

Clean & Sober

I begin this essay with the general premise that each of us is an addict, but some addictions are more socially acceptable than others.

What little I know about addiction to alcohol and street drugs among homeless people, I learned from my work at Loaves & Fishes. Perhaps the most important revelation for me was to understand that most substance abuse is a form of self-medication. People need to mask their pain, whether physical or mental, and drinking or using is simply a less expensive means to cope with this pain. Drinking is legal, using is not, but each serves a kind of medicinal purpose for people who are impoverished, marginalized, and forever hurting.

When alcohol and street drugs are viewed as inexpensive medicine, the rush to moral judgment is slowed and one can look beyond the outward and sometimes raw manifestations of substance abuse and begin to see the life of the addicted homeless person in a broader context.

The philosophy of Loaves & Fishes teaches us to accept – and not to judge – each person as the individual he or she is, and not who we might wish them to be, for example, more like us. But even more than that - not to require this person to be rehabilitated so that they become eligible for service or assistance. And because many if not most of the homeless guests who come to Loaves & Fishes for survival services are self-medicating substance abusers, it is not the mission of Loaves to render them clean or sober. The mission is to accept them and render service without any pre-conditions – unconditional love, it is called, not tough love.

Even in such a lax and permissive environment -or perhaps because of it - some substance abusers wish to confront and overcome their addiction; they wish to be free.

Enter the Clean & Sober program. Originally begun by Loaves & Fishes staff members, some of whom were former addicts, the Clean & Sober program incorporated itself independently of its parent organization, housed itself in the same complex, and became an instant point of referral for addicts who

had made the decision to stop drinking or using. Ten years later, hundreds of homeless addicts had made the successful transition from addiction to living in recovery, leading independent lives, and being reunited with loved ones.

At the anniversary banquet, which celebrated the first ten years of existence of the Clean & Sober program, I spoke to the assembled supporters and graduates of the program:

These words are addressed to those who live in recovery, whether measured in years or months or even days.

You have done what the rest of us are unable, or unwilling, to do. You have confronted your own addiction, you have been willing to do the hard work – the heavy lifting – of looking at yourself honestly, without self-pity or excuse. You have somehow managed to set aside your fear and personal insecurity about the unknown – you have made the decision to overcome.

Why have you been able to meet and accept this challenge head-on, while the rest of us are unable to do so? How were you able to make the decision to do something with your life, while the rest of us do not even know we are in trouble?

Why do we remain in denial, while you are able to push forward with such courage? Why do we continue the delay, always looking for an easy way out, while you seek the truth of self? Why do we seek escape, while you seek freedom?

Where did you find the desire and the strength to choose the most difficult path of all? Where did you find the commitment to undertake such a life-altering change? What happened in your life that sets you so far apart from the drift of the rest of us?

I cannot say, I have no answer; it is a mystery to me.

What I do know, what I can say, is that your life of recovery gives us hope, and sets an example, that one day, we, too, will be confident and strong enough to confront our own addictions.

And if – or when – that day ever comes, we, too, will be able to come to you and say, “I just want to shake your hand, I want to say thank you, friend, you saved my life.”