

# The Gift of Desperation

Earlier this year (in May of 2023) it felt like I had reached my rock bottom. In a manner of speaking this was my “gift of desperation”, without me knowing I was there or how this had happened yet again. The strange thing is that this rock bottom was not my heaviest weight, but it was a feeling of soul deep desperation realizing that the efforts to lose weight was about to spiral out of control again.

I had started changing my eating habits about a year prior to this, and I was feeling stuck and alone – once again. Could it really be that yet another health and wellness plan had failed? I had kept to my new approach to eating, exercised 4-5 times a week, and boom... I was stuck again. The number on the scale started creeping upward... Slowly, but I could see it happening. When I did eat a meal, I found myself not able to stop, but no alarm bells went off, at least not yet. Of course, I kept telling myself those age old mantras “but I know everything” and “I’ve done this before, I can do it again...” all the while subconsciously believing my new approach to eating would counteract all my ingrained bad habits around food.

Thankfully, I had been listening to various podcasts related to more recent research around obesity, new information around the hormones leptin and ghrelin, and the impact of food behaviors on obesity and health. These kept referring to all pieces of a puzzle that I’ve been trying to figure out for years.

In the midst of all of this, one author mentioned... “disordered eating”. I listened and listened again and found myself remembering something about OA. An old friend mentioned being a member of OA about 20 years ago. Did OA still exist, I wondered, and I found myself saying “I really need to find these people”. How bad could it be? I was desperate after all.

After a few internet searches and one or two phone calls, I connected with a local OA group and attended my first traditional OA Newcomer meeting via Zoom. I was amazed that there was a group of people like me. People who had the same pattern of dieting for years, losing a lot of weight and then gaining it all back again, people who from that first meeting had the courage to say it aloud... “Hello, I’m ..... and I am a compulsive eater”.

The talk about God and a Higher Power during that first meeting stood out for me, so I asked the group after the meeting about how I could fit in, not being a conventional religious person. The leader told me about OA Footsteps and how to find out more about all the different OA interest groups online. I didn’t follow up on this initially, but I attended a few more online OA meetings, and soon realized that the entire OA network is within my reach – accessible through Zoom, a gateway to the rest of the worldwide OA community.

Somehow, those first few weeks attending OA was liberating even with the God-talk. The power of just admitting “I am a compulsive eater” somehow released me from that feeling of despair, and the realm of possibility slowly began to open up.

As I started reading about the Twelve Steps and learning about the Tools of Recovery, I really connected with many of the stories in the very first rooms I joined. The courage, tenacity and honesty in the rooms inspired me, and helped me realize that I’m not alone. There’s more people out there exactly like me!

During those first few weeks in OA, I discovered Secular OA. From the very first secular meeting, the language and the different meeting format was a breath of fresh air to me. Here

was another way to work the 12 Steps without feeling any of the pressure or stigma that I associate with conventional religion. And there were other people there who had done it already! I quickly realized I had found a secular group that had a way of working the OA programme without traditional OA language.

While I have nothing but respect for the many kind people I've met in all the different OA rooms, on an emotional level, I felt suffocated and couldn't cope with many of the aspects of conventional OA language. I took the advice offered to all newcomers and attended 6 different meetings – traditional meetings and secular meetings – and very soon I started thinking about how best I could find a sponsor.

After a few outreach calls and a few more meetings, I decided to take a chance and approach my new friends from Secular OA. After all, I had nothing to lose by just asking them for help finding a sponsor. The result was that I've been fortunate to connect with an amazing secular sponsor. 7 months into my journey, my relationship with my sponsor is strong and I've learned so much about myself, my health, and what my goals are. I am working the steps, but there is still a lot to learn about the disease of addiction and how to free myself from the urge to eat.

My compulsion to eat is with me most days. It's there lurking all the time, some days are better than others, but I'm learning this disease will be with me for the rest of my life. Today, the decision is not which red listed foods to avoid this week, but rather which foods will trigger the pervasive urge to eat.

The most valuable lesson I've learned in this journey is that each person's journey is unique. For me, my addiction centers on food behaviors and bad habits around food which have become ingrained over time. It's not only about unlearning the habit of self-soothing with food, it's about learning how best to cope with daily life in healthy ways.

Today if I take stock, I am 7 months into the program, my blood results have improved dramatically. Cholesterol markers are fast approaching normal range, and both my inflammation markers & my fasting insulin test results are normal. Over 30 years of chronic dieting has left me needing to remind myself daily that success is so much more than just the decreasing number on the scale.

My vision of success is measured through tangible and intangible measures. The tangible includes things such as blood test results, my measurements, body composition test results, the fit of my clothing, and (yes) the number on the scale. The intangible would include my sense of wellbeing, my confidence to handle life's challenges, my ability to take care of my own mental health, and most of all, my awareness of my relationship with food.

My journey continues.

- V. P