



RECOVERY TODAY

The Second Step

The Fork in My Road and My Final Wager

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14 across and 12 down. That was the number of white square tiles I counted over and over as I lay on my back in 4 point restraint for weeks on a neurology ward. I was ten years old, terrified, confused and alone. I had suffered a traumatic brain injury to my temporal lobe and was having frequent, violent seizures without a definitive diagnosis. They stuck needles in my spine, put me in machines, pumped me full of Dilantin and Phenobarbital and finally, not knowing what else to do, moved me to a rubber room on a locked psychiatric ward. My childhood was over. The light that always had shown in the darkness was gone. God was gone and my path to self destruction and isolation began.

20 years later, after enduring excruciating isolation, depression and addiction with all its trimmings, I reached for the phone and called a prominent psychiatrist who had dedicated his life to studying addiction and treating addicts. My life had become “No Exit” much as Jean Paul Sarte had depicted it. I was searching for an answer to the meaning of my existence, a map to Hell’s exit. He had known me when I was 16 when I applied to the methadone maintenance program. He patiently listened to my ramblings, my suicidal despair and then quietly asked me whether I believed in God. What? Here I am a junkie and alcoholic looking for answers and he comes up with the God question. Incredible. If I had wanted a theological explanation I would have sought out a minister. I almost hung up. He then asked whether I had read any James when I was in college and whether I was familiar with James’ version of Pascal’s wager. I lied and said that yes indeed I remembered. In reality my brain was mush and it was a good day if I could remember where my old beater was parked. He sensed the lack of recall, and proceeded to tell me he was going to ask me four questions and that he wanted me to think carefully about each question before I answered it. To this day I remember this:

First question: What if there is no God and you do not believe?

Answer One: There is nothing, you have nothing and you lose nothing.

Reply: Yes

Second Question: What if there isn’t a God, and you do believe?

Answer two: My perceptions are my reality. At least I will get some comfort in believing in something.

Reply: Correct

Third Question: What if there is a God and you do believe?

Answer 3: You win. Your belief has a foundation.

Reply: Yes

Question 4: What if there is a God and you do not believe?

Answer 4: I paused and thought very carefully about this. I knew this was it. I muttered “you’re – bleeped”

Reply: That is right.

Approximately four months later I came into the rooms. I arrived as a self proclaimed intellectual agnostic and an emotional atheist. I had previously been to meetings when they were required at rehabs but was definitely not impressed. I heard a lot of God talk and my head spun in circles like Linda Blair did in the Exorcist. My assessment was that the god talkers were employing reaction formation as a coping mechanism. They were dependent personalities who had switched seats on the Titanic. They were still looking for an external solution to their problem and were not capable of accepting responsibility for their circumstances in life. If something good happened then it was credited to God and if they encountered a disappointment then it was not god’s will. My observation was that the addictive and recovery thinking process were very similar. In essence, they had turned powerlessness and faith into an excuse just as we had given institutions and people credit for our addiction. The payoff was there was no need for guilt nor remorse for we were merely victims. Now, I thought, we were now spiritual victims. Any belief system was good as long as I don’t have to drive the bus. I think perhaps that I was a little jaded.

I had missed the point. It was not God specifically but rather “a power greater than ourselves”. It was explained to me that this higher power could be the group, a light bulb or literally anything other than myself but for me to recover I needed to believe in something greater than myself. I was told that the only thing I needed to know about God was that I was not Him/Her. How could I restore myself to sanity when I was incapable of recognizing that my addiction had resulted in thought processes and behaviors that were not sane or compos mentis. Sanity implies rationality of thinking. Compos mentis, a legal term, is defined as having a mastery of one’s mind. Although, I was reluctant to own it, it was quite evident that my addiction had stripped me of the ability to be rational and yes, that I was insane, insane or non compos mentis. After all, I had been committing slow, systematic suicide for twenty years.

It is said that “ you come, you come to and you come to believe” and that this is the typical sequence for newcomers. I listened carefully and critically looking for chinks in the program philosophy secretly hoping that perhaps these were real addicts and alcoholics that were really

clean and sober and that were really smiling and that they were not a group of brainwashed, underachieving sociopaths congregating at the losers club in basements that needed dehumidifiers. I had never known anyone who had stopped using for any period of time and certainly not by choice. All the people I ran with were almost dead, dead or in prison. My mind flashed back to the conversation with the psychiatrist I had called in the spring and the final question surfaced. “What if there is a god and you don’t believe?” I shuddered.

I started to pray, in secret, and asked God to remove the obsession. I, of course, modified the Serenity Prayer to “God grant me the humility to endure, the willingness to listen and the ability to learn.” Hope was hard for me. Hope is an emotional state that requires some form of stimulus. My life didn’t have many external variables that could possibly stimulate hope other than I had been clean and sober for almost 90 days and maybe these people in the rooms were for real. I realized I needed to have faith to believe as faith was said to be the foundation for belief. The hamster picked up speed running circles in my mind. This was my dilemma. Faith to me was illogical as it implied trust in something with no tangible proof of its existence. I had to choose. I had no choice. I had nothing left to lose. I made the leap. My obsession lifted, my suicidal ideation vanished. I had made my final wager

About the Author

Tim C. has been in long-term recovery for over 30 years. He is the co-founder and managing partner of [Chooper’s Guide](#), a web-based treatment and information resource for addiction and owns and operates an apple orchard in Maine. He is active in the recovery movement in Florida and nationally and has been active for 28 years as a volunteer and advocate for substance abuse and child abuse.