommit to your program." If a struggling person reflects that a particular program or treatment method isn't working, the sobersplainer may observe, "You are not trying hard enough." An even more alarming response to this concern is, "That's just your disease talking."

If wondering whether a person can ever drink again, they may be told, "If you do want to drink, put your sober chip or medallion in your mouth. If it melts, then you can drink."

The "in recovery" sobersplainers often expect people to find the same program helpful or useful as they themselves do. Sobersplainers have difficulty contemplating that what worked for them may not work for others.

Sobersplainers exercise what philosophers call epistemic authority—authority based on alleged knowledge and expertise—and they place this knowledge above what others have regarding their own experiences.

In the world of sobersplaining, the active addicts or the people struggling in recovery are not seen as experts on their experiences. Stereotypes of addicts as liars and unreliable reporters combined with claims about being in denial and excelling at rationalization and minimization make it easy to wonder if we can be experts on our own experiences.

At worst, people struggling with addiction or with recovery are seen as self-deceived in a local sense about our use and, perhaps more globally, about our place, worth, and value in the world.

Underpinning sobersplaining is the assumption that a disinterested person is the best positioned to see the truth or reality of someone else's addiction or recovery. Someone who is disinterested is neutral,

impartial, and objective. This objective perspective stands removed from the weeds and the nitty gritty lived realities of active addiction.

Call this the "View from Nowhere." It is one of the oldest views in philosophy and continues to exercise an outsized influence. Sobersplainers take themselves to occupy this perspective on others' use and recovery. The alternative to the View from Nowhere is perspectivalism along with standpoint epistemology.

Perspectivalism holds that every claim to knowledge is embedded in a particular context. We can never get outside of a particular perspective; the best we can do is acknowledge our location and explore how this affects what we can see and apprehend.

Standpoint epistemology claims that people who occupy certain perspectives have the best vantage point from which to make accurate knowledge claims. Put another way, standpoint epistemology acknowledges that perspectives make knowledge possible.

For example, women understand how sexism works better than men because we live its expectations and effects. People who are disabled have knowledge about the different ways that ableism literally and metaphorically structures the world. And people who are addicted know addiction from the inside; we live its rhythms and rollercoasters.

Some of us who make it into recovery often tell our stories in meetings while others write memoirs. What's important is that we tell our stories in our own voices, which is one way we start to belong to ourselves.

In much of the discussion about the "overdose epidemic," largely missing are voices of those who have overdosed. Many of the overdoses involve a mixture of drugs, with a significant increase in synthetic opioids such as fentanyl that are far more powerful than heroin and other prescription opioid drugs.

There is also a marked increase in overdose deaths from cocaine and psychostimulants. There are not many accounts of what it is like to be brought back with naloxone. As a long-time former heroin user who now works in drug education describes it,

> You are disorientated, confused, weak, and very scared. You just want to sink back into the protective wraparound the heroin brings; you want everything and everyone to just go away.
>
> Every piece of you wants to get up and run, and just keep going, but there's no energy, nothing—total disassociation from reality, with everything around you playing out like a &@#% reality show in which you're the unwilling star with nowhere to hide…
>
> I've been revived with naloxone five times, and those are the ones that I remember… My life was a cycle made up of prison, hospitals, homelessness, and the constant search for oblivion to take my mind off the pain of living. I guess my fear of living was stronger than my fear of dying.
>
> The problem with coming 'round after naloxone is that the brain won't accept the fact you've been dead. It's almost like a defense mechanism that softens the harsh reality of what's just happened. And this denial from the truth kicks in and all you want is that medicine to give you oblivion again.[28]

People's responses to being revived are varied. Some are thoroughly disoriented while others are grateful. Some are indifferent and really do not care one way or the other. There are those who are angry at having been brought back; some wanted to die while others had a good high ruined.

A number of them will shoot up again almost immediately. The reasons for using are more varied than the responses to being revived. The reasons for using do not disappear with the administration of naloxone, which only reverses the effects of the drugs.

Naloxone neither reduces cravings nor fends off withdrawal symptoms. It also does not eliminate the fear of withdrawal and the fear and pain of living. Many will continue the search for the protective wraparound and the oblivion drugs bring.

To most people who are *not* addicted, this makes no sense. But even to many who *are* addicted to other substances or behaviors, this makes no sense. The assumption is that a near-death or actual death experience should scare a person out of this behavior.

This raises the question how people could know the risks (having experienced them firsthand) but still engage in an activity that could kill them. They may shoot up knowing the heroin is laced with fentanyl. Making it even more incomprehensible is that some heroin users may become resigned or even fatalistic; they know they will die of an overdose eventually—if not this time, then perhaps the next.

Emergency departments in hospitals have become ground zero for overdosing patients, thereby providing an opportunity for intervention and treatment. Emergency department physicians may administer buprenorphine, which significantly reduces craving. And not being caught in the grips of craving may have an important two-fold effect.

The first is that the attending physician will see a *person* and not just an overdose. This will have an impact on how the physician or nurse interacts with their patient. The second follows from this. Being seen and treated as a person may help some people be more open to information about treatment options.

Nothing closes off communication and willingness to listen more than the feeling that a person doesn't matter, especially if they themselves struggle to see their worth.

There is something of a translation or comprehensibility gap, as I mentioned above. People (including physicians) cannot understand why someone keeps engaging in the same potentially dangerous and even deadly behaviors. This is why first-person stories of addicts are so important.

People who have overdosed and been revived can help to educate physicians and other healthcare providers about the whys and hows of overdosing. They can describe their logic behind using as they do.

Addicts have the ultimate insider knowledge and expertise. They just need to find safe and perhaps anonymous ways to impart this knowledge. Healthcare providers would benefit from listening and seeing the problem from the inside.

In 1899, William James confronted his own arrogance and presumptuousness while traveling in a carriage in a rural area. When he saw how many gorgeous trees had been cut down to make brutal-looking clearings, he asked his driver who would do something like that.

The driver responded that everyone did it because they valued cultivation and the security it brings. They did it for their families. James could do nothing but confront his own arrogance. He realized, "Neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer… Even prisons and sick-rooms have their special revelations. It is enough to ask of each of us that he should be faithful to his own opportunities and make the most of his own blessings, without presuming to regulate the rest of the vast field."[29]

In the same vein, emergency rooms have revelations for both overdose victims and physicians if only they could be open to them. In no way is this to claim that *only* the addicted have knowledge about addiction. There are experts and nonexperts who can offer valuable insights and knowledge without sobersplaining.

My claim is perhaps more modest: People who are addicted presently or in recovery have knowledge that needs to be respected. The non-addicted sobersplainers tend to see themselves as having the *only* knowledge that matters and should drive decisions.

The sobersplainer in recovery needs a reminder too. This person continues to marginalize people struggling by not recognizing the knowledge and insight they have. Their desire to project *their* recovery path or method—even with the best possible intentions—can still bring about bad effects. That path may not work for someone else.

Consider that someone struggling with an opioid addiction may not do well in an abstinence program where MATs (medication assisted therapies) are maligned. The people receiving all these recommendations may start to distrust their own knowledge and become more apt to second-guess themselves.

For all of us, the challenge is to reject both the assumption that only certain knowledge matters and our propensity to project onto others. It is tempting to project when the stakes are so significant. But we must resist that temptation. We need to check our own projections at the same time we deflect those incoming from others.

Early in recovery, this may be especially difficult to do. One of the skills that many of us needed to acquire was judging whose opinions warrant serious considerations and whose we would do well to reject. We most likely will make mistakes in that determination, and we would do well to learn from them.

13

Recovering Character and Cultivating Friendships

Can you imagine what it is to be a better person? I don't mean a wealthier, more powerful, or a physically healthier person. I mean a morally better person, a more virtuous person.

This is hard for many of us to do because we tend to pay scant attention to moral character and its development—even though it is the most precious part of ourselves. Many of us probably pay more attention to the bathroom scale, how many friends we have on social media, or whether have all the trappings of success when we judge our own goodness as a person.

We really don't know how to morally evaluate ourselves and others. The language of "virtuous character" or "virtuous activity" might make some uneasy, especially since *virtuous* carries a lot of baggage in today's usage. Still, I believe it is important to start using more rich and complex moral language.

Our moral character is the defining dimension of each of us. Cultivating, cherishing, and protecting it is our most important undertaking. As Montaigne writes, "Our duty is to bring order to our morals not to the materials for a book: not to win provinces in battle but to order and tranquility for the conduct of our life. Our most great and glorious achievement is to live our life fittingly. Everything else… are at most tiny props and small accessories."[30]

This masterpiece is created only with right intention and attention, which we are able to direct in recovery. We have a remarkable opportunity to intentionally cultivate our moral character and create relationships that help us to become better people. When we do this, we may be capable of flourishing.

Those people whose addictions started or accelerated later in life may have a clear sense of what their moral character had been. They knew their moral principles, values, commitments, and nonnegotiables. They may have an equally clear sense of what they have lost as their addictions advanced.

Others of us whose addictions began early in life may have been hindered in fully developing our moral characters; our moral development was interrupted. We missed out on opportunities to become people who see themselves as beings with moral standing and who deserve to take up space in the world. To us, the idea of moral goods such as respect, dignity, autonomy, agency, and flourishing may be completely alien.

Many of the forms of self-deception further the belief that some of us are undeserving, which is especially true for people whose moral development was hindered or interrupted as children.

In our present context, we do not pay much attention to moral development. Psychologists tend to subsume it to psychological development and the honing of our rational capacities and social skills. On this view, moral development is a tag-along.

Others assume that moral development is all and only embodying the values, principles, and commitments that get passed to us from our families or communities. Moral development certainly involves all of this but far more. Moral development necessarily involves skills and practices to embody and live these commitments and values.

We must be dedicated to composing our character and then cherishing it. Most of us never learn how to do this as children and as adults. In recovery, we have the opportunity to do so.

It wasn't always the case that moral development was ignored; various philosophical traditions from 300 BCE ranging from Greece to China focused on the development of virtue and moral character.

I draw from one Greek philosopher, Aristotle (384–322 BCE), to make the argument that we build our moral character from our actions

and habits. None of us is born naturally good nor is anyone born naturally bad. Rather, we become who we are by what we do repeatedly.

Those of us who have struggled with addiction may have a clear sense of this; we bore direct witness to how we fundamentally changed because of what we did habitually. We may have compromised our core principles and done things that led us to question our self-worth.

As much as Aristotle can help us to understand what happened to our moral character as our addictions accelerated, he can be an important guide to composing a better and more virtuous moral character.

I need to back up a bit first. Aristotle's guiding question is, "What is the good for humans?"[31] By *good*, Aristotle means highest purpose, asking in effect, "What's the ultimate goal to which we should aim our actions?" To this, Aristotle's answer is happiness or flourishing.

Happiness isn't just a feeling or an attitude but rather it is a way of living in the world. Happiness is activity—virtuous activity to be more exact. Happiness is a consequence of how we live.

Aristotle defines *happiness* or *flourishing* as rational activity of the soul in accordance with virtue.[32] That's not a definition that will resonate with most people at first or even tenth glance but with some exploration, it will make sense.

Aristotle describes humans as beings who have rational capacity and emotions. On his view, reason should have dominion over the emotions, channeling them in the right directions and to the right degrees.

Emotions can be directed or misdirected while also being too strong or too weak. Probably most of us have been on the receiving end of misdirected anger, for example. A friend may be angry at someone else, but we happened to be there. At other times, we wonder why a friend might not be angrier about something, especially if they have been wronged. We've also misdirected emotional responses or inappropriately amplified or minimized them.

On Aristotle's view, our reason has the power to direct and calibrate emotions so that people can act in ways that are appropriate to a situation. Moral virtues are those reason-shaped emotions that produce virtuous actions. Aristotle defines virtues as the means between

the extremes of excess and deficiency, each of which is a vice.[33] He did not believe that our emotions should affect our reasoning, but I am in the camp that believes the influence can be mutual. An example will help to demonstrate his approach.

Wit is a virtue, according to Aristotle. As a virtue, wit or the right sort of humor hits a sweet spot between too much and too little. Aristotle calls those who go to the excess in raising laughs "vulgar buffoons." These people go too far in getting people to laugh; they care more about getting the laughs than they do about how a joke might hurt, harm, or offend someone.

Some buffoons try to ingratiate themselves with others or score points by using humor to take people down. There's also a category of people who turn themselves into the butt of their own jokes. Their goal may be to ingratiate themselves to others or to make the joke before someone else does.

Buffoonery when directed at oneself does cause harm to a person, but that harm is often ignored or taken as the price one must pay to be accepted.

A person who is deficient in humor is boorish, according to Aristotle. A boor laughs very little, in part because he finds very little amusing. Furthermore, the boorish person may be impatient with people who laugh and see the humor in a situation. A boor most certainly will never laugh at himself. The boor emits more than a whiff of disapproval with a distinct undertone of superiority.

Both buffoonery and boorishness are unpleasant and even painful to others in related ways. The buffoon may take nothing (including himself) seriously enough while the boor takes everything (including himself) too seriously. The buffoon and boor each take themselves out of much of the everyday social traffic of life.

What is the right sort of wit? Aristotle would say it is pleasant as opposed to buffoonery and boorishness. It is a gentle good humor not intended to harm or exclude. Right wit is not at another's expense

or one's own expense. Wit connects people rather than severing or tearing them apart.

Many people say they tease only the people they love or that gentle teasing is one way to show love. We must be careful with teasing because people's tolerance for it varies tremendously. We need to know someone fairly well before we tease them.

A person may also have right wit about him or herself. Many of us tell on ourselves not because we're afraid someone will tell first (though that may be true in some cases), but rather it is a way to make a connection to other people. Some of us can't wait to tell on ourselves because we know others will appreciate our stories, and that will make them funnier.

A person needs to be sensitive to the reasons why they are using wit and what they aim to accomplish in using it. The context is always crucial. A shared wit can defuse a situation or make people feel comfortable and welcomed.

Humor can be used to call out a wrong or harm; comedians offer political commentary. People of the same partisan persuasion find it humorous while others with a different orientation do not. The upshot is that humor may include and it may exclude; it may connect us to some and distance us from others.

Our sense of humor is a good barometer of how we see ourselves and others. Aristotle might tell us to pay attention to what we find amusing and to whom it connects us. The company a person keeps says a lot (if not everything) about a person's character.

Aristotle might also counsel us to pay attention to when we lose our sense of humor, which may feel like losing a part of ourselves. On the flip side, by regaining a sense of humor, we may get an old part of ourselves back or make a new part of ourselves. Wit is seriously important to our happiness.

Aristotle draws attention to a handful of virtues (including wittiness) he believes constitutes the character of a good man.[34] Yes, he did limit virtue to only male citizens of Greece, but there's still great value in his approach to moral development.

These virtues include courage, temperance, liberality, magnificence, magnanimity, proper ambition, friendliness, modesty, and

righteous indignation. Some of these terms have fallen out of usage while others have been replaced by newer ones.

We tend to use *moderation* in place of *temperance*. *Liberality* is a kind of generosity on smaller amounts of money. *Magnificence* is generosity amplified. *Magnanimity* is greatness of spirit. To have *proper ambition* is to strive for goals but not in a ruthless manner and at any cost, especially to character. *Righteous indignation* is a justified and appropriately directed anger against injustice.

There are so many additional virtues, many of which are discussed by philosopher David Hume (1711–1776). He builds off Aristotle and offers four subtypes of virtues: useful to self, immediately agreeable to self, useful to others, and immediately agreeable to others.

	Self	**Others**
Useful	Discretion, industry, frugality, caution, strength of mind, wisdom, memory, enterprise, assiduity, good sense, discernment, temperance, patience, constancy, perseverance, forethought, judgment, considerateness, peace of mind[35]	Benevolence, justice, gratitude, friendliness, truthfulness, fidelity, honor, allegiance, chastity, charity, affability, moderation[36]
Immediately agreeable	Cheerfulness, greatness of mind, courage, humility, dignity, tranquility, poetic talent, serenity, refined taste[37]	Good manners, wit, ingenuity, eloquence, affability, modesty, decency, politeness, gentility, cleanliness[38]

Here, too, many of the particular terms have gone out of circulation while others are freighted with racist, sexist, and elitist tones. As with Aristotle, part of the challenge is identifying what is still useful and meaningful for living a better life and leaving the rest behind.

A person who is *assiduous* (or who has *assiduity*) works well and efficiently. *Fidelity* is faithfulness to duties and obligations to others, as seen in the motto of the US Marine Corps: *Semper Fidelis*.

To *have greatness of mind* is to embody curiosity and open-mindedness to learn from any- and everyone. *Eloquence* is the ability to speak well and effectively in ways that invite listeners. *Forethought* is the ability to think ahead about the possible ramifications of your actions on yourself and others. (Its excess vice form is fear-thought, which I discussed earlier.)

Aristotle's and Hume's virtues give us so much more material for thinking about the kinds of people we want to be and how we want to show up in the world.

I regularly ask my students to pick 10 virtues that they already embody or would like to embody. They begin to see how some of these virtue traits cluster, making each more vibrant.

What would it mean for all of us to give ourselves the opportunity to come up with our own lists? Most of us are very adept at identifying our vices or shortcomings. Learning how to identify our virtues is a harder lift for many people.

Admittedly, some of Hume's virtues should perhaps be taken out of circulation. *Chastity* is a virtue that girls and women are expected to embody and is rarely applied to boys and men. *Cleanliness* has an ugly history in immigration. *Gentility* is related to *gentry*, which means ruling class, aristocracy, or high social standing. The assumption is that those people will have refined tastes.

How do all these virtues connect to the character we desire to compose? Aristotle argues that we develop our character as we practice virtues. When we habitually act in virtuous ways, we create a virtuous character. We become who we are by what we do habitually. Our

character is the combination of our virtues and reason becoming firm and stable as we mature.

We become trustworthy and reliable people by consistently and habitually acting in trustworthy and reliable ways. Actions build character, and character authorizes actions. Character is always a work in progress; it can always improve and it can deteriorate depending on how we act.

Aristotle recognizes that we human beings are social creatures by nature, and this has a profound impact on how we practice and acquire virtues and compose our character. Each of us becomes who we are by what we *do* habitually most often in relationships with particular others, families, communities, and broader societies.

We need to consider the moral qualities of the people whom we regard as friends. That may sound rather harsh but for Aristotle, in whose view friendship is the most important moral relation one person can have with another.

Our friends can help us to become better people, or they can ride shotgun with us as we damage our character. Friends are necessary for flourishing, because they are necessary for us to create a virtuous character.

Aristotle says that we should be friends with virtuous people because we can learn from them, and being with them provides opportunities for us to cultivate virtues. This may sound transactional to people today, but Aristotle claims that the best sort of friend wants what is good, right, and virtuous for the other.

That sort of friend is a second self, Aristotle claims; to harm your friend is also to harm yourself.[39] When we are going astray or acting in ways that diverge from our moral commitments, our friends provide moral mirrors to us. They are not funhouse mirrors but the clearest, plane ones. The right sort of friend wishes well for the other for their sake and not for any benefit or pleasure that they themselves may get.

While each of us composes our own character, it really is a collaboration because we do so in the company of others. Many of us

who have joined mutual-help groups in recovery (AA, Women for Sobriety, and LifeRing, for example), come to forge friendships out of a shared commitment to changing our behaviors and making new meaning in life.

In the company of others who share a similar struggle and perhaps not much else, we have opportunities to cultivate virtues and intentionally shape our character.

In the context of these groups, each of us may become that "decent human" who takes an interest in whether someone rises or sinks. When so many of us reach a point of indifference whether we do, we need that help.

Outside of these groups, we never may know the effects our actions have on others. Our showing interest, extending a helping hand, or offering simple kindness may make all the difference in the world to another.

Reciprocal goodwill is the first step to becoming friendly with people. There is also great joy in people coming to see that their actions can make a positive difference.

For many of us who felt our actions inflicted harm and wrecked every person, place, or thing, to be able to see ourselves as people who can do good things is life altering.

Instead of seeing ourselves as failures, losers, or no better than a piece of trash, we see ourselves as people who can do good. We see that we can become good friends to others.

14

Recovering Character and Ending Friendships

Many people struggle with relationships, whether we are new to recovery or have been in recovery for a long time. It is difficult for many of us to make the kinds of friends that are necessary for recovering or for composing our character and flourishing.

Because we may struggle with trust issues, we are very careful whom we let into our lives. Others of us truly do not know how to be with others—never mind make friends—when not under the influence.

We may still be experiencing the effects of global shame, believing that we are not good enough to have friends. Global shame is one of the biggest hindrances to our even trying to make friends. It is not unusual for us to wonder, *Who would want to be friends with me when I have done so many bad, shameful, and terrible things?*

Of the friendships we do have, many arise because of context, convenience, or concern. This doesn't make them "bad" friendships by any stretch, but they're not the sort Aristotle has in mind—one who wants what is good, right, and virtuous for the other (as quoted in the previous essay).

Though it may be hard to make friends, we find ourselves in all kinds of relationships. We may have "work friends" that we keep relegated to our office hours. Parents of school-aged children are often friends with other parents. These, too, may stay limited to children's school years. (It is true that some of these friendships break out of these categories, but that only happens with intention and cultivation.)

Maintaining a friendship can itself be something we do habitually. Some of our friendships may be longstanding from the time we were young. Other longstanding friendships may be with drinking or using friends, ones who want the older and more familiar version of us back. And those of us who are older may have friends for decades that we may no longer really like but we still maintain them.

We may tell ourselves that we should maintain those friendships, yet some stay in friendships because they worry about being alone or lonely.

Many of us feel as if it is not our place to end a friendship. We may think that because we have disappointed so many of our friends, we owe them our loyalty and even our devotion now that we are in recovery. Still vulnerable to global shame, we may believe that we deserve to be the ones left but never to be the ones leaving.

There are all kinds of reasons to end a friendship, though—feeling unsafe, betrayed, taken for granted, or profoundly alienated rank high on the list.

Unfriending stranger "friends" or followers on social media is easy. With actual, real-life acquaintances and friends where the relationships may have always been fraught or maintained only to keep the peace with other friends or family members, one is justified in ending those. We can curate our social lives as much as our social media. This can be an important form of self-care.

But what about ending a friendship with a person who has been your "ride or die" friend, the one who has had your back for such a long time? This is a friendship rooted in a long history of shared activities, interests, and concerns. It meets the requirements that Aristotle sets for the best kind of friendship: mutual goodwill where each wishes well for the other's sake because of their good virtuous character.

You'd even say of this person that they've made you a better person, challenging you to stretch yourself and supporting you no matter what. This is the sort of friendship that is a necessary component of a

good life. You are so connected that each of you becomes a second self to the other; your friend is a part of you.

Now imagine you and that friend have grown apart; your interests and commitments have changed as have theirs. Perhaps your interests and commitments have become not just distinct but opposed. And here you are thinking of casting off your second self.

This is a momentous decision because you find yourself at a crossroads—do you end the friendship? Do you break up with them? Would you lose a part of yourself?

While there are yards of books exploring the "to end or not to end" question of romantic relationships, resources are scarce when it comes to friendship. This may be in part a consequence of the fact that friendships are often relegated to second-tier status in the lives of people.

Romantic partners and families come first; friends get what is left over. The expression "just a friend" cements the second-class status of friendships. Yet they do matter enormously as we realize when we are about to lose them.

The great Roman philosopher, orator, and politician Cicero (106–43 BCE) understood the importance of friendships and the role and place the right sort of friend should occupy in life.[40]

Aristotle and Cicero both claim that while the right friends can make us more virtuous, the wrong sort puts our own character at risk. If they are right that our character is the most important and precious thing about us, don't we have a duty to ourselves to excise those friends from our lives? The answer may well be yes, but both would counsel some reflection before doing it. Moreover, how you do it matters as well.

There are some questions you might ask yourself to help decide whether you should end a friendship, downgrade it, or recommit to it. Both Aristotle and Cicero would advocate putting great care and concern into reaching this decision. It may be one of the most monumental you ever make, with repercussions extending into your life as well as the lives of mutual friends.

People in recovery who have been downgraded as friends or who have been pruned from friendships may be especially sensitive about this matter. In assessing a friendship, ask yourself:

- What has changed with your friend? Are they behaving differently? Espousing beliefs that do not square with the person you have known?
- Have these changes come from out of the blue? Or have they been slowly unfolding but you just didn't notice?
- If your friend has always been open and honest with you, do you have the sense they have been keeping things from you?
- Does this make you less willing to support them? Less willing to accept support from them?
- Do you want for your friend to "change back," or can you accept this new person they are becoming?
- Do their new and different beliefs and ways of being in the world compromise you in some way?

Depending on the answers to these, a person might decide that their friendship needs to be less close and intimate. The lack of common interests or shared values makes it impossible to maintain the former closeness.

This may be a very prudent course of action. You can still like someone and wish them well but do so from a greater distance.

Finally, friendships can get into a rut because people are not being intentional in tending to them. Friends can start to take each other for granted. They can also become rigid with their shared activities.

One person changing can shake matters up. An honest discussion between friends can reinvigorate their friendship. There is even the possibility of creating new dimensions to the friendship.

Whether you wish a friend well from a distance or recommit to the friendship, you still have obligations to this friend. Honesty is crucial here; dishonesty in the maintenance of a friendship never leads to anywhere good.

Perhaps the questions above didn't lead to a clear decision for you. If so, Cicero offers a benchmark for when a person should end a friendship: A friend should neither ask nor consent to do what is wrong.

A genuine friend would not want you to compromise your integrity and most certainly would not want to be the cause of your doing so. The issue is what counts as wrong.

Cicero offers some types of cases for ending a friendship I will make more concrete and particular. Throughout, he uses the word *immoral*, and his use is really quite ordinary. Something immoral goes against a set of shared values and commitments. Going against those values and commitments is what makes the act wrong.

Your friend makes an immoral request of you. It may start with a request to tell a little white lie or to shade the truth about a relatively minor issue. Subsequent requests may be for bigger and bigger lies. People in recovery building or rebuilding their characters may not yet be strong enough to resist; they lack the necessary tools. If a person asks this knowing that you are not strong enough, that is exploitative.

Your friend wants you to pander to his immoral desires. *Pander* is the crucial word here; they want you not just to go along grudgingly with their desires but to cater to those desires. Even more, they may want you to have and act on those desires yourself. Friends who are still drinking, using, or engaging in addictive behaviors pose a threat to recovery. If they are trying to get you to relapse, they do not have your best interest at heart.

Your friend asks you to inflict a wrong on another person. Again, this may start with something small and inconsequential. The issue is that your friend is getting you to do their dirty work. You can't belong to yourself if you do this for others.

Your friend's vicious conduct affects others—yourself or a total stranger. *Vicious* is beyond mean; it is reprehensible and per-

haps even unforgiveable. A person with good moral character cannot ignore this sort of act; it demands action.

It is a form of extortion when a friend cloaks their request as being "for the sake of our friendship." It is even worse when the friend punishes you in some way for not doing what they want. You may feel trapped and deeply torn at the same time.

Once you recognize you need to end the friendship, how do you do that? It is easier to avoid or even ghost acquaintances, but not so the person who has been at the center of your social and familial life. How do you resign from a friendship? Cicero is helpful here too. Whenever possible, Cicero counsels:

Allow a friendship to die out gradually through reducing social interaction. Cicero says this is more like unstitching something versus tearing it apart.

Avoid enmity. Don't become overtly hostile and aggressive by antagonizing. Here the concern is to protect your character. You don't want to start acting in ways that are harmful or immoral or vicious.

Do not enlist other friends in this undertaking. In the same way it was wrong for your friend to ask you to do their dirty work, it is wrong to have your friends do your work in ending the friendship. Friends may support you in this undertaking, but they cannot do it for you.

There will be instances when a friendship needs to end immediately. The best course of action is to end it in a way that avoids hostility and the enlistment of other friends. Your friend may try to manipulate and punish you in many of the same ways they did earlier but only with greater force. Your friend may never understand why you are doing what you recognize you *must* do.

Cicero describes reaching that point where a friendship must end as a disaster. It is a disaster because it comes with great loss, chaos, uncertainty, and grief. But it may be exactly the thing you must do to preserve your character.

As we have seen, our moral character can change for the better or for the worse by what we do habitually. The more virtuous acts we do, the more we build a virtuous character that makes it easier to do virtuous acts. We never really top out; we can keep morally improving ourselves. That is very good news and ought to inspire optimism.

What about changes in the opposite direction? Could someone's moral character become so vicious or depraved that there's no coming back? Is it possible for such a person to improve his character? Aristotle leaves this set of questions unanswered, but I offer a few thoughts.

Anyone who is trying to change addictive behaviors still shows some care for his character. Some of us have done some rotten and even depraved things to others and to our own selves. We may still be able to become better people if we are willing to do the hard work and accept the consequences of our past actions and behaviors. Our willingness to do both carries the weight of this possibility becoming reality.

There are no shortcuts or quick fixes to the hard work that we need to do. No one else can do this work for us. And while we have no control over others' perceptions of us or how they treat us, we do have control over our intentions and our efforts.

Some of us will need to do a teardown of our moral character and start the construction or composition process from a new beginning. Others may first identify some features that can be preserved and then do significant renovation. We begin to change how we understand ourselves and our places in the world.

Friendship can play an important role for this struggling person. A friend will take an interest and show concern about whether a person sinks or swims. A friend may be able to supply that positive ideal of a life beyond their addiction and help them to take the steps to make actualities out of possibilities.

The one thing a friend cannot do is change the habitual center of another's energy. If one person is always trying to fix or change another, it may seem less a friendship than a reclamation project.

The person "being fixed" may not belong to themself, but rather to the expectations of others. A genuine friendship, on the other hand, helps each person to fully belong to themself all the while appreciating how friends make this possible.

15

Belonging to Yourself

In recovery, we work on ourselves like we never have in the past. We pay attention to our moral character because we come to see who we are and how we show up in the world mean everything to us. This work is neither easy nor fast; it requires intention and diligence that we may not have thought we possessed. None of us becomes a good person by accident.

At this stage in reading *Recovering Character*, I hope you see how philosophy can help people to undertake this hard work. There's a long line of philosophers who have tied the practice of philosophy to the goodness of life. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1952) wrote: "Work on philosophy—like work in architecture in many respects—is really more work on oneself. On one's own conception. On how one sees things. (And what one expects of them.)"[41]

The reference to architecture might sound odd, but Wittgenstein believed that good architecture had to embody certain virtues or traits that were also important for being a good person and living a good life.

Architecture must demonstrate good proportion, balance, simplicity, functionality, and congruity both within a building and between the building and its environment.

Proportion and balance are related: A large room with small windows strikes a discordant chord. Something just seems off kilter when the windows are not in proportion to the size of the room and do not align with one another.

Simplicity is pleasing. As for functionality, Wittgenstein had no tolerance for design elements that had no function and, therefore, served no real purpose. They are distracting ornamentations.

Congruity relates to the entire property. Is the house in agreement with its environment? A Swiss chalet in the midst of an urban setting would just seem out of place, wrong even. There is a beauty to congruity and an ugliness or failure to incongruity.

Philosophy, like architecture, embodies these same elements or virtues. There is a moral imperative built into philosophy that we become a better person. In other words, philosophy should aim to help a person realize these virtues so that they can design a better life. One's life—their house—can be congruent with the world around them.

For Wittgenstein, the philosopher's work is to liberate their self and others from bewitching pictures, skewed conceptual schemes, and unreasonable and perhaps unjustified expectations.

The practice of philosophy is a remedy for confusion that disrupts the balance or congruity of our beliefs and actions. Whether the confusion is induced by the outside world or is self-inflicted, it makes it much more difficult to stay connected to and in agreement with the world.

Above all else, philosophy ought to aim for clarification—of our *selves*, our place in the world, and the ways we make meaning. Philosophy, when practiced well, can be useful. It can enable us to grapple in productive ways with questions about the meaning of life, who we are, and how we want to be in the world.

To ask how we want to be in the world opens possibilities where before they may have been in very short supply. Our imaginations are harmed as our addictions progress. Some of us also operated with a sense of resignation and inevitability, so imagining was a waste of time. Others' imaginations were running at full speed to the worst possible outcomes; it made more sense to stick with what we knew, even if we hated it.

Some people are willing to act only when they are certain of the results. These people thoroughly research and work every possible sce-

nario, engage in deliberation, and then act in a very careful way. Perhaps it is a desire for order and certainty—no maybes—which in turn provides stability and happiness. These people who play it safe will most often color within the lines of their lives. They have a very low tolerance for uncertainty. Put another way, their uncertainty threshold is quite low.

Playing it safe, or at least trying to do so, is often a prudent course of action, especially when too many areas of life are full of uncertainty and instability. But always trying to play it safe comes with its own risks.

As much as we can anticipate scenarios and try to guard against particular ones, there are many factors well beyond our control. If uncertainty is a cause of unhappiness, the person who plays it safe is vulnerable to great unhappiness and even despair.

People who play it safe may also tend to contract their world in the hopes of keeping it certain and stable. Being unwilling to explore possibilities, they lose opportunities for happiness. There may be happiness in trying something new or different even if it doesn't bring the anticipated result.

Other people love the novel, the uncertain, and possibilities over known certainties. The maybes hold all the potential. They are more interested in what's outside the lines rather than what's within. Spontaneity is more their nature; certainty and stability may feel disappointing, boring, or confining. The spontaneous sort has a very high uncertainty threshold; they won't be governed by worries about what future possible harms or disappointments might come to pass.

Always trying to live life spontaneously comes with risk. A person seeking the novel or the different may never experience happiness in what they have because they believe there is something better. They're like the person who keeps switching the channel on the TV looking for a better show even though there were a few that looked interesting for the few moments they watched.

Trying to live spontaneously can also expand a person's world to the point where everything feels in flux with no solid footing to keep balance.

Being able to judge our tolerance for uncertainty is a hard-won form of self-knowledge. We may be able to tolerate uncertainty in some parts of our life but not in others. Our tolerance level is also related to faith.

Faith is one of those terms whose usage now seems completely tied to religious or spiritual matters, especially in the context of recovery. But following William James, I use *faith* in a much broader sense. Faith runs throughout every aspect of our lives.

We have faith that the plumber can repair our leaky faucets. We have faith that tomorrow will come as it has for every day of our lives. Many of us have faith in ourselves that we will do our best to keep our promises, even as we know that some things are beyond our control that may affect our ability to do so.

For James and for me, faith is a willingness to act, keep going, take another step when the results are not guaranteed. Faith is a willingness to act on a maybe where the results are uncertain.[42]

Maybes and possibilities are the essence of human life. We have to deal as much with possibilities as we do facts; they are unavoidable. Part of being human is negotiating and living with uncertainties at the same time we generate certainties.

James writes, "It is only by risking our persons from one hour to another that we live at all. And often enough our faith beforehand in an uncertified result is the only thing that makes the result come true."[43] Faith helps to make facts.

A simple example will help to demonstrate. Imagine you are hiking and you've got to jump across a stream. Doubting and mistrusting yourself may change your action; you might hesitate for a split second. Doubt and mistrust, like faith, are living attitudes that are woven right into our actions.

Believing and trusting you can make it gives you a much better chance. You will fully commit to your launch. There's no guarantee,

but you've got a better chance of making it a fact if you have faith that you can.

Acting with faith—acting as if something will happen—helps to make the fact it does happen.

A more complicated example involves people who are trying to stop using drugs or change their harmful uses. They may have faith that they can make it through this next hour. They can do things that keep them away from drugs or alcohol so that they don't have the opportunity to use.

The person can drive home a different way so they don't pass their favorite bar. They *make* the fact that they didn't use this past hour. Then they do it again; they stay away from using drugs for another hour.

These facts support their faith, which in turn will help them to make new facts about their use. Here, too, there is no guarantee or certified result.

We have a better chance of not using if we have faith—understood as willingness to live in the possibility—that we can stop using.

To have faith is to grab a hold of a maybe or a series of maybes about matters small (crossing a stream) and great (changing addictive behaviors).

People who play it safe will be reluctant to grab hold of a maybe; they lack sufficient faith.

People who crave novelty and spontaneity lack faith in a different way; they will grab hold of all maybes but not live in ways to make them facts. In a sense, they lack the willingness to act on faith.

In recovery, we become much more adept at balancing doubt and trust, certainty and uncertainty. This is a critical form of self-knowledge.

In recovery, many of us also shift our tolerance for novelty or excitement and boredom. Many people new to recovery worry that

without their substances and behaviors, life will be boring and monotonous.

In contemporary United States culture, boredom is highly undesirable. It seems a state to be avoided at all costs. If we are not experiencing pleasure or excitement, we do not know what to do with ourselves. It is part human nature and part socialization causing people to flee boredom.

Philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) observed, "We are less bored than our ancestors were, but we are more afraid of boredom. We have come to know, or rather to believe, that boredom is not part of the natural lot of man, but can be avoided by a sufficiently vigorous pursuit of excitement."[44]

Excitement is the opposite of boredom. Excitement can be highly pleasurable or utterly frightening. Running away from enemies trying to harm you is unpleasant but certainly not boring, as Russell notes.

We have more distractions and sources of stimulation than ever before. We literally and metaphorically travel the world. We can consume other cultures and have more extreme experiences.

We can get lost for hours on the internet, television, and video games. We continue to seek more intense pleasures because we become dull to them; we have to keep upping the pleasure and intensity of experiences in order to reach a threshold of excitement.

This sounds familiar to anyone who has struggled with alcohol, other drugs, and addictive behaviors but it equally relates to other forms of consumption. This flight from boredom by any means necessary may be the hallmark of our time.

The paradox is the constant seeking of intensity and excitement will lead to more boredom. The person who is unsatisfied in their pursuit of intense experiences suffers what Russell identifies as stultifying boredom, which is unproductive and unfruitful. Stultifying boredom dulls even more, making a person less capable of acting effectively.

This type of boredom saps willingness to do other things, even or especially things people may wish to do. A marathon of scrolling

through TikTok, binge watching series they don't even like, playing video games that annoy often leave people feeling exhausted and hollowed out.

These activities leave little to no space for the pursuit of "vital activities" that connect us to other people and the natural and social worlds in which we live.

Russell recognizes, however, that there is a form of boredom that lends itself to productivity and creativity. He calls this type "fructifying boredom."[45] Fructifying boredom is possible in the absence of the nearly exclusive pursuits of pleasures and excitements.

Russell notes that much of our daily life is full of mundane tasks and regular activities. We need not only to do these well but to learn to accept them as necessary parts of life. Doing them well without a great expenditure of energy frees the space for productivity and creativity. This is where autopilot is useful; some things need to get done so that we are able to do other things we want to do.

Routines help us to engage in those vital activities that ground and connect us to others. Routines may also bring pleasure and comfort especially in tumultuous times. Repetition and routine need not dull but may sharpen and enable people to do different and better things.

A great concern is that we in at least the industrialized western world of capitalism do not know how to strike that balance between routines or sameness and novelty or excitement. Quite simply, the number and intensity of distractions, novelties, and excitements keep increasing. The implications for humanity are great.

Russell notes, "A generation that cannot endure boredom will be a generation of little men, of men unduly divorced from the slow process of nature, of men in whom every vital impulse withers, as though they were cut flowers in a vase."[46]

People in recovery who are composing our characters, cultivating friendships, reinventing ourselves, and living with integrity have our vital impulses firing at full force. We're not cut flowers. We're developing as better persons who have many virtues—including integrity.

Integrity is a vital moral good that we often lose in our addictions but can recover in our sobriety. Integrity does not mean wholeness, nor does it mean seamlessness. Integrity is harmony within all the different parts of us.

As William James argued, each of us has material, social, and spiritual dimensions to ourselves. Active in our addictions, we may have been pulled in ways that were excruciating; we may have felt as if we were deeply divided if not in all-out war against our own selves.

It shouldn't be surprising that everyone—active in addiction or not—will experience some internal division. But not all inconsistencies and divisions are created equal.

As we compose our character and begin to see ourselves as people who have worth and dignity, we realize that there are simply some beliefs we no longer wish to hold and some actions we will no longer undertake. We recognize that these may harm our character. We also recognize that some inconsistencies are neither bad nor troubling.

As Montaigne noted, each of us is made up of bits and pieces having such diversity that there is perhaps more difference between us and our own selves than between us and others. In many ways, our voices will be like the harmony of the world with contrary thoughts, different tones that may be sweet and hard, soft and loud. Having integrity in recovery is living in this sort of harmony with our own selves and within the world.

Harmony is dynamic because it is relational, arising from different elements. To impose or demand uniformity would be deeply damaging and may be a consequence of various forms of self-deception.

When we belonged to the opinions or views that others had of us, we may have denied or disowned parts of our very selves. We may have exerted great diligence to balance out what we took to be the bad parts of us or of our histories.

We may have told ourselves stories and looked for the evidence to convince ourselves that we were neither whole nor good people. We may have tried to tame our inner diversity so that we could be people of worth. We inflicted so much damage on our own selves doing this; aided and abetted by people who wanted us to be different.

On my view of integrity, we have the opportunity to create new harmonies as we and the world change. The fact is that we are always changing, hopefully evolving. We are works in progress, and one form of progress is how we can relate to the past, the present, and the future.

Part of integrity is belonging to yourself. To be more specific, it's belonging to your present self. When we become wed to the ways that we used to be, we tend to assume that that is how we must be both in the present and in the future. In a sense, our past swamps us.

When we try to wed ourselves to the future, we may begin to engage in either wishful or willful hope. We may also generate expectations for how things should be, which assumes we have far more control over the future than we really do. That can breed resentment.

We lose the present when we become wed to a future that does not and may not ever come to pass. To have integrity is to live in the present in a way that respects the past and has appropriate hope for the future, paired with the willingness to act to make it so and accept when matters turn out differently.

Integrity as harmony also gives us new ways to think about the role of self-forgiveness in recovery. Many of us begin to consider changing our relationships to alcohol, drugs, and addictive behaviors because we recognize our mistakes that are stacked like cord wood in our lives. We have histories where we have made many mistakes and harmed many people, including ourselves.

In our active addictions, those mistakes may define us; we bear their marks with great shame. But mistakes, even the worst ones, do not need to define us, especially when we learn from them. Mistakes provide the opportunity to engage in the important role of repair by taking responsibility for our actions and doing better moving forward.

When we think about repairs, we often think of trying to restore something to its pre-damaged form. We make an assumption that something that has been repaired is less valuable than it was before. We tend to think it is no longer as good or as worthy. But this assumption, much like the one about integrity as wholeness or perfection, needs to be reconsidered.

We fail to see that a repair may make something better or stronger, more useful, and able to withstand all the things that are outside of anyone's control.

Self-forgiveness and responsibility are interconnected. Both are a kind of repair work on relationships to others and to one's own self. Both are vital for enabling a person to have a healthy and appropriate relation to the past, present, and the future.

Self-forgiveness is in no way letting yourself off the hook. Oftentimes, we are the harshest judges of ourselves, and no one could possibly make a harsher judgment than those we have made.

A person who cannot forgive themself may be riven with self-deception. Their habitual center of personal energy is a toxic mix of self-recrimination, self-flagellation, and global shame. They see themselves as unworthy of the forgiveness of others most often and self-forgiveness. Someone like them deserves no forgiveness.

Someone who composes or recovers their character begins to make some degree of self-forgiveness possible. Self-forgiveness is a conversion in which the global shame of their habitual center of personal energy is displaced with self-compassion and self-respect.

In seeing themselves as deserving of forgiveness, they become a new person. They are reborn or regenerated as a person who has new possibilities before them.

Self-forgiveness requires a deep commitment to repairing our mistakes to the best of our abilities and in ways respectful of those whom we have harmed. What's difficult is that we often have a hard time seeing the damage we have done to ourselves. Partly this is a matter of perspective; it is difficult to see our own lives clearly when we

are in the midst of them. Others may have a better or more accurate perspective that helps us to see more clearly.

Self-forgiveness and responsibility both require a commitment to be and do better in the future. This is closely connected to composing our character; while we may have been able to see that others deserve to have their dignity and autonomy respected, it may have been harder for us to see that we are equally deserving. One of the things we may be able to do is to reframe some of our decisions and actions.

What a person may have understood as emblematic of their worthlessness and inability to make good decisions may begin to shift. When confronted with two or three truly undesirable and bad options and having to choose, it may no longer seem fair for a person to punish themselves.

Had they more options then, they may have chosen better. If confronted with the same options now in recovery, they may make the same choice but for very different reasons.

Part of what it means to belong to yourself is to have a better understanding of your past and present so that you can intentionally work toward a better future. Self-forgiveness is crucial because it enables a person to learn from the past, appreciate the present, and have appropriate hope for the future.

People who belong to themselves also have the virtue of humility, another term which has become so freighted with meaning that many shy away from using it. *Humility* and *humiliation* are quite different.

Genuine humility and self-knowledge are fused; they concern how each of us regards our own and others' achievements and accomplishments. Humility is a mean between the extremes of vanity and self-abasement.

Vain people overestimate their abilities and accomplishments, tending to disregard any contributions by others along the way. Vain people tend to diminish the accomplishments of others and constantly judge themselves to be superior.

Those who suffer from self-abasement see themselves as having no accomplishments or achievements. They, too, may always compare

themselves to others and always come up on the losing end. These two vices spring from and reinforce self-deception.

People who embody genuine humility are able to fairly and accurately assess their achievements and accomplishments; they neither overestimate nor underestimate. Moreover, they acknowledge how others have benefited them along the way. They are people who are grateful and extend their gratitude by helping others.

For many of us, recovery is our greatest accomplishment, often done in the company of others. Our being in recovery makes so much possible in our lives that could never seem possible in our active addictions.

Even in recovery, especially long-term recovery, we need to be mindful never to take that achievement for granted. If we start to think, *Someone like me could never relapse*, we should take notice because that is vanity rearing what it takes to be its beautiful head.

While we are better able to identify and tamp down various forms of self-deception, we are never fully immune to them. Here, too, self-knowledge is vital. We are always changing and growing, so our needs and wants in recovery will as well.

We do well when we can assay those honestly and fully, which often requires the perspective of others. With genuine humility, we are grateful for what we have, especially those who play important roles in our lives.

Belonging to yourself creates a well-spring of gratitude; gratitude is a cornerstone of many in recovery. Gratitude is one of the most potent forces creating connections with others and the world in general. Gratitude is an expansive living attitude, creating opportunities and possibilities.

Grievance is its opposite, causing a person to shrink their worlds and contract into themselves. Each of us should ask ourselves how it is

that we want to meet and respond to the world. Epictetus offers some guidance we would be wise to heed. He writes,

> Remember that in life you ought to behave as at a banquet. Suppose that something is carried round and is opposite to you. Stretch out your hand and take a portion with decency. Suppose that it passes by you. Do not detain it. Suppose that it is not yet come to you. Do not send your desire forward to it, but wait till it is opposite to you. Do so with respect to children, so with respect to a wife, so with respect to magisterial offices, so with respect to wealth, and you will be some time a worthy partner of the banquets of the gods.[47]

Don't be a person who watches how much others take from the platter. Don't begrudge the person who gets the last serving. Don't ask why you never get anything you want. Be patient for what comes your way. If you decide in advance that it won't be good, you may miss out on a total delight. You also won't enjoy the bounty already on your plate.

In recovery, we have bounty in our lives. Yes, we have hardships, challenges, and losses but we are much better able to handle them and even transform some of them into the most meaningful experiences in our lives.

When we can do this—transform our suffering, make meaning of it, compose our character, and come to belong to ourselves—we can flourish.

Here's to all of us struggling with addiction and recovery.

May we help each other to flourish.

Next Steps

There's a gap between knowing you have a problem with addictive substances and behaviors and doing something about it. **How do you know if you are ready to recover?**

Many people assume that being "ready to recover" means reaching a definitive and dramatic turning point. But for most, readiness doesn't arrive all at once. We move toward it slowly at times and rapidly at others. The speed doesn't matter; the direction does.

Readiness to change often begins with paying attention to our thoughts, feelings, and actions. It begins when we question much of what we have taken for granted.

You might notice:

- You're starting to question the role addiction plays in your life
- You feel tired of repeating the same patterns
- You wonder whether your life could be different than it is right now
- You feel a growing discomfort with the person you've become
- You catch glimpses of the person you might still be capable of becoming

These moments of reflection are often the earliest signs that something inside you may be ready for change.

You don't have to have everything figured out. Nor do you have to know exactly what recovery would look like. Sometimes, readiness begins with something as simple as asking yourself, *What kind of life do I really want to live?* and offering an honest answer.

The **Ready to Recover** quiz is designed to help you explore that question by exploring three important areas:

- How addiction may be affecting your relationship with yourself
- Some of the patterns that keep people stuck in addiction
- Whether something in you may already be ready for change

By the end of the quiz, you'll have a clearer understanding of how addiction may be shaping your life—and whether you may be ready to reclaim more of yourself.

You can take the quiz at the link below.

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Acknowledgments

Hello from the Island of Misfit Toys! So many of us who have struggled with addiction feel as if we simply don't fit in. There are just too many things wrong with us to make us "normal." And our drinking made us even more abnormal.

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About the Author

Peg O'Connor is a professor of moral philosophy and a recovering alcoholic. She is the author of three books on addiction: *Life on the Rocks: Finding Meaning in Addiction and Recovery* (Central Recovery Press, 2016), *Higher and Friendly Powers: Transforming Addiction and Suffering* (Wildhouse Publishing, 2022), and *The SoberPhilosopher Workbook for Exploring Addiction and Creating Recovery* (Wildhouse Publishing, 2023). When not in the classroom, you can find her walking her dog, Clooney, playing tennis, and goofing around with her friends.

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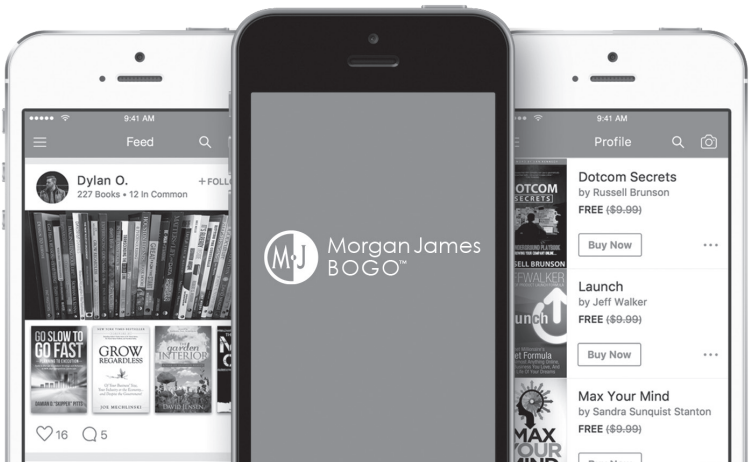
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