



The Fifth Step Don't Chase the Garbage Truck

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“Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.”

I am relatively certain that if one was to rent an auditorium, stand at the podium and offer anyone in the audience \$500 dollars to stand up and admit their deepest, darkest and most shameful secrets that there would not be a stampede to the podium. What amazes me is the human tendency to cloak our true persona and attempt to project an image of perfection. The need to be accepted and to be perfect in the eyes of others denies our humanity, insults God and ensures a state of perpetual inner desperation as well as human and spiritual isolation. For addicts and alcoholics, (to me the same) the prospect of sharing one's life story and cataloging the behaviors, thoughts and past actions that we had so desperately tried to conceal is comparable to being asked to walk on a steel i-beam twenty stories above the street.

I was deathly afraid of heights. The fourth step was intimidating and anxiety producing and certainly the results of my thorough and fearless moral inventory did not enhance my self image or sense of worth. Instead, this humbling exercise left me with a foreboding sense of terminal malignancy and isolation. The magnitude of my disease and its devastation of my soul was overwhelming. How could I with what I had done ever become a normal human being? How could I ever be forgiven? I believed I would always be judged and always be viewed and treated as a junkie, an alcoholic, a human waste product. I had assembled my garbage (and, as directed, noted my positive traits also). I had put the garbage in the containers and hauled it to the curb.

The origins of the fifth step, as well as the third, ninth and eleventh steps can be traced to the Oxford Group which was an international Christian movement popular in the twenties and thirties. Both Bill W. and Bob S. were members and the fundamental spiritual guidelines found in the twelve steps were derived from the group's *Four Spiritual Practices*. However sharing one's wrong doings, the act of confession, the Sacrament of Penance has been associated with cleansing and healing of the spirit since 33 BC and is practiced in Christian, Buddhist, Islamic, Judaic and other religions. Why? It works. And for this addict and alcoholic, it helped save my life.

As my addictions progressed my behavior and my actions became more desperate, more anti social and more destructive. This downward spiral is especially true for addicts as to be an addict in society's eyes is not only to be immoral but also to be a criminal. All street addicts live in a subculture governed by

different social norms and values thereby making the conversion to sobriety seemingly impossible and the act of trying, in the beginning, futile.

Years ago, I had a sponsee who was an inner city, high volume heroin dealer. I had met him when we were both teenagers and both addicts. Years later, I was running the Substance Abuse program in the New Haven Correctional Center. He had started coming to meetings in jail to get off the block and do business with other inmates housed in different blocks. Over the next several months he came to and became very excited about his recovery. He attended meetings regularly and got active when his sentence was over. He finally landed a job stocking shelves in a supermarket at \$8.00 per hour. His meeting attendance decreased and suddenly he was gone. One morning at 6:30, I was awakened by the phone. He was in the hospital, angry, delusional and dope sick. He had a blood infection from injecting in his femoral. When I visited him at lunchtime, he told me that he just couldn't work for \$8.00 an hour. "Mr. C., I just couldn't do it. I was miserable and I was broke. I never have been broke. I was making in a day on the street what I would've earned in a year at that job. I thought I could just sell and I wouldn't use." He had never taken his fourth and fifth step and therefore had never taken a look at who he was which made it impossible for him to cross that bridge and leave his past behind him. Ronnie's addiction picked up where he had left it and it slowly ravaged his body and soul. He died of AIDS several years later. He died because he couldn't reconcile who he was or what he had done. He died because he thought he was different. He never understood that he was not alone or different and that others before him had been like him but had found relief, hope and strength in taking their fifth step and had discovered that they were not alone nor were they bad people; they were merely suffering from the disease of addiction.

The old adage, heard frequently in twelve step meetings, - "you are only as sick as your secrets" - is an easy way for many to understand why taking the fifth step is critical. Secrets imprison and gradually poison the soul. Our natural reaction is to escape the pain. I was told years ago that if I wanted to stay clean and sober that it was strongly suggested that I do the fourth and fifth step. I had watched people come into the rooms and quickly become ninety day wonders. They would burn through the first three steps and then come to a screeching halt. A predictable progression would follow. They would first stop sharing, then sit in the back, come late and leave early, then start missing meetings, then stop going to meetings and then quite frequently end up in prison or dead. For me, until I completed the fifth step, I was an outsider. I had no skin in the game. Nobody knew me or my real story, only fragments. Once I followed the suggestion, which I emotionally interpreted as a death threat, I felt a sense of relief and realized that although I had gotten off the elevator in the sub basement there were many others who had also been there. I was not unique, I was not alone. I had no more alibis only choices. I was suddenly a member of the human race. For the first time in my life I felt like I belonged and knew that I had a shot if I continued to go to meetings and follow the suggestions.

Today in retrospect, I look back over the almost 31 years of meetings I've attended and understand that I could never have stayed sober and most likely would not be alive if I had not followed and stayed the course. Today I understand that sharing who I am keeps me sober and alive. Today I understand that I have a chronic brain disease and that my behavior when I was active was a product of my disease. Today I know that I was not a bad person but a person afflicted by the disease of addiction who out of necessity developed numerous maladaptive coping mechanisms and behaviors to protect and feed my addiction. Today I know that I am not only accountable but also responsible for my actions and behavior

and that my life and my sobriety is a direct result of my choices. Today I know that God doesn't make junk. Knowing this, I understand that when the garbage truck comes to collect my trash, I need not chase the truck and take it back. It is best to leave it on the truck for it is not me it is taking but merely my garbage.