

A Freethinkers Journey of Recovery

I discovered OA shortly after joining AA in 1987. I used to think my main problem was being overweight. If I just lost 10 or 20 pounds I could drink half a case of beer every night without difficulties. Once I quit drinking, however, I replaced the alcohol with gooey desserts and mind-numbing munchies. Then my weight really became a problem. I soon realized that food, like alcohol and drugs, can be addictive. Everybody says that alcohol and drugs are bad for you. But I think the real problem is that they're TOO DAMN GOOD, and that's what makes them addictive!

I identified with the people in OA, because compulsive overeating was my first addiction. Fat is a family affair; growing up Polish and Italian Catholics in Pittsburgh, we would gather round the kitchen table full of gooey desserts at night and stuff ourselves into oblivion, while dad got drunk watching TV in the living room. It was the only time we could let our hair down, have fun, and break the tension in our dysfunctional family. Dad brought the Korean War home with him, had frequent nightmares, and everybody needed sedation.

Early on I discovered exercise and starvation dieting as a solution to the family curse. In gym class I was too overweight to do a single chin up. The gym teacher mocked me with a parody of my surname: "Cow-nacki!" The paperboy picked on me all the time, so one summer I joined a gym with my best buddy Bill. By the end of the summer, I built up a set of beefy biceps. Next time the paperboy hassled me on the school bus, I took a deep breath, flexed my muscles, and stood him down in the aisle way. After that, he never picked on me again, and everybody started calling me "Herc". I've kept up an exercise routine most of my life, attending the gym, jogging, hiking, and bicycle riding. Exercise, fitness, and good nutrition have always been a major part of my recovery.

I always had trouble with the God part of the Twelve Steps. Dad was a role model for skepticism and freethinking. Although he made us go to catechism and Sunday mass until we were 15, he always encouraged rational investigation. He would slip out of his pew to go read Sigmund Freud or Charles Darwin in the car. When I first read the Big Book, I wanted nothing to do with an outfit that preached "all that God stuff". I was a card-carrying atheist at the time. Fortunately, I got in touch with a guy who sent me the Twelve Steps rewritten for atheists and agnostics. Step Two is "came to believe we need strength and resources beyond our current awareness" and Step Three is "made a decision to trust the collective wisdom of those who have gone before us". Using such outside resources, "God" for me became something of a mix of The Force, humanistic psychology and the power of positive thinking. Recently I supplemented this with secular Buddhist principles.

Giving up the alcohol was easy, comparatively speaking. My struggle with compulsive eating has continued for decades, and maintaining abstinence has been elusive. In AA you can quit drinking alcohol; in NA you can quit using drugs. But you can't quit eating food. So you have to moderate. But as an addict, by definition, you can't moderate. So the program's impossible! I thought that way for years. Also, the addictive nature of food is sometimes hard to see, and even more difficult to take seriously. You can take pride in sobering up and tell folks: "I've been to the Betty Ford Clinic" or boast loudly: "I kicked Lady Heroin's butt!", they give you a standing ovation. But try proclaiming, "I'm powerless over pastries" and everyone thinks it's a joke.

I carried on the family tradition of culinary overindulgence for years, rationalizing that I'm a gourmet: I love to cook and I love the taste of fine foods. I generally kept my weight in check with yo-yo dieting and exercise bulimia, and I've used Weight Watchers and all the known varieties of fad dieting prior to OA. By the time I got into OA, I was only marginally overweight. However, by age 50 the middle age spread caught up with me, and I weighed in at 260 pounds. A successful career with too much sedentary living, lack of meetings, and too much of a good thing took its toll.

Yet again, compulsive exercise came to my rescue. Bicycle riding became a panacea. Vegetarian eating was also a game changer. I could wolf down massive amounts of green leafy substances and other veggies with far fewer calories; eventually I had to learn moderation, even with low calorie foods. The weight dropped magically, and I got down to my goal weight of 190 pounds. Between compulsive exercising and low-cal, low-fat vegetarian and vegan eating, I found I could eat more and more. I finally got to the point where I couldn't exercise enough to make up for all the more food I was eating.

Night time binge eating took a long time to eliminate. My wife Mary is a normal eater; I'd never met someone like her before. She can take a bite from a sugary treat and throw the rest away, because it doesn't suit her taste buds. Mary still won't accompany me to buffets, not since a busboy tried to take a plate with a few scraps of food on it and I literally growled at him! (By etymology, bulimia literally means 'eating like an animal'.) To this day I try to avoid buffets, because I take "all you can eat" as a personal challenge.

A serendipitous event was finding an article by a Buddhist on how to eat an apple. One evening after the last patient left the office, I read about mindful eating and then ate an apple. I'm glad I set the timer, because I never thought I could eat something so slowly yet enjoy it so much. It took me SEVEN minutes to eat an apple. I've eaten whole meals in less time! I tried it on my Thursday night take home Thai dinner. Mindfully eating the tasty morsels, I actually felt full, with half my dinner still on the plate! I saved the rest for another meal. This excited me immensely, especially because I've always been a cheapskate, and to get two meals for the price of one is like twitching-your-nose magic. I was also thrilled because I thought I could never feel full again after so many years of binge eating. Mindful eating has become one of my most beneficial tools of recovery.

Another milestone was using Buddhist principles instead of the 12 steps. I eventually got abstinence back by meditating, learning "to sit with my discomfort" and journaling on my sugar cravings. I began to rely on my inner wisdom, peaceful mind, and loving kindness (which I really never experienced much in the past.) Sitting in silent meditation taught me to rely on "the Great Reality within" and the "unsuspected Inner Resource" (to quote the Big Book), which is a reservoir of loving kindness, coupled with equanimity: mental calmness, composure, and evenness of temper, especially in difficult situations. Spiritual awakening, in other words; called by many names.

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