THE EXISTENTIAL MEANING OF RECOVERY

by

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ABSTRACT

Human beings are beings of meaning; we seek meaning in our lives and for our lives. Existential theory proposes that we are also beings faced with the responsibility of making free choices, choices designed to support each and every one of us to live an authentic life in relationship with others. Those of us who have suffered in a life of addiction enter into our recovery needing and desiring to develop an altered system of meaning. A small number of men and women who identify themselves as being in recovery were interviewed and asked, *"What is the meaning of recovery in your life?"* In addition, the author of this study responded to that same question. All interviews were audio taped, transcribed verbatim, edited to a series of coherent addiction-to-recovery life stories, and the author has presented a dialectical analysis of existential meaning of recovery in his life.

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And the truth is that outside of existence there is nobody. Man(sic) exists. For him it is not a question of wondering whether his presence in the world is useful, whether life is worth the trouble of being lived. These questions make no sense. It is a matter of knowing whether he wants to live and under what conditions. (Simone De Beauvoir, 2000)

There came a time in my life when I was forced to make a decision: live or die. I was not particularly interested in the quality of my life; I was interested solely in whether or not it was worth the effort of living. I knew full well that if I continued to drink alcohol that my life would be shortened one way or another. I might be killed driving drunk; I might die in a bar fight; I might choke on my own vomit; or I might just drink until my insides scarred and my brain turned to pulp. When considering those very real possibilities, I found them to be less than appealing, so I decided that it might be better off if I took my own life. It would be quicker, and would cause everyone a *hell* of a lot less pain.

And so, late in 1989, I headed out onto the 401 highway(s) just outside of Trenton Ontario. I did not really have a specific plan in mind. I just knew that I could not live a day longer in such intense emotional and spiritual anguish. I switched on my left hand blinker and moved over into the passing lane. I remember accelerating to 140 kilometres per hour; I remember the tears scorching my cheeks; and I remember distinctly when I cried "*Fuck* it! Nobody cares, nobody ever will care. I'll show them." I spotted the concrete bridge about 200 metres ahead, and I sent the message from my brain to my hand to turn the wheel.

At what must have been the same instant a little voice buried deep in the misery of my existence whispered just loud enough to be heard, "What if you're wrong?" I eased up on the accelerator and turned off at the next exit. I also made a vow to myself. I would try to find a way to answer that little voice. I had stood at the very entrance to nothingness; I had stared into the abyss, and I had come away with what Macdonald (2000) describes as the crucial insight that "in that intense moment, the individual can give herself a reason or ground for existence, one that is

not given at birth, not given to everyone in general, but to that unique, solitary individual" (p. 37). I decided to answer the question, "What if you're wrong?"

For more than a decade I have pursued, with a ferocious passion, the question of my existence. I have asked myself Becker's (1971) three fundamental philosophical questions: *Who am I? What is the meaning of my life? What value does it have?* Oh, the roads I have journeyed in search of those answers. One of the things that I discovered very early in my travels, however, is that I need to place one question ahead of all others. *What matters most? What is the one thing in my life that I could not do without?* **My recovery**, pure and simple. Without a life of recovery my existence would be meaningless. I live my life in recovery in a way that celebrates Nietzsche's (1976) haunting words, "(T)his life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything immeasurably small or great in your life must return to you . . ." (p. 101). Imagine living one's life so well that every single moment of it would be worth living again and again throughout eternity.

It is time for me to ask the question to a broader audience. I want to know what recovery means to others who have made the decision to turn away from addiction and towards a life of meaning in recovery.

Granted, I am making certain assumptions. First, I am assuming that life in addiction offers little in the way of inherent or created meaning, nor does it offer an opportunity to realize one's authentic existence. I make these assumptions based on my belief that human beings cannot form relationships with *something*; they need *someone*. Buber (1996) says it simply, "In the beginning is the relation" (p. 69). Or as Jaspers writes in Kaufman's (1975) *Existentialism From Dostoevsky to Sartre*: "(T)he individual cannot become human by himself. Self-being is only real in communication with another self-being" (p.147).

I also assume that in order to live fully one must attempt to live authentically. Marias (1967) writes:

> Since I have to decide what I am going to do at every moment, I need to *justify myself to myself* for doing one thing and not another: life is responsibility: in its ultimate substance, it is *moral*. Like all human reality life admits of *degrees of being* . . . Since the being of life is not already and immediately given, it can be realized *fully* or *insufficiently*, it can be *falsified*. When one's life is made from one's own standpoint, when a man (sic) is true to the voice which calls him to be a determined thing, and which is therefore known as his *vocation*, his life is *authentic*: when man abandons himself to what is trite and handed down, when he is unfaithful to his intimate and original vocation, he falsifies his life and changes it into *inauthentic* life. Morality consists in authenticity, in bringing life to its maximum reality, to live is *to live more*. Morality consists in each man's realizing his own unique and unsubstitutable destiny. (p. 458)

I cannot live authentically in a life of addiction, and I cannot live a life in recovery without meaning.

And so begins a journey through the realms of existential thought, theories of meaning, and the current state of research as it applies specifically to the existential meaning of recovery.

Literature Review: Existentialism and Meaning

Habit and routine are great veils over our existence. As long as they are securely in place, we need not consider what life means; its meaning seems sufficiently incarnate in the triumph of the daily habit. When the social fabric is rent, however, man (sic) is suddenly thrust outside, away from the habits and norms he once accepted automatically. There, on the outside, his questioning begins. (Barrett, 1958)

Theoretical Underpinnings

Not surprisingly, my ontological framework is one based upon existential meaning. While a thorough investigation of existential philosophy goes well beyond the scope of this current work, I believe it is crucial for me to present a basic, thematic understanding of what, according to many existentialists, it *means to exist as a human being* on this earth. Let me, then, begin to build a theory of meaningful existence, a theory that will later support the possibility of existential meaning in recovery.

Existentialism

Being: Existence and Essence

The fundamental reality is our life. And life is made up of what we do and what happens to us. To live is to deal with the world, to direct oneself toward it, to act in it, to concern oneself with it. (Ortega Y Gasset, 2000)

What does it mean to *be* in this world? Macdonald (2000) manages to synthesize nicely this recurrent theme in existential thinking. "Existence," he writes, "belongs only to human beings" because "human being is the only Being for whom Being is an issue" (pps. 5,6). Kenyon (2000) notes that, "to be human is to have a perspective on our bodies: that they have meaning for us. This quality of self-awareness is the ground of existential meaning . . .(p. 8). Merleau-Ponty (1986) describes this human perception of the environment as *flesh in the world*: this embodied experience allows us to feel the world by living in it. Human beings are the only Beings capable of recognizing the essential duality of existing as both subject and object.

Are there guidelines to being? In other words, does our existence offer a kind of teleological escalator of transcendence benchmarked by universal values and ethics upon which we can freely choose to ride (See Kierkegaard, 1954; and Marcel, 1965), or does Macdonald (2000) describe our lives more accurately by stating, "(T)he insight that there is no already given reason why you should be at all, that the ground of your fragile trembling existence is a gift you make to yourself" (p. 43)? (See also Camus, 1955; Nietzsche, 1976; Sartre, 1992;). While wrestling with these questions the reader may benefit from the wise words of the Christian Spanish existentialist, Don Miguel De Unamuno (1954) who wrote in the *Tragic Sense of Life*, "(I)f it is nothing that awaits us, let us make an injustice of it; let us fight against destiny, even though without hope of victory; let us fight against it quixotically" (p. 268).

To cite a much-quoted line of Sartre's (1992) *existence precedes essence*. Or to flip the Cartesian cogito, *I am therefore I think*. Suzanne Cunningham (2000) illustrates this point in *The Existentialist Reader:*

> I do not exist because I think, but the other way round: *cogito quia vivo*. I think because I experience my being, without meditation or choice, as my struggle to exist in the world. In fact, I am a being who is condemned to translate this necessity into freedom. Freedom is born in and conditioned by such an encounter. I am thus a dramatic thing, the drama enacted by myself in the world with things of the world. (p. 111)

Human beings are *thrown* into this world as unfinished products, and they remain unfinished until the day they die. Within certain limiting factors of existence, or as Kenyon and Randall (1997) write *the actual facts of our lives* – which existentialists refer to as *facticity* – human beings are *free to act* with intention, and thereby open up new *possibilities* in a manner that creates their world.

Of course this paradox means that human beings not only act upon the world's stage, but they are also acted upon and shaped by the world in which they live. Kenyon (2000) illustrates this when he writes, "our bodies, the world, and other persons are *structures of signification*, they

have meaning for us, and we place meaning on them" (p. 9). Paramount in that co-created meaning is the concept of aspiring to living the authentic life.

Authenticity/Responsibility

To be lived well, life must have a purpose, embodied by projects and pursuits that give dignity and meaning to daily existence and allow for the realization of an individual's potential. (Ryff & Singer, 1998)

I wish, above all, to be conscious of myself as a thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility for my choices and able to explain them by reference to my own ideas and purposes. (Isaiah Berlin, 1998)

To paraphrase Kierkegaard, one may not be responsible for the fact that one exists, but one is most certainly responsible for the person one becomes. Sartre emphasizes that authenticity is a project of *doing* and not *being*. One must recognize the vitality and the possibility in the becoming of an authentic self, and it is by no means a life tucked away in the herd or the rabble, but rather, it is a life of individual action.

In freely choosing one's own project, one is authentic or has good faith (Sartre) or is an active will to power (Nietzsche). If, however, one should fall into step with the crowd and abdicate the responsibility of the authentic project, one lives a life of bad faith, or becomes a reactive will to power (lives without authenticity). Frankly, one runs a risk by using Heidegger (1962) to try to illustrate any point as his writing can be extremely abstruse, but this one paragraph is so replete with the basic existential meaning of the possibility of both authenticity and inauthenticity that in this case it is well worth the effort:

> In each case Dasein is mine **to be in one way or another**. Dasein has always made some sort of **decision** as to the way in which it is in each case mine (je mienes). That entity which in its Being has this very Being as an issue, comports itself **towards its Being** as its **ownmost possibility**. In each case Dasein is its possibility, and it 'has' this

> possibility, but not just as a property (eigenschaftlich), as something present-at-hand would. And because Dasein is in each case essentially its own possibility, it *can*, in its very Being, '**choose' itself and win itself; it can also lose itself and never win itself; or only 'seem' to do so**. (p. 68) (bold emphasis mine)

As I understand Heidegger, it boils down to a choice, a choice that Shakespeare wrote of four centuries ago, *to be or not to be*.

What a responsibility. I believe that each and every one of us is faced with acting upon the possibility of becoming authentic, and only we, as self-reflecting beings, truly know which choice we have made. When I find myself engaging in an act of bad faith, I heed Sartre's (1992) words, "the one to whom the lie is told and the one who lies are one and the same person, which means that I must know in my capacity as deceiver the truth which is hidden from me in my capacity as the one deceived" (p. 89).

Existential Meaning

He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how. (Nietzsche, 1954)

Once again I am faced with an impressive array of dialectical propositions. Is meaning something that we can *find* outside of ourselves? Is it a universal pursuit? Or is it an individual project? Do people, as Baumeister (1991) suggests have a *need for meaning*? Are we, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, *condemned to meaning*? Is it only *found* from within? Can it be found at all? Or is meaning merely a necessary human *creation* designed to help us make sense of the absurd? Is it possible to know a life of meaning without its counterpart, a life without meaning? Is meaning happiness-dependent? Or can we find existential meaning in suffering?

If one agrees with the conclusion offered by Reker and Chamberlain (2000) that "finding or creating meaning is an essential issue in human living, applicable across racial, ethnic,

and cultural divides" (p.199) how would one go about measuring existential meaning? Quantitatively? Qualitatively? Or perhaps it is the inherent tension between the thesis and antithesis in each of these arguments that allows for the possibility of synthesizing the understanding of existential meaning in humankind.

The Absurd

All is the same, nothing is worth while, the world is without meaning, knowledge strangles. (Nietzsche, 1954)

Camus (2000) begins this paradoxical discussion on the one hand by stating, "(I) therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions" (p. 152). On the other hand, he writes: "It was previously a question of finding out whether or not life had to have meaning to be lived. It now becomes clear on the contrary that it will be lived all the better if it has no meaning" (p. 176). Reflecting on the central message in Camus' (1988) *The Stranger*, Macdonald (2000) writes:

> human existence lacks any ground, there is no reason why *this* individual should exist, rather than not exist. Human life lacks any meaning: it is absurd because human beings have a desire for understanding and the limitations of their reason do not allow for the satisfaction of that desire. The world in itself is simply unintelligible and humans attempt in vain to discover a meaning that is never there to begin with. (p. 148)

Ayers (1990) asks many of the same questions and comes to many of the same conclusions in his book, *The Meaning of Life and Other Essays*: "(D)oes the existence of the universe serve any purpose and if it does serve a purpose, does the existence of human beings enter into it?" (p.191). He goes on to postulate that "(E)ven if life had a meaning . . . it would not

be known to the persons who had faith in it, nor would they have an inkling of the part that their own lives played in the overall plan" (p. 193). Yalom (1980) illustrates this frustrating existential paradox when he states, "(T)he problem, then, in most rudimentary form is, How does a being who needs meaning find meaning in a universe that has no meaning?" (p. 423).

Interestingly, Camus and Ayers address the answer to this dilemma in a similar fashion as well. Describing the eternal toil of Sisyphus, Camus (1956) asks the reader to imagine his hero's fate as he pushes the huge stone up the hill only to have it roll back down the other side, time and again. As the rock rolls down the hill, Sisyphus has a moment to pause and contemplate his fate. It is in this conscious, self-reflective act that Sisyphus embodies what it is to be human. As he walks down the hill to once again take up his burden, Sisyphus is aware of the fact that "happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable" and that "there is no sun without shadow and it is essential to know the night." As we leave our champion at the foot of the mountain, Camus asks us to consider that:

> One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy. (p.315)

Once again, Ayers (1990) echoes this sentiment "It is open to us to *make* our lives as satisfying as our circumstances allow" (p. 197). Whether or not I am placed on this earth for a reason, the fact remains that I am here. Whether or not this world has within it some inherent discoverable meaning, I may never be permitted to know. What I do know, however, is that I have the ability, and one might say the obligation, once I have decided that this life is worth living, to live it in the best way that I know how.

The Will to Meaning

No one will be able to make us believe that man is a sublimated animal once we can show that within him there is a repressed angel. (Frankl, 2000)

Victor Frankl (1962, 1985, 1992, 2000) offers us a penetrating, poignant look at the other side of meaning. Frankl, a survivor of four German concentration camps during the Second World War, maintains that meaning can be discovered in the world. In other words, meaning has an objective reality. Each situation has its own meaning, and each individual uses his or her own conscience as an intuitive guide to aid in its discovery (Debats, 2000). And once discovered, "personal meaning is the pathway to well-being" (Wong and Fry, 1998, p. XXV).

Frankl (1962) describes the *will to meaning* as "the basic striving of man to find and fulfill meaning and purpose" (p. 35). Frankl (1992) also emphasizes that a human being's will to meaning can be frustrated; he calls this 'existential frustration.' Frankl defines existential as: "(1) *existence* itself, i.e., the specifically human mode of being; (2) the *meaning* of existence; and (3) the striving to find a concrete meaning in personal existence, that is to say, the *will* to meaning" (p. 106).

Frankl (2000) also maintains that through human *self-transcendence* we can discover *ultimate meaning*. "Self-transcendence," says Frankl "is the essence of human existence" (p. 138). In order to become human or to truly experience Being, we must be "engaged and entangled in a situation, and confronted with a world whose objectivity and reality is in no way detracted from by the subjectivity of the *being* who *is in the world* . . . human existence is not authentic unless it is lived in terms of self-transcendence" (Frankl, 1962, pps. 51,52).

And what one may ask is Frankl's ultimate meaning? "Religion," he writes "we may say, revealed itself as the fulfillment of what we now may call the *will to ultimate meaning*." Frankl supports his belief with the overlapping views of Einstein "(T)o be religious is to have found an

answer to the question, What is the meaning of life?" and Wittgenstein who wrote "(T)o believe in God is to see that life has a meaning" (Frankl, 2000, p. 153).

Meaning and Suffering

Life is deeply steeped in suffering, and cannot escape from it; our entrance to it takes place amid tears, at bottom its course is always tragic, and its end is even more so. (Schopenhauer, 1996)

Magee (1997) posits that the more we turn away from suffering the more we become alienated from the realities of our own existence. "(M)ost people," writes Magee "sleep-walk their way through life without *allowing* themselves to meet, or even in any sustained way to think about, the existential challenges posed by the nature of our existence" (p. 220).

Certainly, a common theme among existentialist writers is what Rank (1971) referred to as the *polar twin* fear of human beings in all cultures: the fear of emerging into life and the fear of descending into death. Again human beings are unique in their ability to recognize the finitude of their existence, and it is this recognition that creates what may be termed *despair, angst, nausea, anxiety, void, and vacuum* (See Frankl, 1985; Kierkegaard, 1954; Klinger, 1977; May, 1953; Moulyn, 1982; Sartre, 1992). It is this realization that, according to Becker (1971), creates a condition in which despair and the death of meaning are carried by human beings as a basic condition of their humanity. No wonder then that Moulyn (1982) claims: "(T)he ultimate source of suffering is the fractured living-versus-dying, being versus not being, which engulfs us with the deepest pain" (pps. 190, 191).

Is it possible, then, to overcome this suffering? Is it possible to learn from our existential pain and create or discover meaning in the face of the certainty of non-being? I look first to Frankl for an answer, for if ever one were to give up on humankind, if ever one could have been

forgiven for taking up Swift's cloak of misanthropy, one might expect it to be a man who lost his beloved family, friends, and six million others of his faith during the holocaust. But while Frankl is quick to point out that we do not need suffering to gain meaning in our lives – a point I will take up further in my analysis – he is also clear that how we react to imposed suffering is crucial. Rather than expecting something from life, we may need to ask ourselves what it is that life expects of us.

According to Frankl (1992), "(T)he way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his own cross, gives him ample opportunity – even under the most difficult circumstances – to add deeper meaning to his life" (p. 76). Moulyn (1982) maintains that suffering has a certain *intrinsic value*, and that if we strive to live a meaningful and purpose-striving life that "we can come to terms with the dread of death without denying, suppressing or ignoring this dread" (p. 215). Erikson (1993) leaves us with these words of wisdom, "healthy children will not fear life if their elders have integrity enough not to fear death" (p. 269).

Meaning: Addiction and Recovery

Popular opinion is quite right in admiring a man (sic), who having been ruined or having suffered an accident, knows how to gain the upper hand, that is, renew his engagement in the world, thereby strongly asserting the independence of freedom in relation to thing. (Simone De Beauvoir, 1973)

Health

I will begin this foray into addiction and recovery with a broad examination of health as part of a continuum. Antonovsky (1987) suggests that we move away from traditional,

dichotomous models of health and disease towards something that he has named the *salutogenic model*. Antonovsky does not see disease as a singularly aberrant occurrence in the body's attempt at homeostasis, but rather as a normal part of the human condition (and that of all living organisms) of heterostasis, senescence, and increasing entropy.

Although Antonovsky would not be considered an existentialist, per se, he offers me a unique and distinctly liberating way of looking at how I have moved along the continuum of *dis ease to health ease*. I examine this continuum theory in order that I might think of addiction as something other than a disease, and as those diagnosed as addicts as something other than their diagnosis. In all twelve-step programs it is expected that the only way for one to recover is to identify with the addiction: *Hello, my name is Bruce,* ***I am an alcoholic.*** Not even, *I am a person who suffers from a disease that the medical community has diagnosed as alcoholism.* No, all that I am is alcoholic. I am expected to embody Denzin's (1987) *alcoholic self.*

Antonovsky (1987) suggests that "to be blind to the sickness of the person, to his total situation, to his suffering, is not only inhumane; it leads to a failure to understand the etiology of the person's state of health" (4). Are we, he wonders, only the disease, or are we, rather, a *story* worth exploring? Kenyon & Randall (1997) remind us that "we are stories . . . stories are cognitive: they contain ideas. They are affective: they involve emotions. And they are volitional: the involve activity or behavior" (p.15). If we focus only on the disease we tend to ignore other potentially important contributors to substance abuse like culture, poverty, and marketing, contributors that we can glean from the telling of an individual story.

To that end, Antonovsky proposes that rather just investigating those who have been overcome by stress or illness, perhaps it would be wise to look to those who have managed to overcome, or transcend their *dis ease*. He also suggests that we should look to those on the *health ease* of the continuum for our answers. Why are they there? Have they not suffered? Do these

groups view the world any differently than those mired at the other end of the continuum? In other words, there is much to learn from those who are well. This is, of course, particularly salient to the present discussion as I intend to pursue the storied lives of people who are currently in recovery from their substance abuse problem(s).

Antonovsky developed a model based on his salutogenic theory that he has named the *Sense of Coherence Concept* (SOC). He postulates that people with a high SOC have a much greater likelihood in finding themselves on the health end of the continuum. Antonovsky (1987) defines SOC as:

> A global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that (1) the stimuli deriving from one's internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable, and explicable; (2) the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; and (3) these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement. (p. 19)

Antonovsky refers to this third component of the model as *meaningfulness*. A person strong or high in meaningfulness sees the world as a place that makes emotional sense. Yes, problems will be encountered, people in the throes of their addiction will suffer, but rather than throw up their hands in defeat or lay down in the street and die, such a person will "willingly take up the challenge, will be determined to seek meaning in it, and will do his or her best to overcome it with dignity" (pps. 18,19).

Midanik, Soghikian, Ransom, and Polen (1992) conducted a study based on Antonovsky's salutogenic continuum model using his theory of SOC. Citing studies that demonstrated that alcohol problems seemed to be more prevalent as people aged, the authors set out to discover why individuals in an older population (mean of 62.4 years, N=952, 407 men &

545 women) did *not* evidence an alcohol problem. The authors created and mailed a questionnaire comprised of a 5-item index alcohol scale and a 9-item SOC scale.

Using a multiple regression analysis, the authors found that "SOC was a significant negative predictor of alcohol problems while controlling for alcohol consumption level, frequency of drunkenness and demographic characteristics" (p. 43). They also discovered that SOC scores were significantly higher for a sub sample of lighter drinkers who reported no alcohol problems in the last year and had not been drunk in the past year contrasted to heavier drinkers who described at least one alcohol problem in the last year, and reported being intoxicated at least once in the last year.

Given the fact that the study clearly demonstrated that participants with a higher SOC had far fewer alcohol related problems, I assume that Antonovsky's model has more than theoretical merit. This allows me to look to those who have created a healthy response for answers rather than focussing only on the pathogenesis of disease.

Beyond the Disease: The Meaning of Addiction

Although addiction means many things to many people, I believe it essential to have the term at least tentatively operationalized. Common features of any addiction include: a) tolerance and physical dependence; b) compulsion or craving for the drug in question; c) continued use in spite of negative consequences; and 4) without the substance, withdrawal (psychological and/or physiological) occurs (Kalant & Kalant, 1990, p. 74). Denzin (1987) describes alcoholism as "a self-destructive form of activity in which the drinker compulsively drinks beyond the point where he or she can stop drinking for any extended period of time, even if he or she wants to" (p. 15).

A tried and true saying in the addiction field simplifies this definition somewhat. *If you, as the user, think it's a problem, it's a problem.* It may, in fact, be a problem long before you can see it, but it is not until you can see it that you can do anything about it.

At no time during this project will I attempt to set up, what *I consider to be*, an artificial dichotomy between someone who is in recovery from alcoholism or drug addiction; I regard these terms as interchangeable because they all involve addiction to psychoactive substances.

Gregoire's (1995) article *Alcoholism: The Quest for Transcendence and Meaning* offers powerful insights as to the reality of existing as a *person suffering from alcoholism in the world.* "(M)ore than a bad habit or a disease," he writes "alcoholism is an attempt to give life meaning, to assuage existential dilemmas" (p. 339). Gregoire emphasizes the need to examine the experience of being addicted to alcohol and the importance of trying to understand the personal meaning of alcoholism. It is best if we try to understand alcoholism as a "problem of body, mind, and spirit, and an impediment to the resolution of existential dilemmas" (p. 340).

How one views addiction, whether from a disease model, social learning theory, or social construction viewpoint will largely determine the kinds of inquiry that one makes toward the problem and its possible solutions. Gregoire notes that after decades of debate between the disease model camp and the social learning theory camp that we are really no closer to agreeing on the etiology of alcoholism. He proposes that, instead, we take a social construction stance that allows for the fact that we will never ultimately prove or disprove the disease theory. If, then, we can posit that the etiology of alcoholism is a social construction, "then a more salient question becomes not, What is the proper explanation of alcoholism?" but rather, "What are the consequences of how we define alcoholism for the people with the alcohol problems?" (p. 347).

Sadly, these problems run the gamut and seep into every facet of the person's life. Drugs or alcohol are used to meet physical, psychological, spiritual and social needs, and when they fail

to do so people can be left jobless, homeless, friendless, and without hope. Gregoire (1995) notes that:

> When we become addicted to alcohol, we make a commitment to alcohol as the foundation of our personal meaning. The authority we convey alcohol serves both sides of our existential struggle. We use alcohol to transcend our own bodies and to rise above (however fleetingly) the masses. Subject to the influence of alcohol, we experience greatness and power, attaining peak transcendent experiences. Alcohol also allows us to hide from and deny reality. The numbing glow serves to insulate us not only from the reality of alcohol's impact on our lives, but also from our existential crises. (p. 350)

Substance use becomes the centre of the individual's existence, and this all-encompassing relationship with the substance serves as a way to meaning. As I pointed out earlier, however, this way to meaning is ultimately one of bad faith; it is based upon a specious way of transcending the self without really doing so. Frankl (1969), speaks to the futility of this endeavour, "(I)f chemical causes are substituted for spiritual reasons, the effects are mere artefacts. The shortcut winds up as a blind alley" (p. 40). We cannot achieve transcendence and authenticity in relationship with *something*; we need *someone*. This is a critical point and will be re-visited many times throughout my inquiry.

Beyond Abstinence: The Meaning of Recovery

If I can draw on Denzin's (1987, 1987b, 1989) *universal singular*, I can understand someone recovering from addiction as travelling a unique journey of recovery that shares many common experiences with others in recovery. Denzin's work is based on his massive studies of alcoholics and recovering alcoholics (Denzin's terms) in treatment centres and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in the United States. Initially he calls his method of inquiry interpretive and ethnographic, and later, in 1989, he names it *Interpretive Interactionism*.

Given that I interviewed two long time Alcoholics Anonymous (AA or A.A.) members as part of this research project, I would be remiss if I did not address his work in some way. So, although Denzin (1987b) does not address the existential meaning of recovery in so many words, his *Six Theses of Recovery* remains a salient premise and, as such, it is outlined below:

- *Thesis of the Temporality of Self.* This thesis asserts that alcoholism is a dis-ease of time; that is, the alcoholic knows himself or herself through past, present, and future experiences with alcohol. Fearful of time and its passage, the alcoholic drank in order to deal with this fear. Locked inside the past, or projected far into the future, the alcoholic was unable to live in the present. Recovery involves a recovery of time without the use of alcohol. Treatment and Alcoholics Anonymous teach the alcoholic to live in the present and to clear away the wreckage of his or her past. A One Day At A Time program is taught;

- *Rational Structures of Self.* This thesis concerns the alcoholic's self and his or her relations with others. It argues that the alcoholic must restructure the alcohol-centred relationships that were lived when he or she was drinking. In becoming sober the alcoholic comes to interact with others without the effects of alcohol. He or she learns new modes of self-presentation, self-feeling, and interacting. Recovery involves a radical rebuilding of the alcoholic's relationships with others;

- *Emotionality of Self.* This assumes that alcoholism is a dis-ease of emotion and self-feeling. The alcoholically divided self experienced negative, contrasting emotions on a daily basis. These emotions became part of the alcoholic's social relationships with others. Recovery turns on the relearning of emotional feeling. It also involves relinquishing the negative emotions of the previously divided self. Emotional repair is at the heart of recovery;

- *Thesis of Bad Faith.* The alcoholic attempted to escape or deny alcoholism. Lying, self-deception, and denial were part of daily existence. Recovery involves the shattering of the structures of bad faith that organize the alcoholic's self-system and his or her relations with others;

- *Thesis of Self-Control.* This thesis argues that the alcoholic believes he is in control of himself and the world in which he lives. Denial of alcoholism is coupled with the belief in self-control. The alcoholic drank in order to assert control over his world. As he becomes sober alcohol is no longer used as a means of self-control. A.A. and the treatment process locate the alcoholic in an interactional structure that is larger than he is. This collective structure envelopes the alcoholic and makes him part of something larger than himself. Self-control then becomes a matter of shared, social control. The alcoholic finds his self-structure lodged in a collectivity that is larger than he is; and

- *Thesis of Surrender.* This is really an extension of the fifth thesis. As long as the alcoholic surrenders to a collective force that is outside himself his recovery will be maintained. A refusal to surrender, or a taking back of the act of surrender, signals the alcoholic's desire to once again become the *captain of his soul*. This was the position he occupied during his days of alcoholism (pps. 20.21).

Again, to debate Denzin's work point-by-point is not, at this time, the purpose of my inquiry. Frankly, I feel that his analysis of the A.A. doctrine of recovery is absolutely unerring (See Cain, C. 1991: *Personal stories: Identity acquisition and self-understanding in Alcoholics Anonymous*) and as such, it has more than earned its place in this exploration. My own version of my personal recovery is set out below.

Recovery, I believe, is much more than *putting a cap on the bottle*. I agree with Haines (1997) when she writes, "(R)ecovery will be successful and quality of living will be established

only when recovering people realize the existential need to attend to finding personal meaning" (p. 37). It is a process of altering one's personal meaning system; it is a paradigm shift; it is a quantum leap. Deep recovery requires that we examine our inner selves, our relationships, our values, and our place as responsible beings in this world condemned to both meaning and free choice. Recovery is regaining our place on this earth as authentic human beings.

Fortunately, people do get better. People heal in *body, mind and spirit*. They change their exercise habits, their diet, the places they go, and the people they see. They alter their meaning systems and begin to see themselves as something other than they were. In fact, as Prochaska, Norcross, & DiClemente (1994) remind us most people get well without professional help. They marshal inner strength, engage family and friends, and they draw deeply on their personal existential history of being.

I am once again reminded of the uniquely temporal nature of humanity. We are capable of looking to our past for lessons that can alter how we live in the present and shape future pasts. As a result Macdonald (2000) tells us that "(A)n alcoholic, a drug addict . . .can decide to change their lives, to no longer be the person they are" (p. 36). On December 22, 1989, I made the choice to be much more than I was, and more than twelve years later although I am certainly happy with my current self, I am not even close to who I know **I can be**.

Researching Existential Meaning in Recovery

Reker (2000) proposes that we can understand existential meaning by way of four different dimensional features: 1) structural components or how meaning is experienced; 2) sources of meaning or the contents of the experience; 3) the breadth of meaning or the diversity

with which meaning is experienced; and 4) the depth of meaning or the quality of the experience of meaning (p.42).

If Reker has indeed identified an encompassing four-dimensional aspect to existential meaning, it is perhaps not surprising that most of the instruments developed to measure meaning are quantitative in design. It also does not surprise me that the vast majority of studies conducted to explore meaning in the field of addiction and recovery are also quantitative in nature.

Again, I turn to Reker (2000) to guide me in detailing the prevalent instruments used to measure meaning in the studies that follow. Reker calls these measurements general measures of meaning of life. He notes that "(S)uch measures reflect an individual's understanding of how events in life fit into a larger context as facilitated by a sense of coherence (order, reason for existence) and a sense of purpose (mission in life, direction)" (p.45).

- *Purpose in Life Test (PIL).* This test was developed by Crumbaugh and Maholick in 1969 to measure Frankl's concept of existential vacuum. It has a 20-item unidimensional attitude scale with each item rated on its own separately labelled 7-point semantic differential type scale with different labels across items for endpoints. Scores can range from 20 to 140, representing very low to extremely high meaning and purpose in life. The PIL (as the reader will soon see) is one of the most widely used instruments and Chamberlain and Zika (1988) have concluded that the PIL was the most useful general measure of meaning in life:

- *Life Regard Index (LRI).* Developed by Battista and Almond in 1973, the LRI is represented as a multidimensional measure of meaning in life. Meaning in life was defined by the concept of positive life regard, referring to an individual's belief that he/she is fulfilling his/her positively valued life-framework or life-goals. There are 28

items with a 5-point scale, divided equally into two subscales, Framework and Fulfillment.

- *Life Purpose Questionnaire (LPQ).* Hablas and Hutzell created this questionnaire in 1982 with the hopes that it would be an uncomplicated, easily administered, self-report measure of the degree of life-meaning experienced by older individuals living in institutional environments. It was structured to measure the same concepts as the PIL.

- *Life Attitude Profile-Revised (LAP-R).* Developed by Reker (1992), the LAP-R is a 48-item multidimensional measure of discovered meaning and purpose in life and the motivation to find meaning and purpose in life. Reker considers the LAP-R to be an operational measure of Frankl's logotherapeutic constructs of will to meaning, existential vacuum, personal choice and responsibleness, realities and potentialities, and death transcendence (pps. 45-49).

Now that I have laid out the quantitative land, so to speak, I will turn to those studies designed to measure purpose and meaning in addiction and recovery. There is, I should point out, a paucity of well-researched, quantitative material available for review, and there is very little qualitative literature available that attempts to establish a relationship between personal meaning and recovery.

Purpose in Life: Addiction and Recovery

A number of researchers have explored the hypothesis that practicing addicts (those currently using the addictive, psychoactive substance) will have significantly lower PIL scores than those people in recovery (or those in control groups).

Jacobson, Ritter and Mueller (1977) administered the PIL to 49 male and 8 female patients who were admitted to a 30-day inpatient treatment program for alcoholics. A pre-test was given between the fifth and eighth days, and a post-test was taken between the twenty-fourth and twenty-eighth day of the program. In addition to the PIL Jacobson and his colleagues also administered a Study of Values (SOV) questionnaire to all participants.

The authors discovered a significant increase in the PIL scores from the pre to the post-test, although they were also quick to point out that neither score demonstrated a clear manifestation of Frankl's *existential vacuum*, nor did they see any clear expression of his *will to meaning*. They also noted that the Aesthetic and Religious scales of the SOV were significantly correlated with the elevated PIL scores in the second test. From those results the authors suggest, "one might test the hypothesis that religious or spiritual aspects of a rehabilitation program augment the recovery process" (p.316).

Carroll (1993) examined the relationship between spirituality and recovery from alcoholism. She defined spirituality as the extent of practice of Alcoholics Anonymous Steps 11 and 12 – Step11 suggests prayer and meditation and Step 12 suggests assistance of other alcoholics – and she measured responses through a Step Questionnaire that she developed. In addition, she administered the PIL so that she could test her hypothesis that "the extent to which Steps 11 and 12 were practiced would be positively correlated with the extent of purpose in life reported by 100 Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) members" (297).

Carroll discovered that there were significant positive correlations between the practice of Step 11 and purpose in life scores and between Step 11 and length of sobriety. She also found that there was a significant positive correlation between PIL and the number of A.A. meetings attended. She concluded that her study suggested "a sense of purpose in life increases with continuing sobriety and practice of the spiritual principles of Alcoholics Anonymous" (p. 297).

Waisberg and Porter (1994) decided to examine the relationship of purpose in life to treatment outcome assessed three months after treatment completion in their *Purpose in life and outcome of treatment for alcohol dependence* study. The authors found that "alcoholics have a lower sense of purpose in life than non-alcoholics, and that their sense of life purpose increases during treatment programmes for alcohol addiction" (p. 58). They also reported that a "sense of purpose in life at the end of inpatient treatment was positively related changes in intimate relationship and changes in health" (P. 59).

Padelford (1974) found in her study of 416 Grade 10 students that there was a "significant negative relationship between drug involvement and purpose in life . . . drug involvement was found to be significantly greater among students with low purpose in life than high purpose in life" (p. 305).

Kinnier, Metha, Keim, Okey, Adler-Tabia, Berry, and Mulvenon (1994) and Kinnier, Metha, Okey and Keim (1994) studied the relationships between depression, meaninglessness, suicide ideation, and substance abuse in two samples of adolescents (48 high school students and 113 patients in two psychiatric hospitals). In the first study, "high school students who viewed themselves negatively, were depressed, or who had found little meaning in their lives were more likely to consider suicide and to abuse drugs" (p. 101).

Not surprisingly, the hospitalized adolescents were "more depressed, more self-derogatory, and more suicidal than the high school students. Those patients also reported lower self-esteem, found less meaning in their lives, and used more drugs than the students" and overall Kinnier et al note that "(P)erhaps the most interesting result of this study is the rather strong effect that the lack of purpose in life had in explaining drug use" (p. 109).

In the second study, the authors found that their high school sample demonstrated "a moderate, slightly elevating, linear relationship between drug use and psychological health" (p.

55). In other words, an increase in use creates a situation in which depression, low self-esteem, and meaningless become more relevant. Unfortunately even Kinnier et al admit that any conclusions drawn "must be tempered by the obvious weaknesses of the study" (p. 55).

Adams and Waskel (1991) conducted a study designed to compare PIL test scores of alcoholics showing early onset and later onset and an older non-alcoholic group. "(N)o significant differences were found on PIL scores of 33 early onset (before age 40) and 27 late onset (after 40 years of age) alcoholic men in alcoholism treatment centers" (p. 837). There were, however, differences between the later onset group and an older non-alcoholic group of 20 tested by two completely different researchers (Meier & Edwards, 1974).

Wolf, Katz, and Nachson (1995) compared PIL scores in ten *hardcore drug addicts* who completed a six-month drug treatment program and fifteen addicts who dropped out at the beginning stages of the program. They found that those who remained in the program showed consistently more positive existential orientation (reasons for being) than the group who withdrew and continued to use. "(T)he former subjects reported fewer social-occupational problems . . . and they expressed higher existential meaning and lower existential vacuum" (p. 134).

In their 1994 paper *The Relation Between Meaning in Life and the Occurrence of Drug Abuse: A Retrospective Study* Nicholson , Higgins, Turner and James, report the results from their epidemiological, retrospective study designed to assess the relation between meaning in life and drug abuse. The authors compared personal meaning in life between a group of 49 individuals receiving inpatient treatment for drug abuse and a group of 49 matched, non-drug abusing controls. Both groups completed the PIL and Reker's LAP-R and the results confirm what we have seen in other studies.

The inpatient population had significantly lower levels of meaning of life than the control group and the non-drug-abusing subjects had a higher amount of self-perceived purpose in life

than those who abused drugs. The LAP-R scores indicated that "non-drug abusing subjects perceived significantly more meaning in life, as evidenced by their subscale scores of Life Purpose, Life Control, Death Acceptance, Existential Vacuum, Personal Meaning, and Life Attitude Balance" (p. 27).

The authors are quick to point out the primary limitation of this study lies in the fact that they tested their population after they had developed their drug problem (the same limitation can be found in the preceding studies – excepting the Waisberg and Porter study below – but those researchers neglected to mention it). While this is an important admission, I also agree with the author's conclusion that "(F)rom the standpoint of improving the efficacy of drug treatment, however, this limitation may not be relevant" (p. 28). Regardless of whether the lack of existential meaning existed prior to drug use or after its onset, lack of meaning is a present reality and it could very well become a primary focus of treatment.

Finally, Schlesinger, Susman and Koenigsberg (1990) designed a study to address two issues affecting women alcoholics: purpose in life and self-esteem. Their sample included four groups containing 30 subjects each: Group A, alcoholic women; Group B, alcoholic men; Group C, non-alcoholic women; and Group D, non-alcoholic men. The groups were matched for age, race, marital status, employment, and for alcoholic's length of sobriety.

Schlesinger, Susman and Koenigsberg found, as one might expect, that men and women alcoholics suffered from lower self-esteem and purpose in life than did their non-alcoholic counterparts. They also reported that the "alcoholic women sampled suffer from a severe lack of self-esteem and from a pervasive sense of meaninglessness" (p. 136). As well, they discovered a significant difference between the women alcoholics and the men alcoholics. "(T)he women alcoholics have a considerably lower mean score on the PIL than the men alcoholics . . . suffering from what the authors of the test call an *existential vacuum*" (p. 137).

In all, the studies examined here would seem to demonstrate clearly that there is a significant positive correlation between a low sense of purpose in life and increased substance abuse across both age groups and gender (in the populations studied). Given the fact that I have maintained from the outset that a life in addiction is one bereft of existential meaning, this certainly falls in line with what I would have predicted

Gaps in the Literature

As I noted earlier, the available literature is without question viewed through the *quantitative eye*. As Rubin and Babbie (1993) point out "(Q)uantitative methods emphasize the production of precise and generalizable statistical findings. When we want to verify whether a cause produces an effect, we are likely to use quantitative methods" (p. 30). In other words, quantitative research can help us understand the relationship between variables. It is then hoped that by way of deduction that we can generalize those results to a wider population. Through a certain rigour, we hope to establish a study's reliability and validity, and by using a standardized instrument – like the PIL – researchers hope to answer their initial hypotheses.

Unfortunately, with the exception of the final two studies (Nicholson et al. 1994; and Schlesinger, Susman & Koenigsberg, 1990) the material presented here had far too many self-admitted limitations to do anything but suggest further avenues for research. After doing a thorough literature search that involved both the internet (which included enlisting the aid of the International Network of Personal Meaning's bibliography) and the University of Victoria's library system (including EBSCO HOST and PSYCHINFO searches using keywords: recovery and addiction and meaning), I found a mere handful of studies, all quantitative in nature, that addressed *existential meaning* in addiction and recovery. And although I was encouraged to find study after study demonstrating a positive correlation between one's purpose in life and a decrease in substance abuse – and, of course, a positive correlation between a low purpose in life

and increased, or maintained, substance abuse – I was also chagrined by a number of disturbing research trends:

- Research in the area of the existential meaning of recovery, what there is of it, is quantitatively based;
- The majority of the articles that I discussed had a number of serious methodological flaws that rendered their results, at best, tentative; and
- It would appear that what research there was on this topic diminished as of 1995.

Given all of the above, I am still most disturbed by the lack of attention paid to the individual voice in recovery. (For narrative explorations of recovery and addiction that are not *existentially meaning-based*, See (2001) *Turns in the road: narrative studies of lives in transition*, edited by McAdams, Josselon & Lieblich, and for a remarkable examination of meaning in the lives of chronic male addicts, See (1997) *Message in a bottle: Stories of men and addiction* by Jefferson A. Singer).

As Bruner (1990) reminds us, human nature cannot be understood independent of the culture in which it takes place. In order to know people and their cultures, we must listen to their stories. Riessman (1992) writes in *Storied Lives*, "(S)tories are a kind of cultural envelope into which we pour our experience and signify its importance to others . . . a near universal form for ordering our worlds, narrative allows us to make connections and thus meaning by linking past and present, self and society" (p. 232). And Peavy (1998) tells us that "(O)ur life story expresses our sense of self, how we got to be who we are and where we are in social life, and ties together the myriad of experiences which we have as we go about our daily life" (p. 97).

If that is the case, and every fibre of my being tells me that it is, why do researchers neglect to examine these stories of existential meaning in recovery? What better way to understand those around us, the culture in which we live, and finally ourselves?

I have outlined a number of important themes designed to underscore an understanding of the question of the existential meaning of recovery. I have proposed that human beings are unique in their nature in many respects. Existentialists (Sartre, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Marcel, Merleau-Ponty, and Nietzsche to name but a few), while certainly not a homogeneous body, want us to consider: temporality, embodiment, facticity and possibility, freedom of choice, existence and essence, becoming, the existential vacuum/nothingness etc., and authenticity and responsibility.

I examined the concept of existential meaning through the *will to meaning* of Frankl, and the absurdity of Camus. I looked at the relationship between meaning and suffering. I also reviewed the meaning of addiction and recovery starting with an overview of health by Antonovsky, after which I considered a number of quantitative studies designed to explore the possible correlation between one's purpose in life and substance abuse.

Finally, before proceeding to a more detailed examination of my research, I would like to, briefly, situate myself in a particular existentialist ontological and epistemological camp. I agree with Camus and Nietzsche: life has no inherent meaning. There is no will to meaning, and there is no essential nugget of true meaning available to be mined. I create, and co-create with others, meaning out of the chaos, order, joy and suffering in my life because I can. I create it because I must, for to live a life without meaning is to live a life that is less than human. I made a decision **to exist, to live, to become** as an authentic, responsible human being in relationship with other human beings. For that I am grateful. If you will, imagine me like Sisyphus, happy with the burden and more than ready to take it up again and again.

Research Methods

Research Goals

I am interested in exploring, in depth, the storied existence of men and women who identify themselves as being in recovery from an addiction to a psychoactive substance (drugs that affect the mind, especially mood, thought or perception). I want to know how they describe what it is that gives their life meaning or how they may have created their own meaning. Have they journeyed down a similar road to me? What is it that they have learned in their path of recovery that I can share with you, the reader? What can these stories teach us about others, our culture and ourselves? I am also interested in exploring a possible explanation for my own meaningful recovery.

Research Question(s)

My primary question is, "What does your recovery **mean** to you?" My participants were chosen because they have embraced a life of meaning in recovery. It is that life in which I am interested. I asked each participant to consider the question from what I call the five essentials of wellness: the physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual.

Each respondent emphasized immediately that recovery could not be understood without its counterpart, addiction. In other words, I only appreciate what recovery has brought me because I can examine what it was like before.

Towards Method

When I began this process back in the summer of 2001, I was struggling to find a topic for my thesis. I had a ready-made one based on the work that I had done for a large final project

in one of my other classes, but somehow I knew that it didn't ignite my passion. And so, late one evening, I went out for a run, and I asked myself what it was that mattered most in my life. What was it upon which all parts were contingent? The answer was simple. Without my recovery nothing else would be possible.

Once I had that piece everything just kind of fell into place. I started from my personal ontological framework and built outward. Soon I was reading and re-reading existential theorists from both absurd and religious camps. I then hunted down works on meaning – created and discovered – and I began an exploration of narrative theory based on my own belief that we create and co-create ourselves and explain those created selves through story.

By the fall of 2001, I knew my topic would be the existential meaning of recovery, and I knew that I wanted to interview a man and a woman from AA, and one woman from outside a 12-Step program. I also arranged for a colleague and friend, Sharon, to interview me. Again, I did this because, in so many ways, I think dialectically; that is how the world makes sense to me; it's how I synthesize my created meaning. For the story to make sense to me, I wanted that balance.

As Reker and Chamberlain (2000) remind me "qualitative approaches to research are diverse and premised on a variety of epistemologies" (p. 202). So too are the methods to analyze these data. Earlier, I mentioned that I expected that we would learn more about our participants, our culture and ourselves. In order to attain this lofty goal, I needed a way *in*, a way to understand the rich narratives with which I had been honoured. I needed to present the stories in a fashion that allowed the reader an opportunity to witness, by way of authentic description, each participant's life in meaningful recovery.

I have maintained throughout this work that we can only understand our culture, others, and ourselves through the expression of stories or narrative. Think, for instance, about thinking. We are constantly in conversation with ourselves creating ourselves, so to speak, through our

interactions with others within culture (See Gergen, K., 1991: *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*). This self-communication, Charon (1992) reminds us, is what makes us essentially human. We express the content of our existence, in this case as people examining the existential meaning of our recovery, first through the use of internal and then shared stories. In other words, we create an internal dialogue based upon the way in which we process external stimuli, and eventually when we have been able to integrate those stories into who we think we are, we share them with others so that they can understand us.

Woolcott (1994) emphasises that, "(Q)ualitative researchers need to be storytellers . . . when we cannot engage others to read our stories – our completed and complete accounts – then our efforts at descriptive research are for naught" (p. 17). With this in mind, I recognised that perhaps my most crucial task for the descriptive aspect of my project was to find a way to present the reader with an authentic, engaging account of meaningful recovery as experienced and voiced by my participants. In order to do so, I edited the verbatim transcripts in such a way as to give the reader a description of meaningful recovery as seen through they eyes of the storyteller. Given the fact that my examination concerns the existential meaning of recovery, it is not surprising that themes like temporality, transcendence, embodiment, facticity and possibility, freedom of choice, existence and essence, becoming, the existential vacuum/nothingness, guilt, authenticity and responsibility are prominent throughout.

I also needed a way to analyze these descriptive themes that fit with my dialectical way of seeing the world in order to assist me in developing an *explanation* of my own recovery. By a dialectical understanding, I mean that I have always examined two seemingly disparate concepts, and I have created a synthesis out of the tension or the overlap of both. For instance, I understand my life in addiction a certain way. I understand my life in recovery in a different way, but there are places where I have discovered a mutual understanding that creates a new construction of reality. For me this happens to be an ongoing process; the synthesis is not a static place and it is

not long before the process begins anew. This understanding has been influenced exponentially by the fact that I have been privileged be a witness to, and in no small way a co-creator of, the meaningful stories presented here. That privilege has, in fact, been the catalyst for a complete re-examination of the dialectic of my own recovery.

I cannot emphasise strongly enough, however, that neither the description nor the explanation of meaningful recovery that follows in any way represents some kind of objective truth or reality. We four have been permitted the opportunity to offer our own truths as we have come to understand them at the present time. These truths will undergo more than one metamorphosis in our lifetime. That is the very essence of the dialectic.

I approached my proposed interview subjects and asked them if they would be interested in participating in the project, and I was quite thrilled that the people whom you will meet in a moment, Marge, Sue and Hank all agreed to sit tell their stories on audio tape. In the end, including my own story, I had somewhere in the neighbourhood of 320 pages of single-spaced text to edit.

I reconstructed the narratives in a way that presented the reader with temporal markers. The participants were often concerned that they were telling their stories out of order, and "all over the map." In addition, I edited the *addiction to recovery* narratives in order to remove redundancies and help the stories flow. If the reader is interested in pursuing this style of reconstruction further, See Mishler (1995).

I spent most of the next two weeks editing the text, so that I could present the reader(s) and the participants with coherent life stories. This was actually a bit of a departure from my original plan because, initially, I had thought that I would be presented with a clearly delineated recovery text. Instead I ended up with a three distinct life path processes: a beginning, middle, and an end. I accepted the fact that I wanted a complete picture and not a stand-alone examination of recovery. I reached this conclusion, frankly, because I have come to believe that

such a stand-alone examination would be empty without the history that led to recovery. For that matter, the history of addiction would be set adrift without the anchor of memories garnered prior to substance abuse.

I then presented each participant with an opportunity to examine the edited texts, and I asked them if I had managed to capture the essence of their stories. I wanted the narratives to be accurate in tone and content: I wanted Marge, Sue and Hank to **recognize their voices, not mine**, in the final offering. I wanted each narrative to be representative of that individual's path of meaningful recovery, so I gave each an opportunity to add or subtract to the text as he or she wished, and I will admit that I was a little uneasy as I waited for the stories to be returned. I worried that in the cold light of day with ample time for reflection that there might well be some retractions.

But again, I kept quiet, and I trusted the process; I believed that each person would do what he or she needed to do, and I would not have had it any other way. I could not have it any other way because it would have made this entire project inauthentic. It is almost as if I intuited that it was only with the description of their stories of recovery, as told in their words, that I would ever have a chance at understanding and explaining my own meaningful path. And they removed nothing. They *insisted* that I use their real names. Even after sharing with me that they couldn't quite fathom how much they told me, they took away nothing. In doing so, they gave me everything. In a unique and important way, we had truly become co-researchers in this research endeavour. True enough, their words became the descriptive foundation for my personal explanation of meaningful recovery.

I began the project by having myself interviewed, by my friend and colleague, Sharon, over a number of sessions. We started from the question(s), "What does recovery mean to you? What is the meaning of your life in recovery?" From those interviews, I wrote a first draft of my story of recovery, and from that draft, Sharon created a dozen or so questions that allowed me to

deepen my understanding of my examined life. I edited my original story and presented that version for this paper.

Throughout, the process was unbelievably painful in so many ways, and absolutely liberating in so many others. I think that for the first time, for instance, I felt so sad for that little boy I had been. He was so alone, so unloved, so isolated. At the same time, I gained a new respect for his tenacity and his uncanny resilience. In many ways, I found myself understanding my own heroic myth, (this will be expanded upon in the analysis chapter) for want of a better way of phrasing it (McAdams: 1993). I also understood just how difficult a procedure this was going to be for my interviewees. That sensitivity would prove invaluable in the next couple of weeks.

Participants/Research Location/Site

I interviewed three adults who currently identify themselves as being in recovery from an addiction to a psychoactive substance(s). I spoke with one man, Hank, and one woman, Marge, from the 12-Step community, specifically AA, and one woman, Sue, from outside the 12-Step community. In addition, I participated as the male interviewee who recovered outside of self-help groups. All participants have been abstinent from all psychoactive substance use for more than five years. I chose this timeframe because research in the substance abuse and recovery field would seem to support the idea that relapse becomes a more remote possibility after five years in recovery. In other words, recovery has had a chance to set, to become more solid.

All interviews took place in a location chosen by the participant. I interviewed Marge in my office at work, and Hank and Sue in their respective homes; I chose to be interviewed at the local airpark.

The difference between the research location and the research site is more than mere semantics and must be addressed briefly here. The actual *site* of this research project is within the lived experience of each participant and as such it is much more than just a locale; it strikes to the very heart of the meaningful narratives presented in this work; it is the difference between place and person, object and subject.

Methods of Data Collection

As I stated earlier, I have chosen qualitative research methods for this study because I am interested in generating contextually imbedded data rich in detail. Specifically, I audiotaped interviews of 60-90 minutes in duration with each participant. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim, and the subsequent text taken to each interviewee for a review of content accuracy. At that time, the participant was asked if there was anything he or she would like to add or delete from the text. This not only gave the interviewee control of his or her information, it provided an opportunity to deepen the text after considerable reflection.

Kvale (1996) suggests that the qualitative research interview allows us to gather descriptions of the lived world of the participants with respect to interpretations of the meaning of the described phenomenon and he offers the following twelve aspects of qualitative research interviews:

- *Life World.* The topic of qualitative interview is the everyday lived world of the interviewee and his or her relations to it;
- *Meaning.* The interview seeks to interpret the meaning of central themes in the life world of the subject. The interviewer registers and interprets the meaning of what is said as well as how it is said;

- *Descriptive.* The interview attempts to obtain open nuanced descriptions of different aspects of the subjects' life worlds;

- *Qualitative.* The interview seeks qualitative knowledge expressed in normal language, it does not aim at quantification;

- *Specificity.* Descriptions of specific situations and action sequences are elicited, not general opinions;

- *Deliberate Naïveté.* The interviewer exhibits an openness to new and unexpected phenomena, rather than having ready-made categories and schemes of interpretation. Clearly, I come with an ontological and epistemological framework or lens with which I view the world. During the interview itself, however, I did my utmost to remain as neutral as possible; I asked the question, and sat back and listened, prompting very little;

- *Focused.* The interview is focused on particular themes; it is neither strictly structured with standardized questions, nor entirely 'non-directive';

- *Ambiguity.* Interviewee statements can sometimes be ambiguous, reflecting contradictions in the world the subject lives in;

- *Change.* The process of being interviewed may produce new insights and awareness, and the subject may in the course of the interview come to change his or her descriptions and meanings about a theme;

- *Sensitivity.* Different interviewers can produce different statements on the same themes, depending in their sensitivity to and knowledge of the interview topic;

- *Interpersonal Situation.* The knowledge obtained is produced through the interpersonal interaction in the interview; and

- *Positive Experience.* A well carried out research interview can be a rare and enriching experience for the interviewee, who may obtain new insights into his or her life situation. As the interviewer I, too, expect to gain new insights into my own meaningful journey in recovery. (pps. 29-36)

I present Kvale's *aspects* here in their entirety for a number of reasons. First they support my line of inquiry. In other words, the interview is the most appropriate method of gathering the information I need to begin to answer my question as to the existential meaning of recovery. Second, Kvale's work demonstrates what we can expect from the data once it has been retrieved. And finally, Kvale anticipates nicely a number of ethical concerns that I needed to address before I conducted my first interview. In these twelve aspects, Kvale manages to answer the *how, what, why,* and infer the *who* of qualitative interviewing.

Validity Issues

Maxwell (1996) refers to validity in qualitative research as "the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account" (p. 87). There will be no objective truth to be found in the research of the existential meaning of recovery. That does not, however, mean to say that I have not discovered myriad truths in this journey. I hope I have been able to offer some grounds for the reader to distinguish credible accounts from ones that are not. For instance, it would have done little good to present the story of someone who is currently using a psychoactive substance yet claims to be abstinent and in recovery.

Maxwell (1996) recommends that the researcher remain vigilant in the face of four major threats to validity in qualitative research:

- *Description.* You are only as good as the data that you present. In addition to providing accurate audiotape transcription, I recorded general observations on a notepad as the interview progressed. It was from those verbatim transcriptions and notes that I created an edited version of the four addiction to recovery stories.

- *Interpretation.* The greatest threat to a valid interpretation of the data is to impose my own framework and meaning system onto those of the research participants *during* the data collection. This researcher bias has the potential to be a very real threat to the validity of my project. While I have presented, what I consider to be, a very broad representative account of existentialism, meaning, and addiction and recovery literature, I have my own ontological, epistemological, and value-based views of the world in which I live. As I noted earlier the interview itself was based on the participant responding to the question, *What is the meaning of recovery in your life?* At no time did I attempt to question along typical existential lines of inquiry like authenticity or responsibility. I also tried to alleviate this bias by including my storied existence of existential meaning to the text. After I have described to the reader what my recovery means to me, there will be absolutely no doubt in anyone's mind in which camp I pitch my tent.

- *Theory.* Maxwell notes that the most serious threat to the theoretical validity of an account is not collecting or paying attention to discrepant data, or not considering alternative explanations or understandings of the phenomena in question. This particular point raises a number of interesting issues. Given my decision to focus primarily on analyzing my own narrative, I needed to be especially sensitive to the possibility that I was ignoring discrepant data, or explaining that data in a way that does not permit an alternate explanation. I have agreed, up front, that all the data presented here could easily be analyzed from manifold interpretive lenses.

- *Generalizability.* Maxwell notes two main forms of generalizability: internal and external. Most qualitative studies are predominantly concerned with internal generalizability. This means is that we may draw conclusions within the setting or group studied. The descriptive, interpretive, and theoretical validity of the conclusions all depend on their internal generalizability to the case as a whole. Interestingly, in this particular case, Denzin's universal singular theory may warrant a *theoretical* suggestion of a more external generalization. (pps. 89-98)

An Existential Process in Ethical Research

Kvale and Maxwell were extremely helpful in providing me with a grounding of qualitative research method(s) theory. In other words, before I began it was important for me to be sensitive to methodological issues that might present themselves in both the interview process and in the area of research validity. What actually transpired, however, was a much more deeply personal process. My existential framework informed my research practice from the very beginning and maintained itself throughout; it also formed the foundation for my strict adherence to ethical research practices:

- Responsibility: From the moment I was interviewed, I recognized a level of responsibility that could not be ignored. Once I contacted a participant and they sat down and shared their story of addiction to recovery, I was responsible to present that narrative in an open, and rigorously honest manner. That became doubly evident as I struggled with editing 90 pages of single-spaced text down to 35-40 pages of double-spaced narrative. I was obligated to give each participant an opportunity to withdraw or alter anything that they had told me; after all, it was their story, not mine. I was just keeping it for a while.

- Relationship: I had a previous professional and personal relationship with two of my participants, and I did not meet the third interviewee until the night of the interview. In order to hear stories filled with so much pain and joy, stories with so much significance, I needed to become invested in a relationship with each participant. It was not possible to take a detached stance during or after the interview process. I was, and I remain, an active participant. My empathy needed to be real, to be heartfelt, in order for me to continue this project. You will read the words *data* and *participant* several times throughout this thesis, but it was crucial for me to place directly in front of myself the real truth of the matter. What I mean by data is *shared life experience*, and participants are *Beings* who have honoured me with their constructed selves.

- Temporality: I really had no idea how important the temporal nature of recovery would be in the telling of the narratives presented here. People needed to offer a story that was more than addiction and more than recovery. These stories are about Being, and as such, they are about Beings in time. We were children, brothers and sisters, father and mothers; we have pasts, presents, and futures. We have regrets, we are active agents, and we have dreams. All of these things influence the way that we see, and ultimately represent, ourselves as *beings in recovery*.

- Freedom/Facticity: I will readily admit that when I began this project, I expected to gather the narratives, analyse them according to a certain qualitative prescription, hand the work in and carry on with my life. Well, it has not worked out that way at all. My existential self, if you will, blanched at the idea of following someone else's script, and as you will see, I have been challenged to come up against what I had always considered *a fact of existence*, namely research is done a certain way, and I have decided to exercise my free will and choose – something I am condemned to do – a different and yet congruent way of presenting the analysis of this material.

- Suffering: This was a painful course. When my own interview was complete, I opened wounds that have yet to close. After each interview my participants told me straight away that it was so incredibly hard. One woman confided to me that she was still reeling a bit weeks after the interview. With the suffering came courage. It was incredibly courageous to entrust me with so much.

- Authenticity: Authenticity guides this project. I can only be who I am, and who I am becoming. I can do nothing that goes against the person I have created, and co-created in relationship with others who knows at a deep level that he is nothing if he is not authentic. That means that when it came time to attempt to *explain* the stories of the others, I would not. Rather, I chose to present those narratives as a means of authentic description, and then I used that description to help me better understand and then explain my own journey of recovery. It is the combination of this description and explanation that I hope will lead the reader to examine further what it means **to be** human.

Kvale reminds me of the importance of the role of the researcher and his or her sensitivity and commitment to moral issues and action. "the integrity of the researcher – his or her honesty and fairness, knowledge, and experience – are the decisive factors" (p. 117). In this, I am comfortable. I have been preparing to do this research my entire life, and each one of my participants is well aware of that fact.

Finally, I want to be very clear as to how I plan to use the wisdom presented in the pages above. Perhaps the best analogy that I can employ is that I am about to go on a long and difficult journey with my research participants, or co-researchers one might say, and a fabulous array of marvellous existential theorists at my metaphorical side. With their assistance, I will wind my way through thematic passages of existential meaning and dialectical crossroads in order to

present the reader with a map that both describes and explains the existential meaning of recovery.

From Addiction to Recovery: The Stories

By the time I sat down with Marge to do my first interview, I had an idea that we were both in for an intense, painful, joyful, and absolutely fascinating ride. Marge spoke for three hours. She cried, she laughed, she shared, and in doing so I felt that she trusted me with her life. I mean it was that basic; she put her life, the good, the bad, the beautiful and the ugly in my hands and she said, "Oh, that was so hard." Days later she told me that it was still difficult. And I began to feel humbled and at the same time responsible.

Imagine. I asked her what recovery meant in her life and she filled two ninety-minute tapes. As Marge's life played out in front of me, I realized that I was getting a whole lot more than a story about recovery: I was hearing a life story of being, of becoming. Through her ongoing struggle with identity, she was revealing to me who *she knew* herself to be. Clearly Marge was telling me that her recovery was tied intimately to the fact that she knew, with absolute certainty that she could trust herself and that it was okay to be herself.

One may wonder if she has created or discovered her own identity or if it was, in part, handed to her as a devout AA member. One may wonder, but Marge doesn't, nor do I expect that it would matter to her either way. And yet, as comfortable as she is with her new (relatively) identity, at age 61, with a quarter of a century of recovery under her belt, she can still find herself floored by the ignorance of another; how easily that identity can be pierced and how deeply and immediately the pain can be felt.

When our interview ended, I had spoken not more than a few dozen words, and yet I sat in my chair for minutes after Marge left; I was drained.

I first met Marge during an alcohol and drug workshop at UBC in May of 1996. I sat behind her during one of the workshops – Boundaries – and I was struck by her presence. She had these beautiful eyes and startling red hair. I next met her when she and her colleagues moved to our building as part of the ongoing transience that is Alcohol and Drug Services. Over the past three years it has been my absolute delight to work collaboratively with her, and to learn from her during my practicum for my Master's degree. Marge is an exceptionally skilled counsellor, and a warm, caring, vivacious woman.

Marge's Story

Addiction and recovery run all together because I'm much more conscious of what it was like before in retrospect. I understand so much more now whereas before I was just doing. Before, I was just living it. The further I get into recovery, the more that I'm learning and remembering, 'oh, yeah, that's what I used to do,' and 'that's what I used to feel like.'

I have had a real long history of people, just when I'm going along fine, coming and taking pot shots at me, and it's usually other women. It used to be men, when I was younger, but now it's other women. It is difficult because while I have always been good at defending other people, I have never been all that capable of defending myself. So when women say bitchy, catty things it takes me back to when I was a child. I was a tall kid, and while I felt like a big kid, I wasn't, I was just tall. And being bigger brought a certain imposed restraint against hurting anyone smaller.

So 61 years later, I'm still like that, right? Two weeks ago I was at a health conference, and I was leaving because the end of the conference was just statistics. Now, I have really enjoyed the first day and a half of the conference, but I am not interested in statistics, and I have a ferry to catch. I walked out into the foyer, and I asked the woman at the table if I could have my certificate. She says, "You can't have your certificate. You didn't stay for the whole thing." And I said, 'I'm not staying for the whole thing. I don't want to hear statistics and I'm not five years

old.' She was angry with me, and so she took my certificate, ripped it in half, and then gave me a handwritten thing that stated 'Marge attended for one day' and then she handed it to me. I was just sucker-punched. So I drove towards the ferry, and I was so *cotton-pickin* hurt. I'm always hurt and confused when something like that happens. I feel as though I have done something to cause it or warrant that kind of response from people.

Later, I was telling this story to a dear friend and she said, "Well, you know, it's your presence. When you walk into a room people take notice, and some women probably think you need to be taken down a peg or two." I said, 'Really? Really? I guess that makes sense, but I'm the biggest *woose* and I'm such a big softie. I never see myself as needing to be taken down a peg or two. I mean, I have a hard time holding on to the peg that I'm sitting on.'

When I look back, I am struck by my complete lack of identity, or inner self. I had a series of roles. I was a mother of four by the age of 23; I was a daughter; I was a bunny waitress; I was a wife, but I had nothing inside that I could fall back on. I was only someone in relation to someone or something else. Of course, I had costumes for all these roles, and I could look the part on the outside, but it got difficult when I got caught outside a role. I mean it didn't seem congruent to be PTA mom and bunny waitress, and I couldn't seem to link or ground everything to a sense of personal identity.

As far as I can remember my first drink was a glass of really sweet wine at Christmas at my uncle's place, but my mother says that my paternal Grandma (my father is French speaking Belgian) used to make what she called wheat wine. My Mom said it was grain alcohol. Grandma had eight children, so when everybody would come over with their kids, she would give the kids a little sip of wheat wine, and they'd usually sleep for the afternoon. My Mom stopped taking us there. So from a very young age, I've had alcohol. Of course, I don't remember that, but I certainly remember the ten-year-old stuff, and I loved the way *it* made me feel. I felt silly and funny and more importantly, the adults around me thought I was amusing and that was huge.

My father was alcoholic. He couldn't afford to be alcoholic when I was that age, but he was a very, very stern person. My dad was raised in a convent, and an aunt who didn't like little girls raised my mother, whose own mom died when she was only four. As luck would have it these two people got together. Well, it was nothing for dad to knock my mom around and it was really shameful and embarrassing. Naturally it was never talked about outside the house, but you know, the windows were open and it's summer time and people can hear this swearing and slaps and stuff so it wasn't a neighbourhood secret.

The marriage started to decline and when I was ten, my youngest brother was born, and I loved him desperately. I have a brother that's two years older and one two years younger than me. Anyway, my parents are partying more and more and I have to baby sit so much that I lose my childhood. We had a very traditional family with traditional roles. You know, boys can do whatever they want and girls, well they minded kids and you kept them off the street so they wouldn't get into trouble.

I was a really good student, in fact, so were all my siblings. I am taller than the boys in the class, and I'm Manitoba Metis. There's a whole other story, there wasn't even the word Metis then. There were a lot of negative comments about people who had any native blood, and we were called things like jigaboos and half-breeds, all sorts of really poisonous things.

I was not raised with any sense of pride around my own history, and nobody really talked about the fact that my family's in the history books now. My great, great uncle is, was the first Metis premier of Manitoba, and his name was John Norquay. I didn't know that; I mean it just wasn't talked about. There were so many secrets, lots of unspoken things, and you didn't dare ask questions. I was raised in a house where if you couldn't guess you sure wouldn't dare ask.

This is really painful. As I said, my father was very stern, and plus, I was raised around my aunt, the aunt that raised my mother who was the closest thing to grandma that I had on that side. I really loved her. Just thought she was wonderful. I called her auntie. Auntie weighed over 200 lbs and she was auntie to me, but now that I look back on it she was so obese that she

had to walk with a cane. Anyway, from a really young age she said very chastising things to me. I just thought it was discipline. In fact, it was, it was more than that. My brothers have said, 'auntie didn't like you.' So here's this person that I love, and she didn't even like me, so I got the message, once again, that it wasn't okay to be me.

By now I'm 13-years-old, and I'm as tall as I am now which is 5' 6". I'm also in a town where there are lots of young men, 17-19, who were in the Air Force. Suddenly, it doesn't matter if I fit in with the kids my age because I am getting lots of approval from the older youth, especially the boys. I moved into adulthood very quickly.

In the middle of all of this my parent's marriage was deteriorating rapidly. There was more violence and lots more drinking. But again, here's the other side of the coin because being a really good Metis family we would have these big parties on the weekend with all kinds of family rolling in, and I was allowed to stay up because they needed somebody to chord on the piano, because they wanted to dance and sing, right? Of course you can guess that the dancers were the darker side of the family. There was lots of laughter with all these parties, and I loved it, I just loved it. It wasn't until six or seven years ago that I figured out that laughter wasn't the same thing as happiness; it's just laughter. As well somebody would get drunk and there'd be fighting outside or whatever. They'd get over it and come back in, and party on, right? It was just part it.

My family also liked to tell jokes. My mom's side of the family had nicknames for everybody; they were terrible teases. In lots of ways, though, it was just really lots of putdowns. One of my uncles called me Madge. I hated it. My great grandpa called me bunny and everybody would laugh. It wasn't until years later that I figured out that being called bunny was not a term of endearment. I had big ears as a kid; it was just another put down.

I started dating seriously when I was about 14. I don't know what my parents were thinking of, but they allowed these young fellows to come back to the house and be part of the party, right? Needless to say, and I had no idea about sexuality - none - I had no idea about any

of that stuff. I was sexual at 14; I didn't feel good about it, and I didn't even really know what was going on. There wasn't anything pleasurable about this. You know, I gave in because I didn't want him to go away. Again I felt different because I had no one to talk to about this stuff, so I became the rebel. If I don't fit in, I'm going to fit out.

My dad and my oldest brother didn't get along and one day they had this big physical fight and my brother moved out. My brother had finally had enough and he tried to intervene and stop my dad from hitting my mom. It was awful, the way he left. I was now the oldest kid at home and things just went from bad to worse.

Well, when I was about 15, I started going with this young fellow, 19, who was in the Air Force at the time. All I knew is that I wanted away from my family. I just did not want to be part of that scene partly because I had to wear my parents', and my family's identity, and I didn't like that identity. I also didn't have one of my own. The shame and the constant negativity had just worn me out. We talked about getting married. I mean we were so stupid, big, dumb kids really. Well, the only way I can get married is if I'm pregnant. We worked hard at it and we got married when I was 15 and two months pregnant. I had to confirm the pregnancy through blood tests at the doctor's and that added more shame. My life was constant shame. It seemed that I was always ashamed of something.

So away we go, newly married, and we move to Vancouver and we live with his mom, his little brother, and his cousin in this place in the west end of Vancouver. Well, my husband, no surprise to anybody, turns out to be not a very nice guy. I'd sailed off into the sunset and said goodbye to my family, with my dad's blessing – I really believe that even with everything that my parents always wanted the best for me – and I ended up stranded in Vancouver, fifteen and pregnant, and I discover that I am not living with Prince Charming. I ended up having my daughter two days before my sixteenth birthday and by now my husband had started to become quite physically abusive, and he started drinking more; it seemed like there was nothing that I

could do about any of it. I mean, I didn't have a job, nor did I have any money; I had nothing, and I was totally dependent on him.

So, I leave him a couple of times though you can't even call it really leaving. He was out of the service and he was a traveling salesman. Well, sometimes when he travelled to sell, I fled back to Manitoba, back into this chaos that was my family. They'd lost the family home, and they're living in this garage-type place and I show up with my little daughter.

I managed to get a job because I have to support my daughter, and one of the people I'm working with comes from St Ambrose, which is a Metis community on Lake Winnipeg. Anyway, she said, " My brothers, and my cousins are coming into town and after I get off work we're going to go and get some wine." Remember, I loved wine. I had started to drink while I was pregnant. I didn't know any different. I drank beer - but I didn't get drunk, - but I drank beer, occasionally. I liked mixed drinks too; they were pretty good. But I started to look really forward to drinking. So, here we are headed to the bootleggers – I knew where they all were because my dad used to run for them - actually I'd been the bootlegger, because he would go to the Army & Navy, and he would send people in a taxi, and I would give them the booze because I was home babysitting, right? I was 14. It's just the way it was.

Everybody's under age and we are all drinking wine in this old car, probably six or seven of us and we've got a couple of bottles of wine. I got really, really drunk. Oh, man, did I ever get drunk and sick. Lord I got sick. But I liked it. Even though I felt absolutely wretched, I liked the fact that could I laugh. It was so funny. I liked the laughter. I found at a really young age that I was attracted to men who made me laugh. So, needless to say, I would be attracted to the biggest goof in the crowd. That's just the way I was. I liked being around people who could make me laugh. I thought, like I said earlier, I thought that laughter was happiness.

Anyway, this marriage, there was no such a thing as single parents then. I was in my hometown; I was working, and I looked after my little girl. I had a husband someplace travelling

around, and finally he returns. I got back together with him and we moved back to B.C. That's when I had my stillborn baby. I was not 18 when that baby was born.

My husband became more and more brutal. Also by this time, I knew that I could work. So here I am working and my parent's marriage fell apart, well my dad plans to move out to B.C. because I wrote home and said that A. had beaten me up again. My dad was going to rescue my little girl and me, but I'm scared of my Dad, right? Of course by the time he got there things had changed somewhat, but I am still ready to leave, yet again, for Manitoba.

I go back to my home town, by this time I'm 18, going on 19, and I'm there long enough to become a big target for all kinds of rude remarks and stuff like that. Remember, I am still a woman without a husband according the locals. It was around that time that I got hired as a carhop for A & W; I worked six days per week with Wednesdays off.

Naturally on Wednesdays one of my friends who was in the air force, from Southport, would come in, pick me up, and we'd go and just get absolutely, terribly drunk. I'm still not old enough to drink, but I looked forward to that. I'm just drunk and sick and the whole thing, because that's my thing. But I worried about my little girl. I worried about my daughter not having a Dad. Not having a natural home life, so to speak. Eventually my Dad and my husband's mother (who have now become a couple!) sent the money for my daughter and I to come back, and away I go back to B.C. By now my husband and I are both in full drinking mode, and I just look forward to the times when we can party. I loved the singing and dancing; I really loved being around all of it. Of course, that couldn't happen very often because I was working and we didn't have much money.

In the meantime, I've come back to this abusive husband. Well, you don't get too much sympathy - there were all kinds of adages that we lived by - *you made your bed, and you lie in it, you're his wife, he can do with you what he wants*, that kind of thing and nobody ever intervened. Well that's not quite right because one time my father tried to. What a mess. He just ended up getting scratched up from my husband's mom. It may seem strange that dad tried to protect me

from an abusive man given his background, but for all my father's limitations, my father loved me. He used to sing to me when I was little, "she's sugar, she's spice, she's everything nice, and she's daddy's little girl."

Around this time I joined the Catholic Church. I've taken instruction and I've become a devout Catholic, and my faith is giving me lots of comfort and nourishment. Of course, there are all kinds of roles expected of you as a Catholic mom. Right? One is to produce babies. I was very guilty. I couldn't ask the doctor for birth control. It was just too shaming. As a result I have a little girl in 1960, another one in 62 and 13 months later I have one more.

Whenever I could I partied, and lots of our friends were in the same boat, so it was big house parties. Sometimes it was homemade beer, whatever, we didn't care. During my pregnancy for the baby that was born in 1962, I gained a lot of weight and the doctor put me on what we now know is speed; it was called *Preludin*. I can't tell you how much I loved that stuff; I still do. I felt on top of the world; I could clean the house, and I could look after the kids. I was fairly creative, so I could just knit up all kinds of things everything was just wonderful. Of course, my poor baby was born premature, and addicted. I didn't know that. She was a pretty beat up little baby when she arrived and she had to stay in an incubator. She made it through, but she was really in tough shape for a while. And I didn't know what it was - I know now, but I didn't know that it was as a result of the drugs that the doctor had given me.

In 1967, we moved to Vancouver Island and my husband was working in the bush by then fighting fires. We had no money, no power and no food. I had written to my mom and asked her to send me the remnants from her sewing basket because my kids were going to have to go to school and they didn't have any little clothes, but I sewed really well. As a matter of fact, when my kids were little, I used to buy women's coats and cut them down and make coats for my little ones out of the lining. I felt really good about making something out of nothing. My mother had moved to Thompson, Manitoba by that time. Anyway she got a hold of me and told me that there was work for both of us in Manitoba and she offered to send us the money. I put

my kids' clothes in the car, tied the dog to the steps, and moved away. I couldn't say goodbye to anybody because we owed rent. So we couldn't let anybody know where we were going.

We both start working in Thompson, it's a mining town and suddenly I have a lot of money and I can afford to do what I want, and I'm no longer even scared of him. I'm working in a hotel and when the hotel closes, the staff parties. I am drinking as often as I can by now.

Without going into more of the *nitty-gritty*, I left my husband for a one-night stand. It was this fellow I met in Thompson. I really liked him, and I know he really liked me, and he was on his way back to the University of Saskatchewan. I was getting ready to go into town to a job interview. He drove me into town, and on the way back we pulled off on one of the roads and we kissed passionately. And he said, "I'm going to turn this car around, Marge, unless you tell me not to, and I'm taking you with me." And I never said anything all the way to Winnipeg. And I thought, 'you know, I don't even know this person. I'll probably wake up in some motel some place, and he'll be gone.' But I didn't care. I was going to do this for me. He was there the next morning looking at me.

Anyway, this was the love of my life; it was really something. We moved to Saskatchewan and a year later I have a baby boy, because I'm still not on birth control pills, right? But I'm really drinking, really drinking. I worked in a bar and he was going to university and we both drank. Of course my son was born with FAE, and I didn't know what that was. Nobody did. Anyway, my drinking escalated.

Eventually we got my kids back and by this time, we're in the university scene, and there are lots of drugs by now. I started going to university at age 30. I surprised myself because I just didn't think that something like that would ever happen. But it was my husband who made it possible. One night we were with a bunch of adult students at the pub, and somebody said to me, "Where did you go to school, Marge?" I remarked that I quit school prior to grade ten. I told them about an IQ test that the school had given me where I scored 121 without really trying and my husband asked me to repeat what I had said. I did and he said, "Marge, did you know what

that means?" I said, 'No, I don't know what that means.' He said, "That means that I'm taking you down and I'm going to make you take the university entrance course." Naturally I thought that I would fail it and then that would get him off my back. Of course, I passed it with flying colours and the next thing you know, I am enrolled in university.

By now we are drinking and drugging heavily and we have only my youngest child with us because the other kids went to visit their dad and he wouldn't let them come back. We're becoming much more successful both in status and financially and my drinking has become a huge piece of my life. In retrospect, I can see that I *looked* really confident; I was up there with everybody else. I was with the in crowd at university with the best of all the young professors and the brightest students. I mean, these were our friends, and they were incredibly encouraging to me. I felt like a real big impostor amongst all these people, but they were my friends anyway. So I didn't care much and we partied.

Finally, I managed to get my kids back, and I have to say that throughout my life I have always valued my children more than anything else. I am proud of them and I really love them. Therefore, the times that we couldn't be together were agony for me. Try to remember that during all the violence with my first husband that I didn't have many options. There were no Transition Houses back then.

I started working with Social Services in Saskatchewan in a mobile crisis unit in 1976. In 1978 my granddaughter was born. Around Christmas of that year I have a series of really bad blackouts; I can't trust myself not to sneak home and get a swig of something; and I'm starting to lie about how much I drink. I've also been doing terrible things like creating scenes when we go out. We would go out for dinner and I would start a fight in the restaurant, and I would go to the bathroom and then drive home in the car and leave him sitting there; he didn't even know that I'd left.

On top of everything, he's also become promiscuous. We got married in 1975, a great big huge wedding, and in 1976, he gave me VD. I thought I was going to die of a broken heart. This

was my love. So I then started to love him less, drink more, and become somewhat promiscuous myself (although I was never very good at it, promiscuity that is). Once again, I find my life spiralling downward. I'm getting drunker and drunker more often; I have an unhappy marriage; and I don't have a sense of myself going any place.

One of the people that I worked with in the crisis unit was doing his practicum at the Saskatchewan Foundation of Alcoholism, and part of his practicum was to do teaching for our crisis unit. So we did that - he did that. It was on my second day off. Actually it was my first day off, so that night I did what I usually did. I got really drunk. The next morning, still drunk, I'm off to the seminar, and halfway through it, I begin shaking like a leaf. I'm just really sick, and I'm identifying like crazy with what's on that screen. They showed the video of a drunken woman called *The Secret Love of Sandra Blain*. It's one of those things you don't forget, right?

Our boss was alcoholic and she was on holidays, and as I recall he was showing this because she was out of town, and he wanted to show that this is what was going on with her. At noon some people went off to the pub, and I stayed there with some other people. We were at the Department of Social Services in one of their training rooms, and I said, 'I really identified with that movie.' And somebody said, "Oh, right, Storey, very funny. You mean you recognize B." And I said, 'No, I don't recognize B, I recognize me.' And they laughed. They said "Oh Storey, don't be so silly." And I started to cry, and I said, 'I'm not kidding.'

Well, the fellow who did the training came over and just looked right at me, and said, "What do you want to do about this because you can do something about it?" There was an instructor from the Foundation, and he told me that he would make an appointment for me to see some guy. And I went home and I said to my husband, 'I've made an appointment to go see somebody tomorrow. I'm an alcoholic.' And my husband said, "You can't be an alcoholic - you're my wife." I said, 'Regardless, I have to go.'

You see there was no doubt in my mind that I was an alcoholic. I can remember praying to God, 'Help me, help me, I can't stand this.' I don't want to be drinking, and I'm drinking. I

don't want to be drinking around my grand baby; I don't want to be a drunken grandma. I don't want to be drunk for my kids, but I couldn't stop. I couldn't go any place. We went on our holidays, and I'd have to drink. I mean, sometimes he'd go off to some attraction by himself, and I would claim that I wasn't interested in going but that wasn't true. I couldn't even walk down by the Atlantic Ocean. There he is. I can see him walking by himself, and I'm looking out the hotel window. And I'm standing there with a great big glass of bourbon in my hand. I couldn't go with him because I needed a drink. I had to drink. And so he went by himself, and I thought, I should be down there with him - walking down there with him, and not up here drinking alone. I didn't like what was happening to me.

I went to treatment at the Calder Institute in Saskatoon, and I learned some things about me, one of which my counsellor told me three weeks into treatment. She called me into her office, and she said, "Marge, you *fucking* crusader. You're so busy running around here saving everybody else's ass; you're not going to make it. Everybody else is going to make it - you're not – because you won't look at you." I'd never had anybody say that to me before. I heard what she said, and I stayed on for an extra week working on me. When I got out I went to AA a couple of times in Regina, but I still didn't get it. Even though I had already told myself that I was an alcoholic, I didn't get the fact that I couldn't drink safely. So I started having a drink, occasionally.

We moved to Victoria and my family now has some expectations around me to be sober, but I'm continuing to chip away and sneak; I would buy the near beer and put it in the fridge and have one of those and then when he wasn't looking, I'd have a real beer. I drank anything on the grocery shelf that had alcohol in it which can make you pretty sick. Once I drank stomach bitters, and I thought I was going to die. The whole time, I'm thinking, 'What am I doing?'

Finally, I couldn't stand it any longer, and on February 7th 1980, a year after treatment, I called the folks in Saskatchewan, and they said, "What are you phoning here for? You know what you need to do, Marge. You need to phone AA." Well, I phoned and a couple of women

came and picked me up and took me to a meeting that night. And I was really sceptical, and I'm still amazed that I even got it. I thought I was superior to any of those people, but I went anyway because I didn't trust myself any more. I figured that I had no alternative. So, I got a sponsor right away, a woman who only knew AA. She didn't know very much else, but she knew AA. She pounded that book at me because I tried to talk social worker or psychological stuff, and she'd say, "I don't know about that, Marge, but what I do know is on page such and such of the big book, it says..."

She was driving me crazy, but I needed what she had to offer. I needed to get out of my analytical space and find something real, which is what this program gives me by way of guidelines to follow. I was all over the place. You see the part of me that had, in retrospect, been the happiest was during the time that I was involved with Catholicism, and in AA that stuff started to come alive again. I had put that piece on a shelf some place because it wasn't cool during the time that I was going to university. You know, religion being the opiate of the masses and all of that kind of rhetoric. Well, that piece was back again, and they said that if I worked the steps that something good would happen, that I would get some comfort, and I was looking for that.

So, I started to work, and live, the steps. I became a really good AA member. My family started to relax around me, and even though my marriage actually got worse, it didn't matter any more because now, finally, I had me; I had a sense of self. I had my own identity and doing the fourth step, I figured out who I was. I had always been all of these other things, but to discover me, what an adventure. I started to pay attention to what I believed in, not what my husband believed in.

When I sobered up, I started to see things through a different lens and I started to get my own voice. I started challenging what my husband was saying, and my marriage went downhill fast. He left me for another woman, but not before we had several incidents of fighting and STD's. By this time, I had four years in the program, and I was really active. As I worked those

steps. I started to understand me, and I stopped playing roles. Wherever I was, I was just me, and that was okay.

At the time, I was working for the Salvation Army and that whole spiritual thing of being in the Salvation Army, too, came at a really good time for me. Although I didn't adhere to what the Salvationists believed, I recognized a common ground of tremendous spiritual space, and I started to see the world differently. For instance, the men that came into that facility (this was in Victoria on Johnson Street), well, when I looked at their eyes, I saw people in there. I mean, it didn't matter that they'd just pooped their pants, or barfed all over themselves, there was a person in there. I was so glad to be seeing the spirit in these people.

In 1983, my youngest daughter, 20, was in a car accident. Her boyfriend was killed, and she was in a coma for quite some time. I took the first week off, and I went up to the hospital every day, just to sit by her, with all these tubes and everything coming out of her, and I could see the pieces of bone and blood in her drainage tubes. On the seventh day, I was at home and one of my friends from the program, J, came over to visit and he said, "Marge, I just heard about Carla. Are you praying for Carla?" And I said, 'Of course I'm praying for Carla.' He said, "I bet you're not. I bet you're praying for yourself." I said, 'What do you mean? What do you mean?' He said, "Are you praying that Carla should live?" 'Well, of course I'm praying Carla should live.' I cried. He said, "Carla hasn't regained consciousness. They don't know how badly she's injured. And if she comes around, do you want her to have a lifetime full of pain?" I said, 'No, I don't want that.' He said, "Then, pray for Carla, you have to pray for Carla, Marge." That was the hardest thing I think I've ever had to do, was just to say, not my will. I just prayed for the best for Carla. I was so scared to do that, but I didn't want her to be there because of me.

Anyway, the next day I went to work because I couldn't stand to stay home any more. In the Salvation Army everybody in the whole building has to go to chapel in the morning. Counsellors, janitors, clients, everybody had to go. And I'm in the building, and of course, they're saying prayers for Carla. There are all kinds of people from all walks of life. We had some

long-term residents who would have spent most of their life in mental institutions, but this was the time that the government was starting to release them into the streets. Well, they couldn't look after themselves very well so they lived there. And most of the time they lived in their own little world. They shuffled in and had dinner, shuffled out, and I think that they kept their meds at the front desk. We said prayers for everybody including Carla.

I'm just crying through the whole thing, and I go down the elevator - my office is on the fourth floor - and there were two guys from the second floor on the elevator with me. When I turned around, they were looking at me with compassion. These are people who never looked at anybody, who never looked anybody in the eye. I was so touched and so honoured because I learned that craziness is a pretty safe place to be sometimes, and people hide in there. But, you know, they let me in, just for a minute. Like, in their own weird, crazy world, they felt bad for me. Wow! I was just so moved and so honoured. I learned a whole bunch. Once someone had said to me, "Keep your eyes open. Your teachers aren't who you think they're going to be." I learned more about dignity from people who didn't look like they had any. I learned that regardless of what happens externally to a person, including alcoholism, or drug addiction that the person in there is real. They are somebody's daddy, somebody's son, somebody. It helped me understand just how important spirituality was to me.

This is another lesson that AA has taught me. Step 3 asked me to make a decision to turn my will and my life over to the care of God, as I understood him. And I can tell you that it certainly wasn't my choice to be at the Salvation Army. I did not want to work there. That was the only job of all the jobs that I applied for which I was hired, and I was applying all over the place. So, I started paying attention to God, and I stopped playing roles. I don't even know when that happened. I guess I didn't know which role to play anymore. I'm not sure, and all of this reflection is only possible because of my time in recovery.

I continued to work the program, and my marriage ended. I have to say that all those events are reflected in the twelve steps, and I work on them as a whole; they have become a part

of me. I'm very conscious that I am a servant, and that I am a grateful, happy servant. I'm absolutely amazed that all of that *shit* that I went through in my life has been stuff that has been the meat of my counselling. I never thought that I would talk about any of the stuff that happened to me before, and I have to say that after I did my fourth step, I kind of knew that it is just what happened. It wasn't who I was. All of that shame that I had been carrying all of my life became a place of compassion and empathy. My life has not been one of a wasted tragedy. In fact, it's been anything but that. I worked in a crisis unit, and sometimes it was really dangerous, and the one thing that I needed to say that someone needed to hear never came out of my education; it came out of my own crappy experience. I knew what to say. I knew how that felt. I knew how I felt when I was there, so, I knew what that person needed to hear because it would have been what I wanted to hear. So my life has turned itself around.

I used to think when I first got in the program, and people would say, "my name is Alice and I'm a grateful alcoholic," well, I just about gagged. Grateful? I wasn't grateful to be an alcoholic. I wasn't a grateful anything. I went to those meetings, sat there with my arms folded across my chest, and, and stared at everybody feeling superior. I don't know how they put up with me, but they did, and as a result, I am a grateful member, and I'm grateful for my life. Not just the happy part of my life, because I've had lots of joy in my life. Even the, the crappy things have been okay- that's the gold. I never sit in my office and think, 'Oh, I don't know what to do with this person.' I know it's not me. All I have to do is show up. I don't mean to undervalue the fact that I'm well educated, or that I have some skill, but because I know that all of that influences what I do. It's just that if I can come to work and be open, and be grateful for being a part of someone else's journey that it (being in a place to help) will happen through me.

I actually got involved in counselling as part of a practicum in university. My husband convinced me to be part of project he was working on where a professional and a lay-person would join up to offer student counselling. When the project began they put me with one of the

brainiest of the psych students; he was bright, but, looking back, he didn't have any people skills. I figured it wouldn't matter anyway; I would just show up and occupy a chair.

We were there a few days and this woman came in and she was crying. I took her into the office, and started talking to her, and I think I was sitting really close to her hanging onto her hands, and saying, whatever, you know, 'it's okay.' I looked up and my husband had the biggest *shit-eating* grin on his face. And whatever we needed to do for her and get her connected up with, we did. And I said, 'that doesn't count - that was just a woman - just a woman coming off the street, and anybody could do that, right?' Well, anybody couldn't do it; I know that now.

I started taking courses in that particular field. My point in telling this story is that that wasn't my plan. It was somebody else's plan. That role wasn't part of my vision, but it was part of someone's vision. So I have had the absolute joy of showing up every day, wherever I worked, and I just get to be me. Of course at the time I was still missing a big piece – the 12-Step program – and I was sceptical. I couldn't see how it could work for me. But you know, every one of those steps has meant something to me, and I can remember what happened when I was on a certain step. For instance Step 6 and 7 asks that we let go of our character defects, and I liked some of my character defects, actually. They were the things that I still was using to get by in the world. For one thing, I was an incredible flirt; I didn't know I was a flirt. I just thought I was friendly, right? So, when I got to that part of the program where it said let go over your character defects, and by then, because I'd done the 4th and 5th step, I'd had to come to terms with that I was a big flirt, but I didn't know how else to get by in the world. I mean it sure worked well; I got the attention I wanted. Well, I finally got it during a meeting when someone talked about not being able to receive anything new while we held onto old character defects. You have to let go to receive. I got that, but it was scary because at first I figured if I let this stuff go, I will have nothing, no way to cope.

Of course, that isn't what happened. Life went on, and I stopped doing those others things because it didn't feel right anymore. It didn't feel right to do things that I didn't approve of.

I certainly stopped seeking approval – and not that all of us don't want approval from our peers and from other people – I do too, but first I needed my own approval. I had some really good values that I'd had from throughout that crazy little childhood of mine, and there were pieces of my life that I knew I wanted to be a part of me. I just wanted to answer to my own set of beliefs and the program was congruent with the set of beliefs that I had so it was a good match. It has to do with honour, about respecting other people, about not judging, about accepting where you are and being willing to go on with that. To do the best you can at any given moment.

I don't want to leave the impression that I was all bad because that isn't true. My kids have said that despite the fact that they had an alcoholic mom, they knew I loved them. I needed to hear that. I just am, still, constantly amazed that life is an ongoing, growing thing. I didn't know that before I joined the program. I really didn't know that. I figured that you learned something through a course and then you had it made, and then maybe you would take another course and learn a little more, but I didn't know life was an inside job. You learn the stuff out there that opened some doors in here.

Just recently, at this fall gathering we attended, I learned a whole bunch of things about me because it opened a whole bunch of doors. That's what education has done for me. And I'm real. The program helps me stay true to those core beliefs that I have, so that I can go into a bunch of training and remember there are some things that fit, and some that don't.

Now most of my friends, and the people that I trust, are people in recovery. I find that people in recovery as a whole are a trustworthy bunch. Incidentally, it doesn't have to be AA recovery either. I trust people in recovery because to be in recovery means that you have had to do a whole bunch of inside work. If you are in recovery you have had to take a look at what's gone on for yourself, and kept some stuff and thrown the rest away, and been able to live with yourself, and face yourself in the morning. I've had to learn to focus on my strengths, and there was a time when I didn't think that I had any, but I have huge strengths. I also have a sense of

awe for this whole process. 'Why me and not somebody else?' I'm grateful. I don't take that for granted.

I feel really honoured to have had - this sounds facetious and I don't mean it to be - I feel honoured to have had the life I've had, to have this stuff happen to me. I joined the program when I was 40, so I'd had a good part of my life - not all of it bad – but, I had some really rough parts of it, some pretty ugly things happen. It's not fun to be beat up. It's not fun to do some of the things I did to myself during my drinking and drugging. However, to have the opportunity to take all that, and to have it turn into something useful, I'm absolutely amazed how that happened. I'm just so – wow! And, why I got to have five of my own children? I'm a step-mom to three kids who love me. What, did I ever do to deserve so many blessings? I mean, I'm just grateful.

It's not over by any means; I haven't finished learning, though there are times when I wish I had, actually. I shouldn't say that, but I don't always like learning. I don't like the painful part of learning. I never have. I don't like the part like this recent piece where someone can perceive me as needing to be taken down a notch or two. Crap! Sure I can figure out that it's about them and not me, but that takes a while, even still, to get to that place. Because initially it hurts and the part that hurts is the fact that it's an old, old tape that plays an 'it's what you deserve melody.' Almost instinctively I go right back to 'yeah, they must be right.'

You remember my counsellor from treatment? Well she said something else, too, besides calling me a *fucking* crusader. She looked me right in the face and said, "What are you doing hiding behind all that fat?" And I remember saying that it was because maybe then other women will like me; I'm still doing that. It just is safer in here. It boils down to being scared. I still get scared. I have been working on this stuff for twenty years, and yet, I can't seem to leave it on the shelf for very long. It's very important to me to have female friends that don't look at me as some kind of rival - I'm 61 years old. I'm not a threat to anybody, but you know, people treat me like that.

Or I swing to 'what is it about me that I need to change?' And that runs right up, bang into, 'but I'm just me.' I'm no different sitting here than I am with my clients, going out with my friends, than I am with the person in the grocery store. I'm not any different ever now. So I guess that's why the old tape hurts. If I am just being me all the time and people are still taking shots at me maybe being me isn't good enough; maybe I better figure out what else they need from me. I know that's not true now, but man, do I struggle with it still.

I need to illustrate this with a story about who I am. I was at this workshop onetime and they had us do the brown-eyed, blue-eyed group exercise. You remember, one group gets all the power and they turn on the other group by abusing that power. Well, I was in the blue-eyed group, and the leaders expected me to join in with everyone else and oppress the brown-eyed folks. I wouldn't do it. They couldn't make me do it even after hours of browbeating me. They ended up threatening me with not receiving my certificate for the training. '*Fuck you*,' I said, 'keep your stupid certificate, but I am not going treat other people this way.' I needed to know that about myself. I needed to know that I was trustworthy, and that I had a bottom line that preserved my dignity and that of others.

What does all this say about recovery? Good question because I don't have an objective. I'm not out there looking back at me. I'm just me being me. And for the most part, I never used to be able to trust me because I would sneak off and do something when I wasn't looking. Oh, how I avoided being alone with me. Hotel rooms were just dangerous. If I was alone with me, I would order room service, and I would just pig out on whatever I could. They didn't use to have those little mini-bars then, so you'd have to order, and I'd have to order *gol-darned* dinners for three, because I wanted enough wine and, and liqueurs and everything. I spent a lot of money on dinners for three only to leave the food and drink the booze.

All of this subterfuge goes with that. I mean, I, if I look back on my life of drinking, I had a lot of fun times. Like, lots of fun and lots of laughter, and I enjoyed every part of it. But, boy, the price I paid for that fun was pretty high. I invariably did something, or said something I

wished I hadn't. Or I overdid whatever I was doing at the time. There was no limit for me. I also made promises to people that I couldn't keep, particularly to my kids, so now I make it a point to only make promises that I can keep. And of course that circles back to being able to trust myself because I do what I say I am going to do.

But it's a real comfort to know that if things get scary for me and even though I may be pretty threatened, I'm not going to scapegoat somebody else to save my own bum. That feels so good, so safe being able to trust me. It goes back to the role thing. Roles don't have feelings. They have rules. What do you mean? What do they need from me? What do I need to be? Now just being me is enough. You see it's not at somebody else's expense, and I'm not sure where in the program you learn that. I think you just learn all along. And it's part of Christianity; it's part of my family values.

Initially, though, when my second husband and I split up (you have to remember that I was 44 years old and I hadn't really ever been alone) I was lost. I was always somebody's wife. Even if they weren't with me, I was somebody's wife. Now I wasn't anybody's wife, and I was four years in the program, going on five, I guess. And I thought, you know, I'm not going to be able to make this. I'm hurting too much. My kids will be okay. My son was mad at me, and wanted to go live with his dad, and I thought that was a pretty good idea, and my daughters were grown up. So, I thought, 'I'm out of here. I can't stand this pain any more. I'm sick of trying to cope with this pain. I'm sick of trying to be whatever it is that I'm supposed to be.' I was mad at God at that point. I quit my job at the Salvation Army and then couldn't find a different one. I felt really like I just wanted to give up.

But the biggest part was, I couldn't get over loving him and I remember saying, 'Dear Jesus, if we're not supposed to be together then remove the love because I'm not going to be able to exist if I still love him.' Well, the love turned and went and something else came. It was the knowledge that there was something or somebody else there because I wasn't as suicidal any more. It didn't go away completely right away, but it got better.

It helped that I was a member of the program because people were praying for me, with me, and trying to stay around me during that time. Some might say that I had four years sobriety, and I know four years seems like a whole whack of recovery, but it isn't really that much at all. There aren't a lot of tools in the case, and I still had some of my old behaviours. You know, 'Well, if this isn't going my way, then I'll do this.' I had that sort of spoiled attitude that I want what I want now, and that kind of thing. I was also tired. I was just fed up with coping. I didn't want to cope any more. I didn't want to cope with trying to find a job; I didn't want to cope with another failed marriage.

Suddenly, all of the things that F and I were as a couple were no more. I was just single and as a single you don't get invited to couples things. So, I was alone. And I felt really sorry for myself. And I was mad, and I figured - I've done it. I'm sober, and I'm working the program and I'm doing all these things, well *fuck you*. It shouldn't be this hard. But through this AA connected me to my own spirituality, and while I haven't always been religious, I have remained spiritual, even as a child. As an adult, I made sure that my babies were baptized in the delivery room. Like, right away. I wanted them to be in the hands of God immediately.

Being in the program has helped me make it through some of these things, and looking back at them, with hindsight, of course, I didn't do the steps willingly. I did them because as I was going along, my cravings would come back, or some other thing would happen with me. I had this sponsor who would remind me that I was struggling because I hadn't done my Step 4, that kind of thing. So I would say 'okay, I have to work harder on Step 4,' and I kept on moving forward in the program. And the program has given me all these things that I have been talking about: honour, guidelines, structure, and a framework within that makes sense to me.

When I look at other people who've followed a similar path – the H's are a good example of that – I trust them implicitly. It's not that we're not human, or that we've attained some kind of sainthood, because that sure isn't true of any of us, but there's a code of ethics, and a code of honour about commitment to yourself and recovery that the program talks about all the time. It's

not about other people. It's about following the path; it's about forgiveness; and it's about honesty. I have to say that I didn't want to join AA. Coming from the background and training I did, I thought, I don't want to join AA. I mean it's not me, and that's ironic because it's the thing that saved my buns.

So, I understand when people come in to see me and say, I can't go to AA. I just, it's not for me; it isn't for everybody, but it sure is for me. As I said before, I'm now what I used to scoff at, a grateful alcoholic, and to call myself an alcoholic doesn't bring any stomach-grab of shame because that's a drunk. A drunk is what I used to be. Alcoholic is, well, I'm not just an alcoholic. I'm an addict, too, so - but I loved those things. That's what I did - it's not who I am. My name is Marge, and addiction is what I did, and I certainly don't have any illusions about being a social drinker or any of those things. Why would I want to do that? I'd probably have a blackout and wouldn't remember it anyway, you know.

I've had lots of adventures and misadventures before the program and since the program. It all comes back to the program, though. I mean, I was in the Salvation Army and it wasn't because I was a Salvationist; it was because I was a member of AA. I went up the ladder of GSR and did all the service work, particularly in Victoria, and they nominated me to be chairperson of the rally. By the way, that was the year my marriage broke up. And I said, 'No, I think somebody else better do it.' You know, in all honesty, I didn't think I was ready to do that anyway. There were people who'd been in the program much longer than me, who deserved to be chairperson of the rally because that is kind of the pinnacle, and I didn't feel up to that yet. To this day I know it was the right decision. Actually, my sponsor was the one that ended up chairing, and she had much more mileage in the program. She made a good chairperson, and she was the one that was supposed to be there.

I have a mixture of program, religion, and superstition. Sure, I still have some superstition in there, and I don't care what it is because it doesn't really matter. It's interesting because I'm a lot less likely to challenge when something causes me to say, 'hm.' I ask myself,

'Is this happening for a reason? Open up your eyes, Marge! What's happening here? What are you supposed to learn out of this? This is happening for a reason. What, can you learn out of this?' And, invariably, there's something there that I need to look at. Not that I want to look at it, but there is something there, and I trust the process even though I don't like the process, I trust it.

I'll have been sober 22 years on February the 7th, one *cotton-pickin'* day at a time. And sobriety is not about not drinking, so I guess that I haven't been sober the whole time. I mean I've been nuts part of that time. But I haven't taken a drink, and I took my last drug 19 years ago. Yes, I continued to do drugs after I stopped drinking, but I couldn't keep on doing that once I got going in the program because I didn't feel connected, I didn't feel real. Somehow it didn't fit with the me that I was beginning to trust and rely upon, and it didn't fit with what the program was all about.

So I say thank you for the lessons, and I know that because this old hide has lots of scars on it, and I'm in for the adventure because this is sure an adventure. Whew! Wow, what a ride! And I never know where we'll go next. I almost got scared because there are no guarantees about my job, right? I'm the lowest guy on the pole, and we're moving into the community health boards, but what will be will be, and I will be fine. I will do what I need to do to look after my family, and to look after me, and it's just part of the adventure. Just, here we go.

You know, the ride isn't there to punish me. There's not some great big farce or joke waiting for me. It really is just being the best me I know how to be on any given day, and the rest isn't up to me. I believe in my morning meditation, and it's not unique to me, that says, 'Good morning, Marge. This is your higher power speaking. I will not need your help today.' And I really believe that. I really believe my job is to look after Marge. And when I don't look after Marge, nobody else does, right? I need to look after me, and the rest is God's job. I know that the people sitting in front of me on any given day are the clients I'm supposed to get, and they are God's gifts. I think, 'okay, here's somebody sitting here. It's them that do the work, Marge, not

you. You don't do anybody's recovery; you do your own. You don't do anybody else's. You're there to support them. That's your job, and pay attention to your own self here.' I try to do that, and some days I'm better at it than others.

Some days I get scared and before I've gone through the process of asking, 'What are you scared about? You were scared before and what happened? Nothing, you know. It was just that you got stuck in that rut and you needed to move on.' I have looked for security and safety my whole life, and never found it. All along I had been looking in the wrong place because it isn't out there; it's in here.

Let's face it, sometimes *shit* happens, even if you're in the program. Even if you've been the best you know how to be. Or me, I'm talking about me. Even if I'm being the best me I know how to be, even if I'm doing all those things I'm supposed to, sometimes *shit* happens. This isn't bargaining because I used to think that way. I used to stay good out of fear, and at first, there was nothing wrong with that it was a good place to start. If it was fear of getting drunk that kept me sober at least it allowed me to be sober long enough to learn to be good for goodness sake.

You know, I don't feel totally grown up, but I feel like I'm getting there. I'm not all that anxious to grow up, actually. I'm perfectly happy with parts of me that are still learning and growing. It's so nice because the program has taught me that if I have resentment, I need to pray for that person. Boy, that was hard. Cause the person I had a resentment for, I sure didn't want to pray for them. It was just the opposite; I wanted bad things. But that's not what the program teaches. The program says that this is about you. This resentment that you're carrying is not about them, it's about something that's going on with you, and you need to pray for them. And when I said I couldn't do that they told me clearly that I needed to learn to do it. You have to do it even if you don't mean it. So when you're praying for your family, and you're saying your prayers at night, you have to add their names in there. So what I wished for my family, I wished for them, too, even if I didn't mean it. And then, everything goes away, and whatever they did that I didn't like, well, it happened so I can stay there in it or I can move on. Sometimes that

process takes a little longer than other times. I bet you I have a million of those little program lessons that have become so much a part of who I am and what I think that I can't even remember when I learned it because it was just a part of going along, and oops, here comes something new. So, I don't know what other people's journey through the program is, I only know mine.

Finally, and this is extremely important, I would never have had the opportunity to share my life with Keith these past 17 years if it weren't for the program and the people in it. Keith is a wonderful partner, a delightful, warm, caring human being, and I am blessed by his presence. I am, indeed, a grateful addict.

Next I drove out of town to meet Sue for the first time. I do not know what I expected. I guess I figured I would keep an open mind (interesting slogan for both Sue and I), and hope that we hit it off and that we would be able to trust each other. The first couple of minutes were a little awkward, but Sue said something about addiction that I understood immediately. When I reflected it back to her, we knew somehow that we shared an intimate knowledge through our mutual recovery, and Sue began to reveal. She spoke for *only* 90-minutes, but as the person who transcribed my tapes for me noted, "It was absolutely packed with information." In fact, Sue and Marge both had between 85-90 single-spaced pages of dialogue.

This time I wasn't surprised by the temporal nature of her narrative. From my own process and Marge's, I was beginning to see that recovery meant nothing unless it was contrasted to a life of addiction. But just as germane was the need to talk about childhood, to explain a life's origin before addiction and before recovery.

Sue's story was so different from Marge's. It was more basic, more visceral, sharper around the edges. It was also, like Marge's narrative, however, heart-wrenchingly powerful in content and presentation. It was almost as though Sue was throwing down her story as a gauntlet: *this is my life and this is me and you better get used to it because we are both going to be around for a very long time.*

But Sue's narrative also betrayed her and belied her powerful, almost omnipotent stance. As she spoke, I found myself focussing more on her vulnerability as a child and her complete emptiness before she entered recovery. I also became enthralled by her description of the inner child and the punisher that she had created to integrate her psyche. On the way home that night, I replayed her voice in my mind over and over. I thought, child protection, what an interesting career choice. 'No one' I muttered, 'is going to *fuck* with any of the kids on her caseload.'

Sue was the wildcard. She came to my attention by way of a colleague; her and I had never met before the interview. By the end of our interview, and for the rest of the drive home, I was stunned. Sue was so incredibly generous and giving, to a complete stranger, that it took me aback. I recognized about a quarter of the way through her narrative that we both knew that the other one understood the journey, and that with that understanding that we were in a safe environment. Sue's story is a testimony to the strength and resiliency of people who are truly in meaningful recovery.

Sue's Story

Addiction to recovery, where to start? When I was a little kid, (I come from a family of nine brothers and sisters with me being the sixth) by the time it got to me, I always felt like there was interference between my brothers and sisters and my mom and dad. Almost like they were my caregivers, so unless it was really big I never got to see my mom and dad. Well, I got to see them, but I never got to interact with them very much, and I just felt that it was mostly about survival.

We were poor, really poor and there were times when there wasn't enough food to go around, and what there was to go around might be a pound of hamburger with two or three quarts of water and carrots thrown in just to make a meal. It was just hand to mouth all the time. If I had to describe myself as a child, I think I would describe myself as somebody who had to be either funnier, or had to be quieter, or had to be *gooder*, you know, the *gooder* part. It was crucial to not be noticed, but still be noticed if you know what I mean. So, if you're being good, it's so nobody will notice you. If you're being quiet, it's so nobody will notice you. If you're being funny, it's so somebody will notice you. Although it wasn't consistent, it was the way I operated as a child; it was my survival skill.

Like a lot of families with addictions it was really chaotic and dysfunctional around our house. There was so much abuse. I had one brother in particular, the one next to me, and he was extremely abusive, he was sadistic. He'd kill frogs by putting needles through their heads, boil wild birds eggs just before they were ready to hatch, and he used to torture the four youngest kids.

He used to like place our hands on the Bible, (I was Catholic), and strap us and say that Mommy and Dad said he could. He once cut my little brother's finger off with a skate. I think it was just his way to gain control, and I think from my understanding that it was really hard for him because the older kids picked on him, and he carried the cycle on with us. So, in that instance, I was the quiet one walking on eggshells. I certainly didn't want to be noticed. The little ones, me being one of them, would get up at five o'clock and sneak out so my brother couldn't get us. And then we'd be gone all day, until Mom got home.

So, in that sense, I was quiet. But if we were having a family gathering, say Christmas, and everybody was drunk, then it would be all of us kids sort of fighting for attention. We'd all be there and humour was a good attention getter. It paid to be funny, so I was funny a lot of the time, and quiet the rest of time in order to be good and stay out of trouble and trouble was bad. My Mom always said, "Wait till your Dad gets home," and then Dad would come home and whale on us. So while you had to be good, at the same time, we were little kids, and we tried to play. And some of the games we chose were pretty bad. I remember one time we hung on the hot water pipe, us four little kids, and we broke it. Imagine what that meant to a poor family. Well, my Mom was livid. T never got up there because it broke before she could get there, so us three, got a beating when Dad got home. But what's good? It seems to me that the definition was always changing.

I still use humour to get through, like when I went through treatment, they'd say, "That's a sad story. So, why don't you cry? Why are you laughing all the time?" It was because if I stopped laughing, I was going to cry. You know, and it got to a place where the laughter would almost actually lead to tears. Laughter and tears are two sides of the same coin, and I was just blown away to realize that. You know, because it's scary. I don't like feeling because it wasn't safe when I was little to have a feeling, and so I took that into my adulthood, and I think that's how I got into drugs and alcohol. I medicated so I wouldn't have to feel. Or I'd feel better, one or the other. I knew early that feelings weren't safe. Like if I was mad, I got made fun of because I

was out of control. If I cried, I was a baby. Okay? So if I was scared, then I was weak. So there was always a label attached to everything and everything was conditional. There was always something attached to it. They talk unconditional love in some families, and it's like I don't know what that is. Because everything I ever did had a condition with it.

Drinking was never considered abnormal in my family. Every single member of my family is addicted to one thing or another. As a rite of passage when you turned 21 you went to the bar with your Mom and Dad. In my case it was with my mom when I was 19 because the age had changed by then. I went to the legion – that was how you got incorporated – that was your rite of passage. Of course, that wasn't my first experience with booze, I was aware long before that, but that was our family birthday party. You know, you went to the bar and everybody bought you drinks all night, and it was a celebration. And that's the way it's always been. So it was considered normal, and I didn't know it was abnormal. I didn't know that everybody didn't do that.

I had my first drink when I was a little kid somewhere between 5-7 when we lived in Edmonton. Mom and Dad were passed out on Christmas morning, and I drank the rum and coke that was lying around. I remember that it tasted really good. After that it would have been when I was hanging out with some people at around age 15. By the time I was 13, I'd moved 14 times, so I didn't have any stability. I never made any strong friends. There was no sense of community.

Anyway, when I was 15, we were living in Quesnel, and I decided I was going to get drunk. A bunch of my friends and I got together and bought some white wine, and I got so drunk, and so sick, and it was just like, 'well I guess that's what happens when you drink.' It isn't about don't drink, it's just part of the drinking that goes with it. And I think I did it mostly to fit in. I started hanging around with these kids, and this was the first time we'd ever really lived in any place for longer than two years, so these were friends that I'd actually stayed connected with and formed some sort of relationship with. So, it was to fit in. You know, to stay part of, because

before that I wasn't. Then I started smoking pot, and I was drinking more, trying different kinds of booze. I want to say it's experimental, but it didn't feel like experimenting? I just didn't drink one or two drinks. I like drank until I was blacked out and couldn't remember a thing. I drank this way right from the very beginning, and I would feel like crap.

I guess I did it because people talked about me, you know, "Oh, yeah, Sue was really drunk." And I put myself in really stupid positions and stupid situations that were really high-risk. Of course, now, when I look back as a Ministry Social Worker, I can see that it was high-risk, but at the time it was pretty normal. You know, and my Mom was absent, she would be in the bar all the time, so we could get away with it. You know, we'd be home passed out before they'd get home.

Eventually, though, I started to slow down drinking. I started doing drugs when I was 16 because I didn't want to be like my Mom, and I started to drink so I wouldn't get drunk; I didn't like being out of control. So, I would sip instead of guzzle, and I would only drink beer, I wouldn't drink hard stuff or wine or anything, but as I said, I started doing drugs. At 19, I went through the full MDA rage (I was born in 53) and we also did some horse tranquilizers, but mostly it was MDA.

I was with my boyfriend T at the time. We bought this piece of property out on the Barkerville highway, and we'd have big parties because we were cool. T was cool; I was cool. People would just come out to our place, and we'd have a bag of pot and everybody would have their own joint, and we'd be doing MDA. Our house payments were $86 per month. We bought this piece of property, with two houses, just less than an acre, for 8900 bucks, or $9800, and we lost it because we did so much MDA. We couldn't make the payments.

It didn't matter; we just kept doing it. T and I moved to Calgary after a brief separation, I got pregnant with my son, and I quit drugs and alcohol. I didn't do anything throughout the time I had Kris, and then I think I might have got drunk once or twice after I had Kris. And did I do drugs? I might have done some MDA in the middle, and then I got pregnant with **Jadea**, and I

stopped using again. We had a big party after **Jadea** was born (I would have been 23), and I got drunk. I did some magic mushrooms around that time, as well. And then we moved to Quesnel, and I was relatively drug free and alcohol free.

You see, I still hated being drunk; I still hated the loss of control. So, I would drop acid and I'd do mushrooms. I wouldn't smoke pot. I never liked pot. I started working at the Billy Barker Hotel, at the desk, and by this time, T and I'd broken up, and I started going out and drinking, and then I would drink more and more. Eventually, every time I went out I drank more.

I also joined martial arts in 1979, and I think that was a way to try and control the drinking because I knew already that I had to do something about it. I was always conscious, even as a kid that I didn't want to be like my Mom; I needed to control it. So, I set up a whole bunch of rules around drinking. I never took booze home with me. I'd never have booze in the house because if you drink alone, you're an alcoholic, right? I wouldn't drive if I was drinking was also a rule, but of course, I did. You know, I'd try. I'd stick my keys in the drop safe at the start of the night as a precaution and then call the manager to come and get them out. And drive drunk. My sister and I did it a lot. The rule was that I'd pick my kids up; I'd never leave them overnight. And then I started leaving them overnight. If I went out, I would tell myself that I would only have six beers. Any more than six beers and I would be in trouble, right? I would set the rules and then break them, but I was really trying to maintain control.

It was 1982, and I was really into martial arts. It was really working for me, not in the way that I had first thought, for control, but in the sense that I was starting to feel better about myself. My self-esteem had changed; I was gaining self-confidence. I was doing things that I never thought that I could do. And then, of course, I needed to celebrate, so I was drinking more. I was training real hard and I had started kickboxing and I fought for the Canadian title. And then I found cocaine; before that time I'd never ever used cocaine. I came back from the title fight and a friend of mine, who was also my boarder, gave me a gram of cocaine to celebrate. And that was the beginning of the end. I had found my drug.

Of course, at the time I could justify just about anything to myself because I had so many brothers and sisters who were so much worse than me. You know, 'I may drink and drug some, but I am not nearly as bad as . . .'

Cocaine did a couple of things for me. One, it was like my drug; I never felt that way before in my life. I liked this stuff lots. I just couldn't get enough of it. When I retired in 1985 from kickboxing, I was ranked ninth in the world, and I lost all of that. I could have gone way further, but I was using while I was training. After that first fight, I used, and then I stopped because I was in training. Right? When you're fighting at that level, you have to train six days a week; you can't take shortcuts. You have to do your roadwork; you have to do your weight training; you have to do your sparring; and you have to do your martial arts. There's a whole slew of stuff you have to do, otherwise you're not going to maintain that level that you need.

And then I would start using again. It was great for beer because I could have six beers and do coke, and I would be straight. I wouldn't be drunk any more. It was like this magic drug. Naturally, I'd drink more, then I'd do more coke, and then I'd drink more, then I'd do more coke. And it just got to be a vicious cycle. So if I used on Friday, I wouldn't be able to do anything until Tuesday because I'd be so burned out. And, I'd stopped smoking by then. So it got to be so my weekends went from Thursday night until Tuesday and that left me Wednesday and Thursday to train.

It took me about two years before I lost even that. I was using cocaine all the time. I had a brother, J2, who was in a car accident. He got a 200,000 settlement, and him and I went through about a hundred grand. He ended up with a hundred grand left, and he invested that, but it was like, I never noticed that I was doing that much, you know? Like, it didn't feel like that much. As well, I was working and my ex-husband was working. He had a job that was paying $3,000 a month American, and with the inheritance, and our combined salaries, we didn't have enough to pay the bills.

After I quit kickboxing in 87, I decided that I was going to stop using coke because it was killing me. You have to imagine what it's like to be competing at the level I was competing. I was in top physical condition, and in a short amount of time, I didn't want to work out. I couldn't get up in the morning. My kids were suffering. I wasn't eating properly and neither were my kids. By this time, I had separated and divorced from T, my ex-husband, and everything was way out of control. I was dead emotionally. I remember going home at night and thinking that I would make myself busy. I would get up at seven o'clock in the morning and go to one of my three jobs, and then I'd go to the gym and I'd train until nine o'clock, then I'd come home so I could go to bed. And then I'd ask myself, 'Is this all there is? Is this what there is?' There was nothing there. It was like I was gone. I didn't have any feelings. I had nothing. It was just like this numb place all the time.

All my life I had worked on not feeling, because feeling wasn't safe, and I thought, 'I'm doing a good job of doing this.' I found out later, however, after all these years, how detrimental that was to me. But at the time, it was great. I used to sit there and think people who cried, or got mad, had no control. Now, martial arts, that really gave me control because not only could I control my physical being, but also if I got close to a feeling, all I did was breath, and I was back in control. Everything I ever did was for that, I think. And so, I managed to quit for three years.

Of course, I only quit the coke; I continued to drink. My life really had no more meaning than when I was using the coke. I had quit kickboxing; I was divorced; and I was working three jobs. It was like I was a crazy person. I went back to the kind of rule-based drinking that I talked about before. You know, no more than six beers because any more than that and I wanted to use coke. The martial arts background gave me the willpower and the determination to know that I could do it. But, because of that, it kept me there longer. It's hard to explain, but it's almost like the things that made me so disciplined as a martial artist also kept me thinking that I could control the drinking.

I used to draw it like a pie. In the pie you've got your physical, your spiritual, your mental, and emotional pieces. Well, my pie had a huge slice of physical and a thin little piece for all the other things. By concentrating on the physical, I could avoid everything else. My life had no balance. But on the other hand, maybe I learned martial arts to defend myself, because nobody else was going to *fuck* with me again, nobody was going to hurt me the way I was hurt as a child. So I think that's a positive thing, too.

And then I went back to cocaine. It was the stupidest thing. I'd been doing really well. I worked for the Chamber of Commerce, I worked for the College of New Caledonia, and I worked for the women's centre. I also volunteered for Billy Barker Day Society as a director, and I taught martial arts as a second-degree black belt. I was doing all these positive things, and then, all of a sudden, I decided I was going to go tree planting. Well, I did it for six- seven weeks and I quit and came back home. Now, the psychological part; I never quit anything in my life. I'd already built this whole ego that I have, this alter ego, whatever you want to call it, of myself as a person that's strong willed, determined, doesn't say die, all this stuff. And I go out for seven weeks and quit because I can't handle it. I came into town, I went to my Mom's, and I dumped all my stuff off. I phoned her and told her order me a beer at the Legion. I then phoned my ex-husband, whom I knew was dealing, and bought some coke from him. Something gave. Something just gave. I just gave up. And I went and I used it.

I don't know how many lines I used, and then I flushed the rest down the toilet, and later I told my counsellor what I did. And he said. "Okay, let's talk about why you think you did it." Well, I felt like a failure. I thought that somehow I'd failed myself. You know, that I couldn't do tree planting.

After that I drove down to Vancouver and back. And I went into the bar, and I ran into D, who was dealing, and I got so much coke from him that night. I almost *fucking* died. I just kept doing line after line after line after line. D was mainlining it. And it was like I'd traded my body, you know. I went home about, I don't know, about five o'clock in the morning. My kids

were at my Mom's, and I thought I was going to die because my heart was just racing. I thought for sure I was dying. So I went to my brother's place and he had some Valium.

I then phoned Edward, my counsellor, and I said, I told him what I'd done. And he said, "Well, I knew you were going to use again. And I said, ' How did you know that?' "Duh," he says, "because you told me." I went in to see him and told him the extent of what I'd done and he wanted me to go into detox, but I told him I couldn't because I was doing Billy Barker Days. I was responsible for kids' day in the park, and that's a huge thing with over 200 volunteers. So, he said, "I'll make you a deal. I know how you set limits for yourself, so how about you set one of three beers, no more?" I agreed, but I couldn't do it, so, needless to say, I was in detox the following Monday and it was hard.

Something had shifted within me, but I had no intention of stopping drinking when I entered detox; my main goal was to get off coke. I also hoped to learn a little bit, jump through the hoops. So I went in there, and when I'm in there they get doing this reflection kind of *shit* that they put you through. I've never been so pissed off in my life. I was up all night the first night I was there. When I phoned Edward from detox, he said, "Good morning, Suzie." I snap back, 'Good morning Edward, you *fucking* jerk. What am I doing here?' I was so mad. And he says, "You're just there for a rest." Which got an, 'I'm going to kill you, Edward,' from me.

Anyway, the reflection stuff started, and I realized that I had not been keeping control of my drinking. I wasn't drinking only six beers a night. In reality, I would have a couple of beers with Billy Barker Days guys, and then I'd go over to the Quesnel and have three or four beers. Then I'd pick up half a sack and go over to my brother's. The only rule I kept was I never had it at home. But it wasn't until I was in there that I started to even admit that that was what I was doing. I had honestly never put it together like that before. It's the tricks I played with myself, you know, like how I could justify or rationalize that I wasn't that bad, that I didn't have a problem.

I had no difficulty admitting that coke was a problem because it had cost me so damn much. It was like robbing Peter to pay Paul. I was neglecting my kids; I was being an asshole. And I felt awful about using coke. 'Oh, *fuck*, what am I doing?' You know? And every time I needed it, I'd go, 'Okay, I'm only going to use it if I can afford to buy it without using my rent. I'm only going to do it if I can afford to buy it without using my grocery money.' And, 'Okay, we'll eat beans and wieners for the next week so I can get it tonight.' It was madness. You know, I'd promise the kids I'd do stuff with them, and be too sick. I'd be laying on the couch wishing I was dead, because I would have wicked, wicked hangovers. It all had become such a repetitive theme, and I hated it. I was also tired of living two lives. I mean here I am teaching martial arts. I worked at the Chamber of Commerce. I also worked at the tourist information centre. I was a director of the Billy Barber Days Society. I worked at the College of New Caledonia, teaching people re-entering into the work force, teaching them life skills. I worked at the women's centre, doing the same thing, and I'm living this life, at night, that is totally incongruent.

Of course that became just another reason to feel bad. It seemed that every time I did something good for myself, I undermined it by doing something that I hated about myself. I was tired, you know, I was sick and tired of being tired, and not just physically, but spiritually. I had no spirituality. When I finished treatment, the counsellor said that I was an intelligent, strong woman, but I needed to work on my spirituality. I had an inkling, I guess. Of course, I have a real resistance to anything with God in it. I hate the whole thing about God. So, it wasn't about God. It's about who I am, and what I believe in. I believe that there is something that helps me.

Take the people in detox when I went there. Had they not been there, I don't know if I would have got that I had to quit drinking. Do you know what I mean? I met this guy there who had been clean for about twenty years and his life story was so sad. He was native and his name was J. He said he didn't know how he started drinking again, he just found himself in the bar one day with a beer in his hand. Two months later he had gone through all of his savings and his wife was dead and he was charged with the murder. Well J and I made a connection in detox and I

wasn't getting it...I had no intention of not ever drinking again. I was just going to quit using coke. Well after a meeting, J grabbed me by my face and looked me in the eye and said, "You got to get it little one; you've got to get it or your going to die". That is spirituality to me. He was meant to be there, as was I, so that he could give the message and I could get it. I believe in that stuff.

I told very few people that I was going to detox, so most people thought I had just taken a week off. So one night right after detox, I went to a meeting and I am excited because there's real coffee there. I haven't had real coffee because it's all decaffeinated. So I go into this meeting, and I'm really happy because I get a cup of coffee. And there's this guy from Quesnel, in the program, and he saw me walk in, and he went, "Ah, Suzie." And I thought, 'ah, you *fuck*.' So I got busted, so then I had to come out to people. Like, I wouldn't even admit. Like, I remember talking to him and saying, 'I think I have a drug problem.' Like, I was so wrapped up in who I was and what I was doing that I didn't want to admit that I had that problem. You know, my idea of somebody that's an addict is a junkie, you know, and I couldn't be a junkie, so when I got out of detox and went back to Quesnel, my counsellor told me that I should go to NA. I said, 'I'll go to AA, but there's no *fucking* way I'm going to NA.'

My life was hell. I remember going to a meeting after I finished detox, and I was insane. I was totally insane. Because of course I wasn't medicating, and my feelings started bubbling up; I was like a runaway train. I remember walking all over Quesnel. I remember, I wanted to crawl out of my own skin, and I couldn't. I wanted to be anywhere else but inside my own body, and I couldn't do anything. I couldn't talk to anybody because I thought I was crazy. I went into a bar and thought, '*Fuck*, I'm having a beer.' And I sat there, and I guess it must have been apparent to other people because they were really concerned about me. I had people checking to see if I was okay. They were following me trying to make sure I'm okay.

Eventually, I went into a coffee shop where everybody from the program used to hang out. I sat there, and I couldn't even tell them what was wrong because it was so overwhelming. I

couldn't begin to tell them because I thought I was crazy. I remember thinking at the time that people, normal people, don't feel the way I feel. It was really scary, but still I was curious. Like, I mean, I was thinking about normal feelings and I'm wondering, as a kid, who didn't, couldn't feel because it wasn't safe to feel, and all of a sudden the feelings are so overwhelming.

I thought I was insane. I remember going to the meeting, everybody's saying, "Yeah, it was insanity." So I told them, 'I wasn't insane until I quit drinking.' You know what I mean? Everybody laughed. You know those meetings when you're clean, just to start with, and you start talking about stuff, and everybody's laughing at you cause they've been there? And I just thought I was crazy.

Remember the guy that I ran into in the meeting? Well, he drove me home and him and his girlfriend, who used to be a friend of mine, was extremely jealous because she figured he was up in Prince George screwing around on her. So when he took me to the meeting, she made this giant leap that we were screwing around. She threw an axe at us. That was my first meeting after detox. Now, you have to understand, I don't cry. It's still stuff that I work on, that I'm trying to get to that place where I feel safe enough to let that go. And I started crying that night - I was totally out of control. I mean totally out of control. I thought, 'This is fucking it.' So, I went home, and I looked for something to kill myself with. That's the first time it ever happened.

I went to my doctor the next day, and he put me on anti-depressants, and I took them but they weren't working, and that's when I lost it. I was wandering the streets, and I ended up sitting in this church, outside the door, just in the foetal position, hanging onto myself because I was *fucked*. I felt so alone, and so vulnerable, and so scared, you know. And I went to see my drug and alcohol counsellor the next day and he phoned my doctor. They admitted me. I stayed in there until I went to Crossroads for treatment.

I didn't find Crossroads very useful, though, because for one thing it was co-ed and for another it was based on a twelve-step program. We had to go through the first four steps in four weeks, and one of your big things was to read your life story during the third week. So anyway,

I'd been teaching, facilitating life skills; I knew a lot of stuff already. So I did a lot of things to protect myself. Like, when I'd have to read my life story. Oh, it was really bad. They'd sit around in a half circle, and you sit in the middle in a chair, and you read your story and then they all confront you. So, I did other things. Like, I took a table and stuck it in front of me to protect myself and the counsellor asked me why I did it, and I said, 'I put it there to put my paper on.' When she didn't buy that, I told her the truth. 'I put it there to protect me from you.'

But, I stayed sober. I came out of there, and I stayed on anti-depressants for a year. But my counsellor, Edward was the first person I ever trusted. And then he left right in the middle of my getting clean. His wife had asthma, and they had to move out of Quesnel to the Island. To complicate things his wife was my sponsor. I felt so bad for him, you know, and then I felt I was bad because I had those feelings, like I was being really selfish. I was so stuck in it, so stuck in it. I couldn't get out of it. Meanwhile, he's saying stuff like why he had to go, and he says, "You know, I have no choice, I have to go." I felt like, five years old, and I couldn't get out of it, I couldn't. I was so vulnerable at that time. I felt abandoned and I couldn't stop those feelings. I think it was the first time in my life that I felt like that. I didn't put someone else's feelings before mine.

When he left I got John, another counsellor, and he *fucked* me over because he was really into power. I cleaned up on July 16th, 1989, and on January 15th, 1990, I went to see John. On January 16th, my Mom died, and then my daughter was sexually abused in May. All this time I'm on anti-depressants. Oh and my ex-husband had disappeared for a year. Anyway, back to John and I. This relationship was really dysfunctional, but in my own defence, I didn't know about counselling and the roles. Like, I didn't know about power imbalances, and skill, and stuff like that. And so it was set up, like I got to a place where I would say, 'Well, I'm going to kill myself.' You know, for attention. I mean it got people to listen; people cared about me. Nobody ever cared about me before.

John gave me his home phone number, and I'd be phoning him all the *fucking* time. And every time something happened, I'd phone him, and go in there. And it was just really, really *fucked* up, you know, and I'll be the first to admit it. I had been allowed to create this dependency relationship with my counsellor, a relationship in which he held all the power. Meanwhile, throughout all of this I am in and out of the hospital.

So, now it's summer time, and T had come back and he wanted to visit the kids, but it was the kids that kept me together. I phoned John because after I agreed to the visits, I freaked out. And John said, "See, you're dependent on me." And I said, 'What?' He said, "You're dependent on me. Something happens to you and you phone me."

I was in shock by what he said, and I tried not to see him, but I couldn't do it. I ended up going to see him. Actually, I phoned him from work, and I was in a rage. I was furious. I've never been that mad before. And you've got to remember, I like being in control, right? I am totally out of *fucking* control at work. I screamed at him on the phone, 'Are you *fucking* happy, I'm mad, John, are you fucking happy?' I'm screaming at him, right. And he's saying, "That wasn't my intent." Blah, blah, blah! I said goodbye and I hung up the phone and shut the anger down. I went and I taught Kung-Fu. I tested students, and then I went home and OD'd. I took all my anti-depressants, and I ended up in intensive care.

I spent some time in the psych ward, and I came back out, and I had decided that I couldn't go see John again, but I'd already started the process to get into Maya House (the women's treatment centre). Well, John was supposed to do the paperwork for it. He phoned me up, and asked me to come on down, that we needed to do this. And I said, 'Okay, I'll come down and fill out the papers.' And I was scared, because I didn't want to get that rage again, because I had been out of control. I was really, really scared of it.

When I went to see him I told him I was going to give him a month's free membership at the gym. He said, "Well, that's not very fair." And I said, 'Well, what's the difference between what you did to me emotionally, and what I want to do to you physically?' It was tangible, you

could have cut the air it was so tense. Before I OD'd, I wrote release of information letters, because I'd given him permission to access my records, talk to my doctor, and talk to the counsellor I was going to in Williams Lake for sexual abuse. And so, I wrote things giving him permission, consent for release of information from those two people. But after I OD'd, I wrote new letters forbidding him access. I thought, *fuck* you. Right?

So, when I'm down there, he tells me I can't get into treatment unless I give him access to my doctor and counsellor. Once again he is pulling a power play. The he says, "I want to know when you see your doctor and what you talk about. I want to know when you see Mercedes (my sexual abuse counsellor) and what you talk about. I want to know when you see your sponsor, and what you talk about. So I'm thinking, fine, I'm not going to any of them. Right? Because by now, I'm so *fucking* mad, and there's no way I'm going to go back in there. And then he says to me, "So you were in the hospital again?" And I said, 'Yeah.' And he says, "Well, what for?" I told him that I OD'd and he says, "How do you think I feel?" And I said, 'I don't *fucking* care how you feel.'

That's what I mean about power over; he misused a lot of power. I did manage to get into treatment, and ever since I have been very particular about people I go to see and I know about power. I didn't at the time. I had no idea about power dynamics. I didn't know what was going on. I thought there was something wrong with me. You know, somehow, I was defective because I became dependent. You know, that I was weak.

I ended up going through Maya House, and I managed to get some good work done. It was different at Maya. First off, they laid down the ground rules, ground rules that you were expected to follow. We were told to speak in group the same way as the counsellor did, with respect and honouring our feelings and those of others. I was finally doing feeling work and getting at the issues. It was a place where I first felt safe enough to even let any of my guards down. I had to go back again two years later, and I did some really good work.

After I finished treatment in 1990 at Maya House, I got into a relationship with a woman, and that's when I came out as a lesbian. You know, I talked to John about it during the year before I OD'd. I said, 'I think I'm a lesbian.' He says, "You've got enough stuff on your plate, you know. Don't worry about that." He was such a *fucking asshole.*

I went back to Quesnel and I worked: I was good at what I did. People looked for me; I didn't have to look for a job. I worked really well with people, with kids especially. And they wanted me to facilitate life skills for kids, 17 to 24. I thought that was a good idea and that I could do the job just fine, but John, who was on the board, says, "I don't think Sue can do it." You know, I never, ever went back to him. Never! So it's sort of like, he just couldn't let it go. And I tried to go through the channels. I wrote a letter to the drug and alcohol guy that was supposed to be his supervisor and nothing ever happened. I did it in an attempt to get my power back, you know, as some kind of closure. To say this happened, to receive some kind of acknowledgement. You know, there was never even acknowledgement that this might have been out of whack.

So I worked there for two years, and then I went back into treatment after which I went back to school. I ended up going back to Maya because I was in trouble again. I got into a relationship right out of treatment the first time. I got out Friday, and I was in a relationship Saturday. It was around that time that I lost my house as well. Anyway, this time around (1992), I did a huge chunk of work, and I never looked back.

I think that's when I started to change my outlook about the program. When I first started the program, I was told this is what you better get, you better get this because you're not going to be able to stay clean. And you better make sure you get it. I always had this feeling that I didn't fit in, that I had to make up stories to fit in. You know what I mean? And they're telling me to be honest, and I'm wondering, 'Well what the fuck am I going to say?' You know? Once in a while they'd talk about something and I could be connected. But it wasn't very often, by and large I felt totally disconnected. I thought I was in outer space or something.

Of course, in the meantime, I went because I was scared of using. I was afraid I'd use if I didn't go. So I went to NA and AA in Quesnel, and then when I moved to the Island, I went to NA. I went to a couple of AA meetings, but I didn't care for the AA meetings. So I stuck it out at NA for a while. And then as I started to deal with the issues, my personal issues, my feelings and stuff, I stopped going to meetings, and I started going to personal counselling. Other than doing that, I have a really strong support network that includes people in and out of the program.

I haven't been to a meeting since '95. It's like you would go in there, and you'd admit that you were powerless over your addiction, and that your life had become unmanageable. I'm powerless over everything. When in my life did I ever have power? Do you know what I mean? I've never had power. So, to me, this doesn't make me feel better. I'm trying to get power. I'm trying to empower myself, trying to get my voice. And so, here I go, into this program, and that's the very first step, and I felt a lot of resistance around. And I thought, '*fuck* you.' I'm finally coming to a place where I'm starting to say what I feel, and what I think, and that's empowerment. That's not giving it away. To me, it's like the program asked me to go backwards, and I wasn't prepared to.

As I mentioned, I haven't been to a meeting for six years, and I still run into people in the program and they say, "Hi, how are you?" But they're not asking, *hi how are you*, they're asking me, "Are you still clean?" You know? The program is only as good as the people that are in it, and my experience has been is that it's pretty narrow minded and judgmental. I don't like it, so I don't go back. Also, there are so many phrases in the program that shut people up, like "you're in denial, get off of the pity pot, this too shall pass." To me they just shut me down. In retrospect, I believe people use these phrases because they are uncomfortable with my feelings and emotions, but it made me feel like I was wrong because I couldn't get it. AA does not seem to have a place for emotions. To me, how I stay clean is to deal with the day-to-day feelings. If I have resentment towards someone – or I feel hurt – I tell that person. If someone says or does

something I'm uncomfortable with I **NEED** to speak up. That's what the *getting in touch* with my feelings has been all about.

Have you ever said to someone that something didn't matter when it did because you were afraid they'll get mad at you or you'd hurt their feelings? Well my staying clean **DEPENDS** on me saying what is **REALLY** going on for me. This is the hardest with people close to me. The last time I was in Maya House I made a promise to my *inner child/self* that I would look after her and I do that by owning my feelings or speaking my truth. That's how I stay clean.

Sometimes I don't do it right away, if it's a friend then it's harder to do it right away. At work, I find it's easy, because that's how I set it up already, I don't have to guess at anything. That's the way I operate. That's how I'm known. But, with people that I've known in the past where I was not quite as assertive, then I've got to re-set those boundaries because I'm not the way they expect me to be. That's harder because they have to change something, or I have to change something. And so, that's how I manage myself, and that's how I manage my emotions, and that's how I stay true to myself. And if I stay true to myself, I don't feel *shitty*, and then I can stay clean.

In 95/96, I started doing *Many Roads, One Journey* which was written by Charlotte Castle. It's a sixteen-step program for women, and it's about power in women. I started to get into that stuff, and it was different than AA or NA, and it felt right *because* it was empowering. It made me feel like I had some choice. It helped give me a different look at addiction. I know some of the women that were junkies, and they now have a drink once in a while. You know, because it gave them a choice to do that. There was also a place for feelings. They were honoured at meetings ... not judged.

But at AA and NA they even talk about the fact that there may be *those people, those unfortunate few* who for whatever reason cannot follow their path because of being morally incapable or unwilling to be honest with themselves. I think it's a cult. AA and NA are cults. It's

like, "Go to ninety meetings in ninety days, do this and this and this, **or** you're going to die. I don't know anything else besides cults that say if you don't do this, and do it our way that death is sure to follow. Having said that, I know that there are people who get lots from the program, but for those people for whom it doesn't work, it doesn't seem as though they are given any other options.

I learn more about myself everyday. It is a big question for me, the whole *who am I* thing. It's so hard to figure it out because one day I'm one person, and the next day I'm another person. For instance, I never lived by myself until I got my own place when I was 45. And you know what? I didn't know what I liked to eat; I didn't know how I liked my house to be. I didn't know if I wanted to make my bed. I didn't know anything. And so I experimented. 'Well, I won't make my bed.' And I never made my bed for two months, and when that bugged me I made my bed because I wanted to. I found out that I have some comfort food. I found out that I like beans and wieners when I'm upset. And I'd go and buy myself beans and wieners. And I like that. You know, and I make myself meals that I like. So it's different levels that you discover in yourself. I know that I don't like people in my space. I have things a certain way. I don't mind having company, but don't go in my bedroom. Don't move some of my stuff. I'm finding this out, like it's a real big thing to me if somebody moves my stuff.

All my life, I gave up my space. I never had space, you know, and then I got into this relationship with this woman, and I created a space. This is so weird. This is so pivotal for me because I never, ever had my own space. I lived with my Mom and Dad, nine sibs, moved out, and moved in with a boyfriend. Right after that I had my kids, and I never had a space to myself. My ex-husband moved out, and I slept on the couch. I had an empty bedroom, and I slept on the couch. And then finally I claimed my bedroom, and I needed my space. I painted the walls. I bought myself a bed. Wallpapered. New curtains. Bedding. It was wonderful. And then I got into a relationship, and I gave it away, and it wasn't until I gave it away that I realized how important it was to me.

It's certainly a journey. There's still tons of stuff. I'm going to therapy just to work on the issues that keep coming up, whether it's from work or the crap from my past. I don't talk to most of my family. I haven't talked to D in over ten years. My sister died in 2000 (J the one that acted as my caretaker) and I hadn't talked to her in eight years. I never talked to another brother until he had his kidney transplant two years ago, and it had been seven years prior to that. It seemed like with my family that I couldn't do the work I needed to do with them around because I was always putting up my barriers, always protecting myself. So, it took me that long to be able to get to a place where I trusted enough to pull some of them down, and to recognize how detrimental they had become.

Let's see if I can explain this part. I mentioned earlier that when I went to Maya House for the second time that I discovered, for want of a better term, my inner child, and I don't particularly like that term. But I met my little kid, right? I created a relationship with her. This is a physical creation of a relationship. I had to actually visualize her as a child, and then I committed to her that I would look after her. Eventually, through time, I gained her trust. Okay? And she's the keeper of my demons. I'm able to have my emotions because I've created this trust with her over and over again; she knows that I'm going to look after her. In order to care for her I need to establish the boundaries that I have been talking about; I need to tell people when something is okay or not. Now, because I've made this commitment to her, I am able to grow and I am able to grow because she trusts me and she gives me access to my feelings.

I've also got this other part, the punishing part. She's the one that created all those rules to keep safe, to not feel. I don't want to toss her. I tried to get rid of her for eight years, and it's only just recently that I realized that she's there for a reason. She has tons of value. She's determined, she's strong willed and she's protective and she's brave. She's also punitive and a disciplinarian. She is made of many things, but I wouldn't be here today without her. I've only just, in the last year, come to that conclusion. I never recognized it until then.

And so, to me, that's recovery. That's the whole picture. That's what I wanted to become and that's where I'm headed. I can't do it without including all the parts, and I'm sure once I get this second piece together that there will be a third, and a fourth. I'm sure that that's what's going to happen. So, I can't be saying, 'This is what I've become,' because I don't know yet; it is all still unfolding.

Understand that this all takes commitment. I've had people think that I am addicted to therapy. I don't think I am. I'm just in a place where I need an outside person to say that they see me, and it's been good for me. I hated feeling dead. I hated saying, 'Is this all there is?' I would have been dead. I would have killed myself. There was nothing.

This is what happened. After I OD'd, and I came out of the psych ward, I remember sitting on the riverbank, and I had never in my life felt that kind of desolation; I had never been so tired. I'd never been so goal-less; I had no desire. Somehow, I knew that there was nobody in this world that was going to get me out of this except me, and somewhere I had to find that strength that would allow me to go on.

I found the strength, in part, because I think there was a piece of me that thought I was worthwhile. I think even when I was a kid that I took that piece of myself and hid it. Because it seems to me, I used to think when I was little, if they knew me, they'd really love me. If they really knew me, they would love me. And I think I kept that piece somewhere hidden, protected. Then when I started doing martial arts, when I got something positive in my life, and my self-esteem changed, and my perception of myself changed, I think part of me bought into it. Let me tell you, though, I couldn't go through that hell again; I simply wouldn't have the strength.

As I said, I still use the girl with the rules, though. They come up when I feel insecure, when I'm tired and emotionally drained. And they protect me, they keep me checking things out rather than spinning a bunch of crap about what I might or might not have done wrong. The rules have kept me alive and they continue to do so. Her rules have allowed the other little girl to trust and develop feelings.

I mean it's not all one thing. Let's say I've had a good workout. I might feel good about my choices, and myself and I will be able to sleep at night. But then there are the times when I'm tired, cranky, worn down, self-doubting, and that's when I'm my most vulnerable. That's when it's the hardest. The world still sucks in lots of place, but when you come back and close your eyes, and you can say, 'My piece in the world, my part in today's world is okay. I did what I know I have to do, and I can sleep tonight.' I don't have those feelings of shame, hatred, self-hatred and guilt to the intensity that I did. I still have stuff I have to work on, and I do that in therapy. I guess what I'm saying is that I am learning to deal with guilt and sadness as normal emotions. Remember, when I was growing up it wasn't normal, so I've had to change my tapes.

So where does that leave me? Where am I going? Well, I'm going to finish. I'm still doing some heavy-duty work in therapy. I'm going to get out of child protection, and into addiction work. Who knows? I don't think I'm ever going to stop. It's like a challenge to me, you know? I remember being in treatment the first time, and Bobbi, she was the house attendant, said, "The first time I ever felt joy, I felt like pins and needles all up my head." I looked at her like she was nuts, but now I get it. I can't explain what it's like to actually have an event and the feeling right there, instead of having the event, then the feeling, and then shutting it down so fast that you wonder if you ever even had the feeling. Now I have the feeling, and I go with it. It doesn't happen all the time, but I guess my goal is to just keep doing what I'm doing, and working on that piece that I tried to turf for so many years. Finally, to understand all of this is so freeing. It's hard work and it takes discipline, but I finally feel free.

Now Hank. My dear friend Hank. His story broke and continues to break my heart. It confirms my belief in the absolute absurdity of life. It also corroborates my basic premise that life is an arena of suffering and that our most essential human responsibility lies in easing that existential pain.

It took me a while took track Hank down. Immediately after his accident, my wife and I went to the hospital to see him as he clung to life. A couple of months later we visited him in rehab at G.F. Strong, and then, nothing. Hank was alive and we went our separate ways.

When I made the decision to interview one man from a 12-Step program, I knew it had to be Hank. In small ways, he had acted as a kind of gentle mentor to me when I moved here in 1995. We met at the house he is renovating, and we sat in his kitchen, he in his wheelchair and me on a small kitchen chair. And I turned on the tape recorder.

Hank told me a story that I am sure he has told many times before in one incarnation or another at AA meetings all over the world. Interestingly, even though I had known Hank for almost seven years, it was a tale with which I was unfamiliar. As he talked about his childhood memories, the first thing that assaulted me – I had to force myself to sit quietly – was when he talked about 'always having the disease' and how 'he knew that there was always something wrong' with him. I wondered how he managed to convince himself that a little boy of three could be wrong or broken because of the disease of alcoholism.

It was actually right then and there that I understood, maybe for the very first time, how deeply ingrained the disease-model could become. In Hank's mind alcoholism is absolutely no different than being born with a congenital heart defect, except of course, that his defect is all encompassing. It attacks, from birth apparently, his physical, emotional, mental, spiritual and social self.

For the next 30-minutes or so, Hank lifelessly described an empty existence of isolation, madness, and blackouts. He talked openly about years of fantasizing of killing his family, friends and strangers. He often lost his place and complained of the frustration of living with the brain damage that he received as a result of brain shearing. As he spoke, even I who have heard hundreds of similar stories began to think, 'for Christ's sake, Hank, how could you not have known? You black out every time you drink and you want to wipe out half the Canadian Navy with a hammer.'

It wasn't until he began to talk about finding AA that he began to animate. He wept openly as he described what it meant to him to find a place where he was understood, where he belonged. As Hank's narrative progressed, I began to catch glimpses of the man that I had known. He spoke modestly about his helping relationships, his wife, his sponsor and other friends in the program. His purpose, his pre-accident life's meaning became eminently clear; he saw himself as a conduit for the message of recovery. If AA and recovery could help him, it could help anyone, and he lived his life to be a guide to the *other*.

During the last fifteen minutes of our interview, Hank talked about the devastation of the accident, and how he has had to fall back to the absolute fundamentals of AA recovery. He also spoke of being forced to, once again, look deep into the abyss and re-examine his very existence. For the first time in years, he thought about, and even planned a way of not being. And through it all, Hank never once considered drinking again. 'How would it make anything any better?' he chuckled rhetorically. How, indeed?

I met Hank in 1995. He was the Drug and Alcohol Counsellor at CFB Comox, and I had just moved to Comox to be with my fiancée. During the summer, while I waited for my BSW program at UBC to start, I asked Hank if it would be all right if I helped him out with one of the groups he was facilitating on the Base. Generously, he accepted my offer, and I have held him in the highest esteem ever since. Despite not having an AA background, he welcomed me with open arms. He valued my contributions, and he always made me feel as though I truly belonged. Hank has a favourite line that goes something like, "If I had to bet on you or the disease, I would bet on the disease every time." On one afternoon, a young, aggressive newcomer pointed to me and demanded of Hank, "If you had to bet on him or the disease, who would you put your money on?" Hank looked at me carefully and replied, "Him." I have never forgotten his generosity of spirit.

Hank's Story

Since I stopped using alcohol, I think that I can find a number of defining moments, even though I didn't think they were defining at the time. Once I had the information I needed about the disease, I was able to look at some of those moments, and realize how long I had the disease: I think I had the disease right from the start. As I went on, I discovered more information that confirmed that for me. So, I'll see if I can put it in some sort of order.

As a kid, I always felt out of place. I always felt alone and different. I felt unloved or unlovable. As I got more information later on, I realized that it was me. I mean, at the time, I wanted to blame everybody else, which I think was another part of the disease for me. I thought there was something wrong with my mom, or something wrong with my dad. And over a period of time I figured out that there was something wrong with me. As far as being able to feel like I fit in.

That changed when I started using alcohol, and I started really young. What was my first experience with alcohol? Well, my mother gave me a drink of brandy to help me sleep because I had a cold, and I liked it so much, I can remember the next day pushing a kitchen chair over to the sink to get the brandy. I was three or four at the time. So looking back, I really liked the stuff because it changed the way I felt. It made me feel good. It's tough because I don't have

any comparison with what it was to feel normal at that time because I guess I always felt, I always felt out of place, felt different. Felt like I didn't belong. When I drank, I felt good.

My parents were social drinkers. I had two brothers - one older, one younger and they both had the disease as well, later on. My maternal grandfather, great grandfather, uncles, and great-uncles all had the disease. It skipped a generation with my dad, but there was suicide in his family, lots of mental health problems.

But I thought that the family life was good. My parents loved me and they were always supportive. They always encouraged me to do things, even though I didn't. I think they were there for me if I had been able to ask. But I think, again, my belief around the disease is that it interfered with that process. It's kind of like the disease is there and running, and I never felt normal until I used alcohol.

I think the next time that I allowed myself to be what I wanted to be was when I used alcohol at about age 12 or 13. I stole some alcohol from my dad, home brew, and drank it, and then – although I don't think I drank enough to be drunk – I let myself be a jerk and do dumb stuff. Again, there was something weird about my response. I think at the time it was probably more an emotional thing than a physical addiction or anything. I don't think it was. It couldn't have been at that time. But there was certainly an emotional attachment to it. It happened again about age 16 when I had my first blackout. You see there was never, ever any normal process around my alcohol use. So here I was 16, and I drank six beers, blacked out and got in trouble with the police (no driver's license). I always drank to get drunk and be somebody.

I wasn't drinking a lot because I was under age and I couldn't get a lot. But when it was there and I could get it, I would drink and get drunk, and do dumb things. As I said, the disease for me has always been there, forever. It was just a matter of getting the alcohol into me, I think, to get a reaction.

When I was younger I had, I think, one or two close friends, but not lots of friends, no. I had girlfriends, though. An uncle sexually abused me when I was about five or six, and a

schoolteacher abused me when I was about 13 or 14. That certainly affected my belief around sex and my behaviour around sex and that sort of thing. I guess I felt really guilty about the abuse, so I mean, that was a part of what I drank to cover up later on. I didn't think of that at the time, but it was always there. Anyway, I think I pretty well always had a steady girlfriend from the time I was 13 or 14 years old right through up until the time I got married in 1966. We had two daughters, one in 1970, one in 1971.

I joined the navy when I was 17, and I had trouble right away in Cornwallis. I got posted to Esquimalt (where I was later married), and the drinking continued. Although my parents didn't have a problem with alcohol, they used to buy booze for us three boys. I think that was one of the ways that they would connect with us because we were all heavy drinkers. I suppose that they discovered a way that they could make contact with us. They'd come and visit for the weekend and bring a case of beer, a bottle of rum, and a bottle of wine. So we'd party on the weekend. They were in Vancouver and we were in Victoria, so they'd come over and buy us groceries and stuff because we didn't have much money.

Still when I drank, I would always drink to get drunk, and I usually drank to blackout stages. They were long blackouts where I would wake up in the morning and wonder where I'd been. By age 17, I was missing whole nights from my memory. Eventually, that's the way most of them were. I would drink and have a blackout. I'd be at the mess drinking, and come to in the morning and wonder where I'd parked my car, and go out to check and see if there were any dents. You know, the usual practice.

Let's see if I can get the timing of this thing down. In 1963, I would have been 19/20 (born in 1943), and I worked in the pay section while I was posted to UBC. At that time they had a UN TD, or university naval training division office, out there. I was posted there as the typist, because they needed one body to be their gopher. Then in the summer I went down to the recruiting office in the pay section.

Of course, I got into the booze there, and began to drink and have blackouts. I mean there was never anything in between; it was drink and blackout. At the time I lived at home in New Westminster with my mom and dad, and as I said my dad was a normal drinker. We'd go down to the Terminal Hotel in New Westminster, and he would have a beer or maybe two at the outside. He'd sip, and it would take him all evening to drink a beer. I can remember sitting thinking, 'Geez, I wish he'd drink that damn beer so I could have another one.' Right? Given the chance, I'd just drink and drink and drink. That was one of the signs that there was a problem. The police stopped me in Stanley Park for drinking and driving, but I wasn't charged. I tried to get out of Discovery, and there was a kind of Y in the road where it goes around through the park, and I wound up on the boulevard in between the Y. And the cop on the horse just happened to be there. He said, "I think you better just leave it there and go back in." That could very well have been my first impaired charge.

The drinking age at the time was 21, but it didn't matter to me. Another evening, after drinking most of the night, I got stopped going home. I had a couple of real dandies, a trunk load of stuff. The police stopped me because the headlight was out on my car. The guy checked my license and asked me my age. 'Nineteen,' I replied. "You been drinking?" 'Somebody slipped me a drink under the table down at Discovery.' I lied. He warned me not to make a habit of it and to get my headlight fixed. That could have been DWI number two.

In the meantime, of course, I was still living with my parents, and they really never said a word. I remember after I sobered up and told my mom that I thought I was an alcoholic, she said, "Well, you know, you come by it honestly. Your grandfather used to disappear for a week at a time." So when I was only gone for a few hours, I guess she thought, "Well, at least he's not gone for a week." You know? So, Dad, I think it was beyond anything of his experience; he had no concept. When I told him that I had alcoholism, he said, "Well, no, not really. You're just drinking a bit too much." 'Yeah, dad, that's what I mean.' So I mean, I think he saw it but he

didn't want to say anything, I guess, for fear of kind of losing the family or something. I'm not sure what his concept was of it, but they always had booze in the house, and I always drank it.

Well, eventually I became legal in Vancouver, and I drank in the bars all the time. From there, I moved over to Victoria, got married, and we got posted to Ottawa in 1968. I didn't get in much trouble during the four years I spent there, but I was confronted at the office a few times for dumb things I did that were booze related. I was drinking at lunch and stuff, but it was also an enabling kind of office; there were lots of alcohol users. So while I might have gotten a warning or something, there was never any real follow up. I also think that the drinking was progressing, though, as my income increased. Even though there were times when my two kids didn't have milk, there was never a time when I didn't have booze. My wife had come from an alcoholic home so she was seeing normal behaviour.

From there, I got posted up to Inuvik with my family for two years, and that's where my drinking went right out of control. I was probably drinking almost 24 hours a day; I worked hard and I played hard. I ran the pay office, and it was a tough job up there. I also got myself on as a bartender so I could have enough money to drink, although, again, I didn't realize that at the time, but looking back, that's what was going on. I then started doing the books for them because they didn't have anybody to do the books. While I was the bookkeeper, I used to use the magic pen so that I could drink free. *There was nothing wrong with me.*

The blackout drinking was absolutely terrible. It was 1972-1974, and I was drinking about a thousand dollars a month on the bar. I don't think I could have done a better job, even if I wasn't drinking. I used to get up at five o'clock in the morning, go in and work in the office until six o'clock at night, then go in and work at the bar. I don't know where my wife was when this was going on. How could she put up with all this *shit*, right? And then, of course, then on the weekends, I'd take her to the bar and we'd both get drunk. Even though she didn't have a problem with alcohol, I turned her into a heavy drinker up there. It made sense to bring her with me, that way I wouldn't have to go home and face the music.

I drank everyday, and I blacked out every day. It was around this time that I could see the progression of the drinking and the blackouts, and I felt like I was to go crazy up there. It was like everything I was doing was an act, an act to try and cover up the insanity that was going on inside. I don't think I was suicidal yet, but I certainly felt persecuted by my boss. 'Why doesn't he recognize what I'm doing? Why can't I get a promotion faster?' This is even though I'd got promoted when I left Ottawa to Master Corporal. Well, the promotion came anyway: I left Inuvik in 1974, after two years there, as a Sergeant.

All this time, I couldn't figure out what was going on. It was like I was out of control, and this made me scared. Funny thing was that I didn't see the booze as the out of control part. Instead I felt that maybe my job was a little beyond me, and that meant I was putting all these hours in trying to control the job. I mean, I finally got it, by the time I left there, I had it down so I was only working about maybe ten hours a day, instead of twelve to fourteen.

I enjoyed myself, the parts that I remember. But frankly most of it was missing. We went out one night, I was told, and fought a house fire, and I was there helping the firemen, and I don't have any recall at all about it. One night three of us went out on the Skidoo, and we turned it over. I was drunk again and managed to walk away. Hell, I used to drink and drive all the time, and I never had an accident, so I guess I learned how to drive drunk, basically. It's thinking about it now that makes it scary. Who was watching over me and everybody around me? Drunks and fools, drunks and fools.

As I said my wife had come from an alcoholic home and she put up with this stuff. You know, thought it was normal, and I guess kind of had her own life going. Although I'm sure she felt isolated. I thought I had the perfect marriage because we never fought. Well, it's kind of hard to fight if you never talk. We had these two little kids, and I tell myself that *we* looked after the kids fairly well. But I'm not sure about that, either, because I was basically never there. So maybe *we* looked after them is the wrong pronoun.

Next, I got posted back to Esquimalt and I spent a year in Naden, and that's where I got my first impaired charge. I was still drinking and driving like I'd been up in Inuvik, you know, but in Inuvik there was nothing to hit. So anyway, I'm doing the same thing down in Esquimalt. I was in the parking lot up at the Chiefs' Mess at Naden, and I ran into a parked car trying to get out of the parking lot. Of course they hauled me in and called the cops, and I couldn't believe what was happening. I thought, '*fuck*, there's nothing wrong with me,' you know. Why are they picking on me? And of course, I blamed the bartender for phoning the cops, and I blamed the cops for not letting me go. They took me in, they fingerprinted me and they held me for a few hours. Then they let me go and I wandered back to the Mess, straightened the fender out on the car, and drove home. Seemed like the logical thing to do for me.

Mind you, by this time, I was nuttier than a fruitcake. Remember I said I was feeling crazy in Inuvik? Well, I was starting to get crazy. I would be driving home thinking about killing my wife and kids, you know, and killing myself. Thinking about murder/suicide. And I couldn't figure out what was going on. I enjoyed life and yet I'm thinking I want to kill myself. I didn't know what was going on.

I came in the next day after the impaired charge, and my boss said, "What the hell happened to you last night? You got this impaired charge. Now you have to go see the MPs, blah, blah, blah." He was more upset than I was because I still saw the whole thing as bad luck. The MP that had interviewed me called me up and because I had talked about the blackouts, he called me a liar. He says, "What do you mean you don't remember?" I said, 'I don't remember.' He said, "Fella, you're a liar." Well, I didn't remember and I had left this clue, if the guy had some training about alcoholism. I mean, it was all there. And I am pretty sure that if he'd asked me, I wouldn't have lied because the denial wasn't around that part of it. The denial was around, *there's a problem here, as opposed to do you have blackouts*? Yeah. Of course I do. Everybody does. Yeah, I won't lie about the blackouts, but I will tell you that alcohol isn't a problem.

Of course, back then nobody in the military was taking any training about substance abuse. There were no courses available, no reading material, not a thing. I mean for many drinking was the main form of entertainment; it wasn't something you worried about. My boss asked me if there was a problem, and I assured him that there wasn't. I mean all this stuff is going on, and no one, including me, can put any of the pieces together.

Well, after all this, I got posted to a ship, and that is when it got really bad. Don't get me wrong, for a drinker the place was heaven. I guess you can say that my *skid row* was my pit in 8 Mess. Our drinking hole was right across from my office, so that was great. The big joke was, you know, if you can't run your office from the Mess, you're not much of a supervisor, right?

I lost my license as a result of the impaired charge, so my wife would drive me in to the ship. Part of me started to question if maybe I had some kind of problem. I asked myself that because I guess my boss must have said something that kind of triggered something. Anyway, I quit drinking for two weeks and there were no adverse affects that I can recall, but then I got posted to the Yukon. I went down to visit the other guy I was replacing down there and, I was so happy at being sober for two weeks, I thought I'd celebrate, so how does an alcoholic celebrate, right? I got drunk, of course.

Once I got my licence back, rather than drive, I'd sleep in the car. Rather than stop drinking, I figured out a way to not drink and drive. I had a station wagon, so I'd just climb in the back. My wife thought that was a great idea. She used to say, "At least I know that you're not going to kill yourself." She must have gone through hell because she worried all the time. She used to say, "All right, sometimes I wish you would kill yourself and then it would be over for me." I gave her hell.

So anyway, now it's 1975, and I am on board ship, and I felt like my brain was falling off in chunks. More and more, I am thinking about killing my family and myself, and I had no idea what was going on. I would find myself just thinking this shit from out of nowhere; it became like

a normal thought process, and I would think, '*Fuck*, what are you thinking this shit for?' I was scared.

I was still eating like a horse, exercising a little and sleeping like a rock. At least at the time I thought I was sleeping. I think what was really happening – I put this together later – was that I was actually passing out. There was no REM, so I was starting to hallucinate, you know? I think that was part of the process of thinking about killing myself, and thinking of killing my wife, and thinking of killing my neighbours. When I think about now, you know, those thoughts that I was having had become intrusive. It was almost like it was no longer *me* telling myself to kill everyone.

I was still on board ship, and I was having blackouts and I would come out of blackouts and find myself wandering around the upper deck with a hammer in my hand, looking for somebody to kill. And that really scared me. *What the fuck am I doing*? You know? I talked to my brother about this stuff later because we were on the same ship at the same time, and he told me that he used to wonder what was going on because one minute I would be there and the next I would be gone. Well, when I was gone, I was wandering around with the hammer watching chunks of my brain drop off.

I can see now, of course, how much of this was connected to the alcohol use, but I didn't have the knowledge, you know, that if you drink and you do this then that will happen. That was the part that was missing. I didn't have the knowledge about what was going on. I thought, there's nothing wrong with my drinking, but wait, that's not true, because I knew, what did I know? Because I knew there was something wrong. I had switched drinks; I stopped drinking for a couple of weeks; people were telling me that I had a problem; and I had let my job go. I had a really good Master Corporal (Killick) working for me, and he was doing all my work. No wonder I could run my office from 8 Mess, right? He covered for me all the time; he was doing both our jobs, but when something went wrong because of my drinking, I blamed him in front of the boss.

Finally, for me, I think that four things came together, almost at the same time. One was the bar bill, because the bartender said to me one time, "You know, Hank, you're a nice guy. You drink a little bit, but you're a nice guy. Do you know that you have one of the highest bar bills on the ship?" And I kind of laughed, "Right on, yeah, right on, Steve." But it triggered something or maybe planted a seed is a better way to put it. I knew that the booze was really cheap, and I was also charging cigarettes to my bar bill at $2 a carton. I can remember sitting there thinking to this day, 'What the hell. What's he mean I've got one of the highest bar bills here? I don't drink that much. It must be the cigarettes." So I quit smoking right then and there on the first of March 1977; and my bar bill went up, it didn't go down. That was the first wedge.

The second wedge was the craziness of wandering around with the hammer and thinking about killing everyone. I knew that that wasn't right. It had gone from thinking about, you know, about doing my wife, and doing my neighbours, to wandering around the ship. That was getting pretty close to home, because the ship was really my home. I spent more time there, I think, than I did at home. So, I thought, 'Oh, *shit*, there's sure something wrong here. I'll go and see a psychiatrist.' I went and saw this doctor, and he checked me all over and everything, you know, and I was still fairly healthy. My liver wasn't enlarged or anything, although I don't how, I mean, I was drinking probably more than 40 a day. Right? But I did have this spider nyacnea? I'm not sure what it was called, but it was a kind of spider acne, where you touch the skin and you don't get the proper response. This guy had to have had some training because he was pretty good. He asked me if I drank or smoked. 'Yes to the first, no to the second.' "How much do you drink?" he wondered.

It so happens that just before I came to see the doctor that I had been to a lecture by J. H. So, I'm sitting there in this lecture hall and my buddy R.P. was with me. He says, "You know that guy used to be such an asshole. I knew him when he was drinking, and he used to beat up his wife and kids. Now that he's stopped, he's doing great. I've got a lot of time and a lot of admiration for him. So we should go and listen." So we went. So anyway, I'm sitting in this

audience, and J is talking about the progression, right? He said, "You drink a couple and this happens. And you drink a few more and this happens, and then you drink a few more and this happens." And then he got about halfway down the chart and talked about drinking so much and you start having blackouts. And I can remember sitting there thinking, 'Uh, I have blackouts. And I'm okay. That chart is wrong.' So the second wedge was the blackouts.

Well, another thing John said during the lecture that anybody who drank more than six beers a day had a problem. So, when the doctor asked me how much I drank, I said, 'Oh, about six beers a day.' He says, "Oh, yeah, that's nice. Why is it that you're here Hank?" I said, 'Well, I want to see a psychiatrist because I'm having thoughts of beating people over the head and it scares me because I'm not that kind of person.' I didn't tell him about the blackouts though because I still didn't see them as being that abnormal, I guess. Or maybe I thought it was all tied into the chunks falling off my brain. He said, "That's not all that different from normal, you know. A lot of people feel angry and hurt and they want to take it out on other people. But we'll get you in to see a psychiatrist. That's not a problem."

So then he finished doing his exam, and he said, "Six a day, huh? When do you drink them? Do you have any before lunch?" 'Oh, yeah, we usually have a couple before lunch.' "Do you have some with the meal?" 'Well, yeah, sometimes we have a couple with the meal.' "After lunch?" 'Well, yeah, we have a couple after lunch sometimes.' "How about before you go home?" 'Oh, yeah, we have a couple then.' "How about on the way home?" 'Oh, yeah, a couple more.' "How about when you get home?" 'Oh, yeah, a couple per night, yeah.' There's a dozen a day, my God. But he didn't say that, instead he said, "If you think you have a problem with alcohol, we have a treatment program." I mumbled some kind of negative response and pretty well ran out of his office, scared again. I don't think I even stopped to get my psychiatrist appointment. But the third wedge was in.

Now for number four. I knew my friend R. was in AA, and he would wander by the mess when I was drinking and say, "One of these days Hank, you're going to be in my club." I would

tell him to *fuck off* in a friendly way because I liked him. So, anyway, once again I got drunk, hopped in my car and got stopped by the police, and got nailed for impaired charge number two. And that was it. They took me in and fingerprinted me. I wouldn't give them a breath sample. 'Is there something wrong with your goddamned machine?' Wouldn't give them a sample, right? So they charged me with that, too.

Of course, I was down in Colwood, so then I walked back to my car and drove home. I got home, went to bed, had a couple of drinks, and I can remember.... oh, geez, I mean I was right nuts at that time. I was toxic. I can remember walking back to my car actually and going across the Colwood golf course and hiding in the trees and watching people, thinking, thinking about killing somebody. Yeah, I mean it was all scrambled. I hitchhiked with a guy, thought about killing him.

Anyway, I got back to my car and I then drove home, and I can remember getting up that next morning and thinking, 'My Jesus, I'm really in trouble now!' Because it was my second impaired charge, and I figured I was going to jail. 'This is it, I'm going to jail, and, no way around it.'

So, I went back to the ship that morning, and I got a hold of R and said, 'Hey, R, come and tell me about this AA *shit*.' He came and sat in my office, I can see it today, and said, "You know, Hank, I don't know what you want, but let me tell you, if you're an asshole when you're drinking, you're going to be an asshole when you sober up. If you want to go to AA, I'll take you to AA." So, he took me to my first AA meeting. And, there was another guy on the ship, D, and I don't know if it was that day or the next day, anyway, R kind of turned me over to D, and we went to my first AA meeting Tuesday and talked about getting into treatment on Wednesday. I had been charged on Monday. Just bang, bang, bang.

Now, I had no idea what treatment meant, I was doing this because of the impaired charge. It had nothing to do with the drinking. Basically, I manipulated myself into treatment. I went and saw my XO and said, 'Look, I know you really can't sail without me, but I want to do

the program that they got going up in Naden here and it has to do with alcohol and stuff.' And my XO said, "Oh, yeah, you can go in there. Great, yeah, we'll get you over there." I was heartbroken that they could sail without me.

I started doing AA meetings, two or three a week. And from my first meeting, it was like, for the first time in my life I belonged. Like coming home. It was just such a relief to have people sitting there talking about all this *shit* that was going on in **my** head. *Shit* that I couldn't talk about to anybody. I'd always felt alone, my whole life, and finally I wasn't alone, so it was great. Of course, I still didn't think I had a problem with alcohol. I was just felt like I was broken in pieces. Like, I knew I enjoyed the booze. I'm sure that I knew that I needed it, but I was still in denial; I didn't have the knowledge about what the disease was. They told me to keep on coming back, and I was such a people pleaser that I figured I could handle that.

I went into treatment in August. It was real quick. One of the lectures was put on by a couple of AA guys, and they said, "A lot of people come to AA for one reason, and then all of a sudden, the light goes on and they're there for another one." That's when I knew; I knew that that's what it was, for that. You know, that I'd go there for one reason and because I liked what was happening, I stayed for the other. I'd gone to get out of the impaired charge, and I stayed because I belonged. I was just soaking it up. It was great! I just loved it! Yeah. I got so much out of treatment; I mean I was really sick. I didn't realize how sick I was.

If I'd continued to drink the way I was drinking, I would have killed myself because I'd be driving home and think, 'I could drive in front of that truck, or I could hit that tree, or I could drive off the road.' Finally I was able to talk about it. I got a tremendous amount out of group, just a tremendous amount out of group. I soaked up the knowledge, too, watching films. We used to watch films a couple of times a week.

They had a family night once a week at that time. They didn't have a family program, I mean, that was the family program, right? Your wife would come in once a week for an

afternoon, I think, and an evening. It was then, when we started talking about it that we started fighting. It was actually normal development that was just a little delayed.

And while I was at treatment, I thought, 'Jesus, would this ever be a great business to get into.' So I said, 'How do you get to do this stuff?' I was told, "You can read these books, and you can take this course." This was right at the end of my treatment, and I thought, 'Yeah, I'd really like to do that.' So, I bought all the books, every self-help book they had on the list. There must have been fifteen books, you know.

Anyway, I took all the books, and we were going to sea. We left on about the 5th of September for South America? Yes, it was South America. I took this as the greatest opportunity in the world. I hit AA every place we stopped. I started an AA meeting on the ship. 'I need it. If there *ain't* one here, I'll start one. If I'm the only one coming, one person will be here.' I think most times there was about seven of us, and we would meet there, once a week.

We went to Long Beach. R had been in AA for probably a dozen years by that time. I knew some people in San Diego, I knew some people in Long Beach. 'Come on, let's go.' We'd go to AA meetings. We got down as far as Panama, and we phoned a guy in Panama. He came down in a little Toyota and took the seven of us, in a little two-door Toyota, to a meeting in the jungle. I couldn't believe it. Here's this place in the jungle, and it's got the half walls, a big fan in the ceiling, you know, it's like something out of Humphrey Bogart.

Amazing! I went to a meeting in Ecuador. I phoned up this lady and she said, "Well, hop on the bus, come on up, meet you in town." I hopped on the bus, went in, went to this meeting. It was all in Spanish, she translated. Amazing! I'm alive. It's like, 'This is the best thing.' This is absolutely sheer joy, to find all these people who are doing this sobriety stuff and I'm part of it. It's belonging to something.

We hit more coming back in San Diego, Long Beach and Seattle. And, I think, we may have gone to one in Vancouver. But I was overjoyed to find out that that's what was wrong, that I had this frigging disease. I was getting knowledge that I had thirsted for. Because I'd known my

whole life that there was something wrong, and somebody finally said, "Hey, this is it." I thought, 'Yes, this is what's been going on." I was scared because it was new stuff, and I hated new stuff. I hated change. But, you know, I knew I needed to do this, so went to a lot of meetings, and I got involved doing all kinds of stuff.

I got posted up to Comox the next year. I had been sober just over a year when I got posted to Comox, and I'd been going to the follow up about once a month as part of the aftercare program; I tried to get one going on the ship, but there was no response. But we still had our AA meeting when we were at sea, so it wasn't too bad. Now that I was in Comox, I still wanted to get involved. So they said, "Why don't you take the drug education coordinators course, do some education stuff." 'Okay, I'll do that.' I got myself on the course, but in the meantime I looked around the base and there wasn't anything happening at all up here. So I thought, 'Well, *shit*, I need follow up. I'll just start a group myself.' So I phoned ARC (alcohol rehabilitation centre), got the names of everybody on the base who had treatment for the last year, phoned them all up, and said, 'Look, we're going to start a follow up group here. Come on over.' And that's how things started in Comox. I went and got the educators course and started to get a little bit of education; I was also running the pay office at the time.

One of the most important things I did in Comox was hook up with Jerry, my sponsor. I'd heard that he was a mean *son of a bitch*, and I figured that's what I needed at the time. I knew this guy, R, and he'd been through treatment before me. At the time we used to take the bus to Esquimalt once a month for follow up, and that's where I met him, come to think of it. Anyway, I'd seen him at a couple of meetings, and when I came up here, he'd been out doing a little research (drinking). When I came back I was kind of thunder on his doorstep, right? (He sobered up and he's still doing great, by the way.) And he said, "Remember I talked about sponsors?" At the time, I had a sponsor because I'd asked a Navy guy that I knew forever in Esquimalt to be my sponsor, and I had done that because they said you need a sponsor. I didn't even know what the

hell it was. I was still *perfect* at that time, you know? Didn't really have a problem. I had done all the steps, and everything.

Anyway, R says, "My sponsor's Jerry. You'll see him, he's the guy with the hydraulic finger." I used to go to the meetings down at the Alano Club, and of course, it was smoke *em* if you got *em* and everybody had *em* (I never did go back to smoking). I went to this one meeting, and I see this finger poking out of the smoke, and I thought, 'Gee, I'll bet that's that Jerry guy.' So anyway, I kind of watched him, you know, for a few weeks and then I figured that I'd like him to be my sponsor. So I went and asked him because I liked what he said and how he said it. Whenever he talked there was no bullshit. It was all, "This is the way it was for me, and this is the way it is in the program, and you know, it was all common dog, and straight, real straight stuff. No bullshit. I thought, 'Boy, that's the kind of guy I need.' So, anyway, I started hanging around with him, he agreed to be my sponsor, and over the years we've become best friends.

What happened then? I started the follow up group and I started doing education stuff and I became the assistant in the program. I guess people started noticing that there was kind of a change occurring. People were starting to stay sober. They started asking me to do assessments for the referrals. They would say, "We got this guy with a problem. Would you mind talking to him? We think he might need treatment." As a result of this I got to know most of the bosses and the doctors on the base. It seemed like lots of people were coming to me for information. I told people what they could expect in treatment, and I started talking to spouses and I brought them into the aftercare group. We were real leaders in this stuff.

I guess doing the education stuff, I'd met some of the people in Ottawa who were also involved with the treatment side of things, and they would come out and do presentations for the education stuff. So I got to know them, and of course, I knew the guys down at ARC really well. The Ottawa guys asked, "What would you recommend if we were to have a full time position on the base? Would you write us up what you think the job would entail?" I told them I could do that, no problem.

So I sat myself down with the other drug education guy Ted, and we wrote up this thing of what we thought a job description would be for somebody who was working full time as a Base Alcohol and Drug Coordinator. I really had no idea at the time that I was writing my own job description. I phoned this guy I knew in Cold Lake and got some information for it, wrote it up, and sent it in to Ottawa, and didn't really give it a second thought. I went on with the assessments. I ran the pay office, and I organized some pretty interesting outings for the families in the program. One time we took the whole bunch to Cold Lake for a rally, and the next year they came out to Comox to stay with us. It was great. I still drove down to ARC. We'd take them down there for a meeting. We just did all kinds of stuff to keep the guys, you know, interested. You know, it made me feel good. I guess I get pleasure from watching other people change. I like being able to give them some information, and watch them take the information and run with it. It's just, wow! You know?

Well, about a year later they came back and said, "Okay, we've decided to hire somebody full time. So, I had 21 years in at that time. I talked it over with Jerry and said, 'You know, I could do that job. I'm doing it now. I wrote the *fucking* job description. I know that I can do that job.' And you know, I'm scared because I hate change, right? But I thought, 'One step at a time. I'll do it. I'll sit the board first.' I had learned to let things flow. That's one of the things that I got out of the program was that you do the work and see what happens. You know, you plan but planning is not results. So I thought to myself, 'Well, I can. I'll go and I'll sit the thing, and if I get the job, great. And if I don't, that's okay, too. And if I do get it, then I'll get out.' Well, I studied for the panel and I got the job.

Then I went down to San Diego to take their Navy training for addictions. It was tough. They want you to fail. They want anybody that's going to fail, to fail, because if you get out in the field and you don't have support, they don't want you to fail out in the field. So they just put the boots to you. I got pretty good marks all the way through; I had around an 85% average. But I had trouble in the growth group. I think that because of the stress, I mean this is hindsight, but

because of the stress, in a sense my alcoholism came back. I started to use the old defences again. I started withdrawing and not being confrontative, and doing all the things that you don't need to do when you're being a counsellor and taking counsellor training. I got called on the carpet for it, but they told me that since I was going back to be a base counsellor and not going to a treatment centre that they would pass me. Again, looking back, they were probably just *wagging my tail.* It really doesn't matter. I came back to Comox, and did the job that I had been doing for ages, and the one that I had been preparing most of my life for. And I did that job with zest right up until the accident.

I think that I discovered early some of the keys to having long-term success, and I may have mentioned one of these earlier. You can't feel responsible for the other guy's recovery, or for his failure for that matter, okay? I need to remember that I am carrying the message. I need to be able to say it in a way that you can understand it. See, if I give you information, the odds of you hearing exactly what I say are not very good. You hear what you want to hear, and then you use that. And my belief is that what I pass along to you, you interpret in the way you need to interpret. Does that make sense? I have had lots of people say, "You've helped a lot of people." I say, 'No, they've helped themselves. All I did was pass them the information in a way that they can handle it.' They take it and they run with it or they don't, and that's okay.

Hey, I run into people all over the place. We were sitting in the hotel in Vancouver just before I went in for my operation in December or January. I was in for two operations, one in December that popped open, and I had to go back in again in January. I had some plastic surgery on my back. Anyway, we're sitting in the Plaza 500 and this woman walks in and I said, 'I know her.' And she comes up to me and she says, "You don't remember me, do you?" I says, 'Well, I do. I can't pull your name because I've got some brain damage, I think.' So she told me her name and she said, "You know you saved my husband's life. We were in your office the day of your accident, and you talked to him about drinking and about going to AA, and he stopped drinking. He went to AA and he's been doing great. And he went to treatment, he's been great ever since."

And this was two years later. Holy Christ, I couldn't even remember it. You see, the day of the accident is wiped out: it's gone. But isn't that great, to be able to pass on that information?

When we did that AA group on ship, one of the guys that came had sobered up through the Salvation Army. I mean, when I first went to AA, I thought that AA's the only way. And then when I started looking around, I was smart enough to figure out that there are other people doing other stuff here that's working just as well. So, I always take that stuff and use it. I think that's one of the things that I've done is that I can use new stuff all the time.

Now, what has my recovery meant to me since the accident? (While riding his motorcycle home along the Island Highway, Hank was struck by a car and almost killed. He has been paralysed for three years now.) Well, it saved my life. It's like doing it all over again. It's like going through the same process of recovery, the same process of growth again. I use the same tools that I was given by AA. The tools came from outside to start until I could internalize them and use them myself. I think that's why, for me, the meetings are so important.

Because people would tell me things. "If you do this, this will happen. If you do this, this will happen. Try this and see what will happen." I would take this stuff and I would have to hear it and hear it and hear it before I could use it. Before it would work for me. I'll give an example. I needed to learn about how to grow up, to mature and stop being the teenager at 35, in order to become an adult. I had to begin to take responsibility for myself. 'Yes, I did this. Right or wrong, I did this. This is how I feel about whatever.' It was that kind of stuff.

I think just prior to the accident I had finally got to the point where I could think and talk at the same time. I got to the point where I felt like I was my own person; I was happy with who I was and I had confidence in myself. I was an actor rather than a reactor. I felt like I could do, well not anything, but anything I was capable of doing. I felt like I could do. I guess I felt like I had direction. I had felt complete. It was like finding all the *shit* in one sock.

Also, I was able to say that. Maybe not in those words, but if you'd asked me about something, I could say, 'Well, I think this or that.' And I could do that without having to lie or

back-pedal or *bullshit* or justify; it was all right there. I believe that was me overcoming my disease. I believe that the disease affected absolutely everything I did, or thought, or felt; it was total. The disease is total. It affected everything. And so the arresting of the disease came through knowing that. Saying, 'Yup, this is the disease, and it's popped up here, it's popped up there and it's popped up there.' And once I recognize that all-encompassing nature of the disease, and I see that I am doing something stupid because of it, I can change it if I want to. But when I was using alcohol and in denial, I didn't even know I had a disease. Okay, so the process has been learning about the disease, and learning at what depth it is. Each time it's kind of like, I get to one stage and I find out there's another stage to go. 'Oh, *shit*, here we go again.' I see it as opening something up, having a look, and then building on the base. I can change the way I am. I'm capable of changing, I know that, and to do that I need to be an actor instead of a reactor.

I see my recovery in five-year blocks. Like, there were certain tasks that I needed to accomplish before something else would come up that I had to accomplish. Let's see, the first five years was about staying sober. Getting a handle on the drinking. The second five years was about understanding what the problems were. And I think the third five years is about solving the problems. And I think the fourth five years is about coming into action, I think. Making the shift from working on the problems, to dealing with them as they come up, and it's the integration of the first fifteen years. Ideally, you get to where stuff becomes second nature and you are able to live the life that comes out of the twelve-step philosophy of AA. When I first started the process, I was scared shitless, and while there are times that I still get that way, I do things in spite of the scary feelings. I think that pre-accident, the process itself had become exciting. 'Wow, is this ever neat! I'm learning this about myself.' I was able to act where I could see myself doing things, or catch myself doing things, accepting it and then making a choice about whether I wanted to change it or not.

So, yeah, this *fucking* accident, I guess that the accident has become part of the recovery cycle. I know there's more to go. But the accident really, really, really threw a *scud* into the

whole thing. I think that my AA program had been well enough ingrained, though, and because **I live the program** there was never even a thought of using alcohol after the accident. It never crossed my mind. Why would I do that? It ain't going to make it better; it's only going to make it worse. Why would I want to lose even what little bit that I have now in my growth process, right?

I have 25 years, I guess, but in the last few, after the accident, it was like I had wiped out all that growth. It was like the growth had been taken away from me. Just wiped out, because I realized I was using some basic coping skills I used to use when I was drinking. I turned to manipulation, people pleasing, and vulnerability; all that kind of stuff was right back. It was like I hadn't been sober at all. Or hadn't been in the program. I had been sober but hadn't been in the program.

But in spite of that, there was no desire to go drinking. There was no desire to use drugs or anything to change the way I felt to deal with the problem. I would use what little resources I had inside to deal with the problem, and start to learn how to do that again. The very first thing I learned when I was old enough to drink and had the money to drink was that I could deal with my disease by drinking. So after the accident, it was like pre-drinking. All the problems are still there, but I know that I don't have to drink to solve the problems. I just have to do it. Have to work through it. I have to work on what I need to work on again, and that all came from inside myself.

But like I said, the initial response was to use some of the old coping skills. I lie to my wife. You know, like, "How does my dress look?" 'Oh, it looks great.' You know. "Oh, you're angry with me." 'No, I'm not.' Right? All the old *shit*, I call it *shit* but the old patterns are still there, if I choose to use them. Now, I can also choose a different way, but it's the old patterns that I used when I found myself in this defenceless position after the accident. I am not sure why it wasn't possible to be the me I had become prior to the accident, but I suspect that it was brain damage. I had shearing in my brain because when you stop from 50 mph to zero in a hundred

feet, whether you got a helmet on or not, you get brain damage. It's called shearing. So, I think that's there. I mean, they said there's no way you can't have it. But what they told me was that I am so *fucking* smart that I could cover up any brain damage that I have anyway. I laughed at that one.

When I was in the coma, they kept me under drugs for two weeks. I was in the hospital for critical care for a month. Then I went to G.F. Strong, and I was there for almost a year. I felt like the only way I could survive was to use the old techniques. For the first time in years, I felt suicidal. I mean, before the accident I would have a little ideation once in a while, but not like it was after the accident. There were times when I thought about drowning myself, or maybe hooking up a hose to the exhaust. Yes, I'm *pissed off* about the accident. I feel real angry about that sometimes, but that's starting to come through now. I know that I felt kind of confounded because I've never had a condition that I couldn't recover from. So, I think, yeah, it's partly denial. No, that's not really true. I guess it's that I'm so unsure of myself. Yeah, I guess that would be the thing, I am unsure of myself. Sometimes, even though it's not true, I feel like everything I had before the accident has been wiped out, or for a time that it got wiped away. I have the tools, though, I know that. They're still there and I'm using them. I have gone right back to the basics.

So what matters to me right here, right now? Being with my wife, having friends, being able to work on the physical stuff. Like getting up in the morning. I mean I need at least ten hours of sleep a day. Sometimes I get up at eight o'clock and sometimes I get up at nine and that's great. When I first got out of the hospital, I wasn't getting up until twenty after eleven, so it's things like that gives my life meaning. Simple things, like going to physio a couple of times a week; I like that. I go to the gym, and in my mind I go three times a week!

This house has given me lots of heartburn, but lots of meaning too because I've had get off my ass and go to the Regional District and go to the health people, and go to the highways

people, and, deal with contractors, and.... be alive. Yeah. Do stuff, do stuff. I do something today, and I see what happens.

You know, I developed my belief system and my philosophy on what I've got out of AA, and not just AA, but the people that I associate with. I get messages from people all the time. I just need to remember to keep my ears open and keep listening. There are a lot of good people in my life. Drives my wife nuts, the fact that I know so many people. Imagine feeling so isolated and alone for so long, and now I am connected everywhere. It's amazing, just amazing. Oh, Jesus, maybe I do have it.

My Story

In as much as the present gives meaning to the past, inasmuch as the narrating self is the subject, and the self in the past is the object of the narrative, the self of today must take command over the self of yesterday. Whereas the self of yesterday acted irresponsibly, the self of today must act responsibly; where the object was passive, the subject should be active; whereas the self in the past could escape from unpleasantness, the present self must confront it. (Jarvinen, 2000).

The meaning of recovery in my life, how to begin? Well, I believe that a story of recovery cannot be told without a life context. For me, that means years and years of experience went into developing a self that I am able to understand as *being in recovery*.

My earliest memories are ones of isolation, loneliness, and feeling different than everyone else around me. My early years, 0-5, were shaped by my mother's illness. I was adopted at the age of eight months to Alec and Jesse Muir of Brantford Ontario. My parents were married quite young during the Second World War just before my dad went off to sail with the British Merchant Marines. Both my parents were working in Glasgow Scotland before they hit their teen years; they lived through a Depression and the Second World War. Anyway, after the war they immigrated to Canada and eventually decided to have a family. Medical tests would confirm that a juvenile case of the mumps had left my dad sterile, and coincidentally my mom was also unable to have children. So, in their mid-thirties, my parents adopted me, a decision, they came to admit, that would be quite regrettable.

As I mentioned, my mom became very ill. When I was four, she was diagnosed with tuberculosis, and she was taken away to a sanatorium for a year. During that time, my dad worked 70-80 hours a week delivering bread, and a pillar of the church, Mrs. B, babysat me and my little sister Betsy – my parents had just adopted Betsy as a newborn – and it was, for me, a nightmare. All I remember of this time in my life is Mrs. B yelling at me and hitting me with whatever she happened to be holding at the time. Sometime that summer, I packed a sheet up

with a couple of toys, my pillow, and a peanut butter and jam sandwich, and I tied it to my hockey stick and ran away. Now, remember, I am not yet five, and I am convinced that everyone will be better off if I just leave. I remember going to a place called Alexandra Park – about 10 blocks from our apartment – where my dad found me eventually. I don't remember if we talked about why I ran away, or if anything changed afterwards. I just remember how miserable I felt sitting in the park, miserable but somehow resolute.

My mom came home in time to take me to school in the fall, but she wasn't well enough to walk me everyday, and my dad was still working long hours trying to pay off medical bills. Each day I would walk the six blocks to kindergarten, and it seemed that each day I would get the snot beat out of me by a two brothers a couple of years older than me. It went on until an older kid down the street, Jamie S., decided that I would be a worthwhile project. He taught me how to protect myself and how to make it so that anybody beating me up would have a price of their own to pay. I also think that he probably took those two demons aside one day and put the fear of God into them because by Grade One my walks to school were free of harassment. When Jamie was 21, he died of a heroin overdose.

In Grade Three, we moved to Eagle Place, 79 Brighton Avenue to be exact, and I started at King Edward School. What can I say about this time in my life? I was always first or second in my class academically, and my fondest memories are of winning spelling bees and baseball arithmetic. I can remember clearly being able to do basic math – adding and subtracting columns for instance – faster than my Grade Three teacher, Ms. K.

I can also remember that Ms K. was the first, but not the last, teacher to arrange for me to get the strap for misbehaving. She asked the Vice Principal, a very large man by the name of Mr. W. to strap me. I guess she was too frail or maybe the sound of the strap hitting a kid's flesh was too much for her to bear. My education experience became one of ineffective discipline which included everything from corporal punishment to having my hands and mouth gun-taped to being forced to stand under the bell each morning in full view of the entire school. Every report card

showed marks in the 80's and 90's, and comments that maintained that I put no effort into school and that I was extremely disruptive.

Every parent/teacher interview seemed to bring some form of punishment from my parents. My hockey gear would be taken away, or I would have to spend time in my room because my parents, my mom in particular, were tired of being embarrassed by my behaviour. A pattern was created that was extremely resistant to change. My mom would tell me about all the other kids that she knew who were well-behaved, or she would point to my sister and remind me of just how good she was. Discipline was limited to her striking me on the legs with a fly swatter, and a constant barrage of negative comments. In retrospect, the fly swatter was the preferred form of punishment because I can remember running through the house laughing while she chased me. Dad continued to work long hours.

By the time I hit Grade Six, I was becoming aware of another pattern in our house. Weekends were often filled with drinking and song. My dad had a wonderful voice, and friends and relatives would join him in songs from the old country. "Ah, Alistair, just get us a wee one," my Auntie Lizzie would say to my dad and off he would go to get her a scotch. Of course, she would say that to every nephew in the house at one time or another and by the time the party was over she would have peed on the couch and been carried out to the car. It seemed to me that when people had a glass filled with amber liquid in their hands that all was well. Except my mom. When she drank, which was rare, she became bitterer than ever. I couldn't find anything to say that wouldn't be seen as being smart-alecky and result in some kind of rebuke.

Funny, but as I am thinking about this stuff I am remembering that mom would always threaten me with the standard 'wait till your dad gets home' line. You know, when dad would come home he would take me into my room and tell me to yell right after he slapped his hands together. It was our secret. He only hit me twice growing up. Once when I broke the nose of a girl next door – we were the same age – who had beaten up my younger sister, and once when I threw a rock at a neighbourhood kid and hit him in the eye. Both times he hit me so hard that he

knocked me across the kitchen into my bedroom and then he smashed me from one end of my room to the other. After the first beating, he took me for ice cream, and after the second one he took me to a drive in movie.

Christ, I feel guilty relaying the story like this. It's not like my life was miserable, it wasn't. My dad always bought me the best sport's gear he could afford (and often more than he could afford), and he went to as many games as his work would allow. He also volunteered to flood the local rink, and he always made a rink in our yard. My mom welcomed other kids over to our house, and I was able to take a friend on summer holidays, or have sleepovers just about whenever I wanted. It was also my mom who introduced me to books, and fostered a love of literature that has lasted to this day.

It is just that I remember being so isolated, and unlovable if that makes any sense? You know a couple of years ago, I was trying to piece together some feelings from my childhood, and I realized, for the first time, that I had no memory of ever being held, nor do I remember either of my parents telling me that they loved me. I lived in some kind of emotional vacuum; no that's not it either because there was emotion, but it was usually bitter and poisonous. *I* could never seem to get *it* right. Somehow I always disappointed someone. God this is hard.

You know last year I got in touch with my sister Betsy after a fourteen year estrangement and she sent me some letters and journal stuff that my mom had written. In one entry she laments about the pain of never being able to love me. She remarks at how ugly I was as a kid, and how no matter how much I did or tried to do to gain her affection she couldn't seem to give it. She wondered if she might be crazy because, shouldn't all mothers love their children? After all, Betsy was so easy to love. So I guess my intuition was pretty good, even back then. *Fuck*, imagine wanting to have a kid and then getting one and finding out *it* wasn't what you wanted after all. Thinking at first that it might be you, that maybe you were just not capable of loving a kid until you adopt the second one and then you discover that, no you can love a child, just not the one you named Bruce.

We moved again, this time to another house in Eagle Place, 82 Harriett Street, telephone number 752-5770; it's funny the things you remember. My dad was now working for a milk company . . . wait a minute. That reminds me of what was probably my favourite memory or memories as a child. Quite often my dad would take me to work with him on Saturdays. You see little had changed as far as his work habits went. He still worked at least ten hours a day six days a week. Anyway, my mom would stand at the bottom of the stairs and call up "Bruce, it's time to get up." Did I mention that it would be 4 A.M.? I would come downstairs and have breakfast with my mom and dad. Mom always got up with dad and made him toast and eggs and Maxwell House instant coffee. On Saturdays, we would all eat together, and I would listen to them talk while they smoked their Rothman's cigarettes. I guess if I were to describe their relationship through the years it would be with the word respect. They respected and admired each other tremendously.

My mom told me on more than one occasion that I should be proud of the man that my father was. He worked hard for his family and never complained. She needn't have feared. I was so very proud of him, and I loved the fact that he wanted me to come with him on the weekend. I am sure that I probably got in the way more than I actually helped, but it was so cool to see how my dad's customers responded to his stories and his quick smile. And the way that he would introduce, with pride, as his son, that was pretty special too. Still, though I was proud, I took my dad for granted and pursued my mom's affection like some Holy Grail.

You know, this isn't quite accurate. Yes I was proud of my dad, or I was proud of the fact that he worked hard, and I certainly enjoyed the fact that he bought me all the sport's gear, and unlike my mom, he took great pride in my sporting accomplishments. I wasn't proud of him, however, right after we adopted Christine. I would have been 11-12 and Christine 2. It seemed that from the moment we got her that my mom and dad would fight. He would drink and they would argue. They would say things like "Why on earth did we ever adopt her?" "What were we thinking of?" Sometimes she was in the room.

My dad would come home from work and he would start to drink his rye and water. Funny because the more rye and water he drank, the more water I put in his rye bottle when he wasn't looking. During this time in his life my dad was pretty mean and he would say hurtful things. He would tell me that I would never have any friends, or that my long hair made me look like some kind of freaky girl. He told me that he was ashamed to be seen with me. That may have been the hardest thing to take because it was when he told me that he was proud of me that I felt the best. When I look back on it it's as though he begrudged me my teenage years because his life had become one filled with endless work and little joy in raising his family. My parents were both very big on scripts and the script was just starting to go off the wall. One of the kids was getting really tall, and he was gaining a voice, and he wasn't going to be towing the line much longer, and they had no idea what to do about it.

Grades seven and eight were the only two grades in my educational career that I enjoyed. We were in a brand new school, I was still at the top of my class, but now I was also beginning to shine as the best athlete in the school. I had teachers who challenged me, and suddenly I was in trouble less and less. I also fell in love; you know the lightning-bolt kind of love, just before grade seven. I was delivering the local paper to a house on Tenth Street, and I had come to collect. I rang the doorbell and this dark-haired, sparkling-eyed brunette answered the door. I could not, and I mean this, I could not breathe. I stood there stammering like a bloody idiot with every staccato volley taking more of the life giving oxygen from my body.

I somehow got away without passing out, and lo and behold school starts and who should be in my class but fair Janet D., the girl from the doorway. I found every reason to be near her. I walked with her to and from school, and we were on the track team together. Janet died, at age 18, in a car accident. She was a passenger in a car driven by a drunk driver.

That summer, at age 12, I grew another six inches stretching to my present height of 6'2". I also developed an incredibly bad case of cystic acne. I had lesions on my face that were a couple of inches in length. What a mess. My parents bought me some face cream and told me to

make sure to wash. I was already showering twice a day. I was so ashamed. I wouldn't come out of the basement; I wouldn't answer the phone. I couldn't bear to look at myself let alone have others see me.

Well, school started back up and I appeared as this gangly, ugly creature. I was sensitive to any laughs or comments; I could feel my shame when people whispered. If I actually heard a guy say something about my looks, I would deliver a quick, hard blow. I was safe in class because of my wit. Nobody wanted to be on the other end of one of my defensive barbs. I continued to do well academically, and I continued to star athletically, but socially, I was rapidly becoming a misfit. Once again, I felt isolated, and absolutely unlovable.

By mid-year my parents sent me to the doctor – yes I went alone – and I had to tell him what my problem was. He looked at me when I told him about my skin and he said, "Oh my, that is bad. That is going to scar. Why didn't you come in before this?" Gee, I don't know doc, maybe because I'm twelve years old? From there I was referred to a dermatologist, and for the next few years I saw this guy every second week where he would inject my face with needles and treat my skin with an ultraviolet light. I still remember the smell of my skin burning and the pain of those injections. My parents never accompanied me to any of these visits.

As I entered into my teens and high school, I was an insecure mess. Grade nine was, for the most part, an exercise in futility. Having skipped grade two and starting kindergarten at 4, I was already developmentally vulnerable. I attended high school for three years, and I failed math and physics (I had never failed anything in my life), and I was put on independent study in my other classes. My behaviour was pretty much out of control, but I think that the school didn't want to expel me because I was the captain of the basketball and football teams. It wasn't like the movies, I can tell you that. The high school jock did not get the girls, he was too shy and felt like too much of a freak to even talk to them.

And then came Jane. I had known Jane most of my life. She was a really nice, hard working girl. Her parents owned a greenhouse, and I used to see her outside working in the sun

when I delivered the newspaper. Anyway, for some reason, she seemed to like me, and she was the first person that I ever spoke to about my skin. She understood, she actually understood. Round about the time Jane and I started to date, I discovered the solution to all my isolation and loneliness. Alcohol. I was fifteen and I smuggled some beers with a friend of mine over to Parson's park. He had maybe 1.5, and I drank a half dozen. For the first time, perhaps in my life, I fit in. I felt confident, and I didn't worry about what I looked like.

By the time I was 16, I had quit school and I was drinking every weekend. I could easily drink 24 bottles of beer or a 40 oz bottle of liquor. I smoked a little marijuana, dropped acid and MDA, and experimented with cocaine. I would take anything that altered my mood. I was married to Jane by age 17, and we had a baby, Patricia Ann, by age 18, and I fell into a pattern of heavy alcohol and drug abuse that would last on and off for a couple of decades. I really don't want to get into a *war story* expose, but maybe if I just kind of list my problems with booze it will help you understand why my recovery is so important. I will try to hit the highlights or maybe lowlights is a better way to say it:

- Age 15: My first blackout(s). My tolerance increased remarkably. I stole money from my dad to pay for my booze. I started experimenting with other drugs;
- Age 16: Tolerance continues to rise. I quit school and take a fulltime job. Half my pay went to booze and drugs. I began to look forward to any chance I could get high;
- Age 17: Married to Jane. Let me tell you getting my dad to sign that consent was a difficult process, but by this time I would have walked on a mile of broken glass to escape my mom (and drink without retribution) I continue to drink on weekends, but I start drinking during the week. I miss my first days of work due to alcohol abuse;
- Age 18: Tricia is born. I am playing baseball and football in addition to working at GWG. I am drunk as many nights as I am sober. I got fired from work because of yet another alcohol related absence. Jane tells me to stop crying like a baby and to act like a man and get my job back. I do so, and I promise my boss that I will never miss another

day's work due to booze. Interestingly, I am true to my word. Within eighteen months I am promoted to foreman, the youngest in the plant's history. My mom says, "What in the hell are they thinking promoting a kid as boss? What could you possibly know?" My mom had worked as a seamstress in the same factory, and had she still been working, I would have been her boss. Every Friday night, I spend a large part of my paycheque at the bar:

- Age 19: Jane who has proven to be a loving, kind wife, and an amazing mother has reached her wit's end. She finds me passed out on the bed at home when I am supposed to be going to her mother's for XMAS dinner and she pours a bucket of ice water on me. She tells me it's the booze or her. I tell her that I will never stop drinking. She doesn't leave. By then, I am drinking 20-30 beers a night on the weekend, and I am snorting 10-15 of her diet pills (speed):
- Age 20: More of the same. I am drunk most of the weekend, falling from one party to another. My young family doesn't see much of me. I remember one incident where I was off for a holiday, and I invited a bunch of guys over for a party while Jane, as usual, worked her ass off in the fish and chip store below our apartment. Anyway, I am supposed to be in charge of my 3-year-old and I end up passing out in the bathtub and she wanders downstairs to her mom:
- Age 21: By now I have figured out that something is wrong, but I don't know what it is. I try switching drinks, only drinking light beer, Scotch (because I hated the taste, but then I drank a Mickey a night for two weeks until I acquired a taste). I also started working out again. It was during this year that I had my most frightening blackout. On a Friday night, I joined some buddies for a game or two of euchre, and we drank from a punch bowl full of straight alcohol (alcool) and fruit juice. I remember that it was around nine at night, and I led with the Jack of Hearts. My next memory, I am at work on Saturday morning, alone, cutting denim with an 8" knife that did 2400 RPM'S. During this year I

almost died in my own puke a couple of times. I lost complete control of my bowels and shit all over the bathroom. hell. I almost broke my neck slipping in the excrement. I was losing all my friends: nobody wanted to be around me anymore, not even my drinking buddies. I had become a laughing stock. Jane stood by me, and **nobody but nobody** had any idea of the extent of my drinking problem. I was wandering the streets at night blind drunk, stealing people's lawn furniture, sitting on the roof in my underwear, scaring people by just appearing in their doorways. Jesus what a mess;

- Age 22: I had the brilliant idea to get my driver's license. I got my first impaired charge a few months later. If I hadn't driven my vehicle onto a fire hydrant. I would have ended up crashing right into the legion. I am not sleeping. I often have the shakes, and the diet pills are keeping me going. Jane probably saw about half of what was going on. Who knows what Tricia saw?
- Age 23 – 25: I joined the military. Actually Jane almost signed me up. She went to the recruiting office, and she made the appointment. She knew that I was desperately unhappy at work and in my life in general and thought that a career change might help. After the impaired charge, I stopped drinking for a few months, the longest time ever. During my first leave from basic training, I went to the recruit club and drank, much to the amazement of my section, 38 bottles of Moose head beer. I was *back*, and I wouldn't stop for another three years;
- Age 26: On New Year's Eve, 1981-1982, I sat down with my best buddy Pete in Oshawa, and we drank two cases of beer, some hard liquor, and we dropped a few hits of acid. The next morning, I was still sitting there drinking when Jane and Tricia woke up, and I told Jane that I shouldn't drive home. She was furious. We had a rented car and the insurance was in my name. Anyway on the drive home, I was hallucinating so badly that I thought I might go insane. The windshield melted before my eyes, and Jane's face disappeared behind a mass of slashing scars. When we got home, I went up to the

> shower and looked down at my legs, which at the time I believed were about a foot long. The whole world was like a house of mirrors. The next day I stepped on the scale and was dismayed to discover that I weighed 230 pounds. Something clicked, and I vowed to change. Three months later I weighed 175 pounds, and I was fast becoming one of the best runners on the Base in Kingston.

I'll pick up the story from that decision to change, and talk about what happened over the next, well, almost three years because, in many ways, it is where my story of recovery begins. As I said, I knew that something had to change, and I had actually been running a little bit even while I was partying out of control. I didn't know how long I was going to quit drinking and drugging, but I figured that I would just stop until I got in better shape.

Well, one day followed the next and the next thing you know I was standing at a crossroads. It was June of 1982, and my best friend and best drinking buddy, Pete was getting married. He asked me to be in the wedding, and he also asked me if I could just be myself and let loose. I kind of hesitated and then said 'No, I can't do that, things are going too well.' Now what did that mean? Well, I was incredibly fit, I didn't smoke, my wife and daughter were happy. I could answer the phone or the door without feeling like my world was going to crash in on me. I could think clearly for the first time in years. I could tell that my mom was proud of me (I don't think she actually told me that, but we made peace and she became more involved in my life), I went shopping, I visited the library, and for the first time I considered going back to school. In a word, I was rejoining, or perhaps for the first time, I was taking part in the world around me. I started playing sports again. I went for walks, and I marvelled at just about everything. I was physically and metaphorically lighter, and I wasn't about to throw it all away.

That summer I was posted to CFS Aldergrove. When I arrived no one knew me. I was, to them, a thin, fit, athletic, quiet individual. I ended up playing with every sport's team, and I continued to run. Oh, I was so happy. I remember Jane saying to me one night how happy she was, but at the same time she said she felt strange. When I asked her what she meant she told me

that having sex had become making love, and it was different having me so present every moment.

For the next couple of years I stretched as an individual, and I think I stretched in all my roles. I was a much better husband, father, son (even from 5000 kilometres away), and I was a better human being. I treated people with respect, and I treated myself with respect.

End of story, right? Oh, how I wish that were true. In the summer of 83, someone I knew from Kingston was posted to Aldergrove. I had been unmasked. It wasn't long before all the old Bruce stories were making the rounds. Before I knew it, I was laughing right along at myself, embellishing the tales and adding to the legend. Then in the spring of 84, two of my best drinking buddies got posted in. It was almost as though someone decided that I had been sober long enough. More and more, I felt that I was a phoney. I believed that the real me was the drunken me, the asshole me, the buffoon me, the angry, caustic me.

One night in October as Jane and I walked to the gym to attend an Oktoberfest, I turned to her and said 'I think I will have a beer tonight.' I want to say that she looked crestfallen, but what really crossed her face was a moment of panic followed by resignation. By four o'clock that morning, twenty-odd beers, a bottle of whiskey, and a few joints later, I was pounding on my bedroom wall screaming at the Gods, 'Why, why, why did I do it?' See, I cry to this day when I think of that waste. **At that moment**, I killed my marriage, I compromised my relationship with my daughter, and I set in motion another five years of spiralling hell.

Oh, it didn't happen all at once. I quit again after that night then I found out that my mom had been diagnosed with inoperable cancer – how can they call it inoperable and still put her through three operations? – and I went back to Brantford to be with her for a while. She died June 8th 1985. While I was there, I had a couple of beers, and when I got home I started back into the cycle. I switched to cider, I drank coolers, I tried all the things I had tried as a very young man, and, once again, they didn't work.

Of course, I continued to shine at work. I won the first Canadian Force's Base Chief's commendation while on my leadership course. I continued to run and lift weights, but the fun had gone out of it. For a little while I was a *must have* at every party, but that soon wore thin, and I became, as before, a social pariah. I didn't know when to stop. People laughed at me, and I think some to particular pleasure at watching my fall.

I was then posted back to Ontario, and I ended up working at a gym in Trenton. I remember getting to town before my family because I had to go house hunting, and Jane and Tricia were tying up loose ends in Brantford. Anyway, I had found a townhouse in Belleville, and I was walking down the main street of the city whistling. 'This time,' I vowed 'things would be different.' I had a chance to start over again, and I would make it right. You know, I really believed it.

The pattern continued. I excelled at work, and I spun out of control at home. I spent just about all of 1988 and 1989 drunk. I remember being on a course in Montreal for six-months, and I was running really well. I never had a week where I covered less than 70 miles; and I never had a week where I didn't drink more beer than I ran miles. I started getting in trouble with the Military Police, and I went from one embarrassing incident to another.

Three events came together to send me into a suicidal tumble in 1989. Let me back up. I had my first serious affair that year with a young lady, Daphne, on the broomball team that I coached. We partied our *asses* off with the other girls on the team, and then we would retire to her room on the base and just disappear. I pretty much left my wife, the same kind woman who had stood by my side since I was a teen. She was going to school full time and working evenings full time, so I had all kinds of time to play. At the time in her life when she most needed me, I turned my back on her. At a time when my daughter needed me most – after all, my wife was out of the house 18 hours a day – I abandoned her. She was left to her own devices at age 15/16.

As I said, I started disappearing for days at a time. Sometimes I would stagger home at 3 A.M., and sometimes I would sleep in the gym, or in the park, or with Daphne. I passed out in a

ditch one night still astride my bike, and one of my players, who also happened to be with the Military Police, picked me up, cleaned me off, and drove me home. I was quite certain that I was going insane. I couldn't figure out why I couldn't get control of my life. I would stop drinking for a couple of weeks, and then I would start back up with a vengeance.

After a particularly ugly incident in the U.S. where I got in a fight with some Americans, and I ended up being AWOL causing not quite an international incident (actually I was told this, but I don't remember a damn thing because of a very long blackout) but certainly embarrassing my home Base, I was finally charged for my behaviour. Part of the charge had me referred to the local alcohol and drug counsellor. What a smug asshole he was. There was no way in hell I was going to let this pinhead into my life; I would handle it on my own.

I got horrifically drunk at a huge sport's banquet and humiliated my boss, and myself in front of pretty well every General in the Armed Forces. For that I did a few extra duties, and my boss, and friend, Louise begged me to go back to counselling. I went back a couple of times, and I told the guy, Randy, to go *fuck* himself yet again. This came after I had told him that I handled my own problems, without help from anyone else. He quickly asked me how well that strategy was working at the moment.

Event number three fell quickly on the heels of the other two. I had promised myself that this time I would stop drinking. What I actually thought was that crazy people shouldn't drink because it only made things worse. Anyway, I headed out to a XMAS party with the Broomball team on December 20th, 1989, and I brought my sixteen-year-old daughter with me. We started in a bar, and then we moved to a home shared by a couple of the players. So, here I am out on the town with my girlfriend, my underage daughter, and the rest of the team. Actually, my daughter brought this event up on the phone with me the other night. We had never talked about it before and she reminded me that Daphne had told her what I had bought her, my daughter, for XMAS that year.

We drank all night, and I can't remember how Tricia got home, but I do remember that everyone had passed out except for Annie and I (we are still friends), and I asked Annie to drive me to work. There I was sitting at my desk at eight in the morning drinking beer with Annie taking pictures of me with my pants down around my ankles. I stood up and told Annie to drive me back to Daphne. I put the last psychoactive substance I would ever use on the counter, and I walked out the door. I woke Daphne up and we headed to Ottawa for a couple of days. Oh, and I also phoned my long-suffering wife who was back in Brantford helping her mom take care of things after a fire, and I told her that I was having an affair and that I was leaving her. She told me to go home and she would meet me there and we would talk about it. We would talk about it.

Well talk she did, and listen I did. The barrage of questions went on for around 16 hours, pretty much non-stop. By the time we had finished, I was able to tell her that there wasn't much in my life that I knew, but the one thing of which I was certain was that I was no longer in love with her, and I wanted to leave. I had tried to leave, albeit hypothetically, when I was around 21, and I got just a taste of how much Jane loved me, and what she thought that her life would be like without me.

Anyway, I moved out of the house and into the barracks on the base. I don't want to get off track here, but part of this is crucial. The next few months of watching the pain I inflicted on Jane take hold were some of the worst times of my life. A couple of times she told me that she couldn't go on, and once she had a little too much too drink herself (a rarity), and she tried to wander out into a frigid night with no shoes and no coat. She was crying "It doesn't matter, nobody cares, why bother?" I remember holding her and pulling her back in the house while crying myself 'look what we've become, look what I've done.' *Fuck* it was awful.

Between December 22nd, 1989 and March 01 of 1990, I managed to stay sober, and I even attended a couple of counselling sessions. Randy was on my ass to go to an A.A. meeting, and I finally told him I would go just to shut him up. I will never, ever forget the trauma of that first meeting, and I never even made it through the doors of the church in which it was held. I parked

the car down the block, and I just started walking in circles past the building. I stopped in an alleyway to puke once because my guts were in such a knot. I finally summoned the courage to walk up to the door (after everyone else had gone in, and I was quite certain that the meeting would have started), and I put my hand on the door handle, and I could not pull it open. Don't get me wrong, it wasn't locked. I just couldn't exert the one-pound of pressure that it would have taken to open the door.

The next day I go in to see Randy, and he asks me how it went. 'I guess I was late,' I said defiantly 'because the door was locked.' Randy who has been going to meetings for a couple of decades says, "Bruce, the doors to an open meeting are never locked. It's okay, though, you got up the walkway, and that can be pretty hard in itself."

So, the next week, I actually make it to the door and through the door, and I attend my first ever A.A. meeting. I remember sitting in this smoke filled room – I am still a smoker at the time – and watching all these ancient people drink coffee and shake hands with each other. I think somebody welcomed me at the door, no wait a minute, somebody actually asked if I would like to share that night. I guess the person that they'd planned on didn't show up or something. I had an idea of what he was talking about from a movie I had seen, so I mumbled something absolutely unintelligible, and I shuffled off to a corner of the room, way in the back. They read their rules or steps and traditions, and then as I recall, some guy gets up and starts talking about what the little sayings mean to him. You know, *first things first, easy does it, one day at a time, there but for the Grace of God*. Well, I am thinking to myself 'What a strange little cult.'

Then of course another guy gets up and tells his *story*. As best as I can remember, I thought what *fucking* planet is this loser from? He had lost his business, been in the psych ward, lost two families, and been charged with impaired driving a half dozen times. Two things stick with me to this day though. One is when he talked about being sober for around five years, and he got married again and he went on his honeymoon. So he's sitting there with his new wife, and he decides to have a glass of champagne to celebrate. Within three months, he has lost it all again.

This clicked for me because I thought of the number of times that I had tried to quit only to end up just having a beer, or a glass wine and then bang, I am off running again.

The champagne thing also triggered another memory for me. There was a fairly melodramatic, soppy made for T.V. movie called *The Morning After* that starred Dick Van Dyck as this hopeless drunk who tries to get his life together. He's sober for a couple of months and one night he's sitting at the table with his wife, and he decides to open a bottle of wine as a reward for some promotion at work, I think. I am sitting on the couch with Jane - this was years before this meeting – and I was sobbing my heart out. When he poured the glass, I am screaming at the screen 'Don't do it you idiot you will lose everything.' In retrospect, I was pretty emotionally wrought over a movie that had *absolutely nothing to do with me.*

At the end of the meeting, everyone held hands and said a little prayer, it might have been Our Father, but that doesn't seem right. That was it for me. Keep coming back my *ass*. I am outta here, and I ain't coming back. On the way to the car, I imagined a long line of Scottish relatives rolling over in their graves because Bruce Muir had gone to a meeting full of ex-drunks.

The days marched on and the countdown continued. I was confirmed to enter a four-week residential treatment program at the beginning of March 1990. Jane and I were hardly talking, and Daphne had been posted to the East Coast. Oh, I was miserable. I remember walking back from a visit with Tricia and Jane, and for the first time in a long time, I seriously considered that I couldn't go on anymore. I entertained any number of foolish ideas, and I thought, I will give it another day, and if I don't feel better, I am going swim out into the middle of the Bay of Quinte and drown myself (hard to do in February in Trenton given the thickness of the bloody ice, but as I said I was a little nuts). I also had a small *Exacta* knife, and I used to press it up against my wrist. I wondered if it would really work if you filled up the bathtub with scalding water and then stuck your wrists in and cut.

The next day I was giving blood, and a friend asked if she could talk to me. "I saw you walking yesterday" she said "and I have never seen that much pain on anyone's face in all my

life. Are you okay? Can I help?" I think I told her that I was not okay, but there wasn't a damn thing that she could do that would help. Thanks for thinking of me Red.

That weekend, I was at my absolute lowest, or at least the lowest I had been in years. I borrowed the car from Jane, and I headed out onto the highway. Well, you know the story, and I know everyone else does by now because it's in my introduction, but it's just that I really thought that I wasn't coming back. Remember, I have no happy vision of an afterlife, this is it, this is my one kick at the cat, and I have blown it so badly that I am willing **to not be**. I just couldn't see myself going on being in, and causing, so much pain. I had done so much damage to my sense of whom I thought I should or could be that I couldn't imagine ever being ever able to repair it. In a way I was right, though, I tore some pieces of myself away that I can't fix. I can't be the person that I could have been, but I can be the person I might be. I'm getting ahead of myself.

It was the Monday before I was scheduled to go into treatment, and I was sitting at my desk at around 22:00. My life had become so crazy that I was, unbeknownst to anyone, sleeping in the gym. I would use a goalie pad for a pillow, and huddle up in some old sweaters. Nothing wrong with me. But you know, that time in my life allowed a few things to happen. I spent absolute alone time with me, and I started asking myself some hard questions. I would ride the ExerCycle for hours on end, cursing my plight, and trying to figure a way out. Man did I bargain.

Anyway, this particular night, I was just sitting there, and I made a decision to find out if I could actually live a different way. Jane's telling me something's wrong, my boss echoes that sentiment, and the friends that I have that actually care about me are pretty much saying the same thing. One guy actually suggested that I probably didn't have a booze problem, but it might do me good just to get away for a month. I promised myself that I would try. I promised myself that, even though I thought everyone had it all wrong, I would go to treatment and I would try to find a way to get better. See, I still wasn't convinced that alcohol was my problem. I still thought that I was crazy, but maybe by going to treatment someone else would agree with me and I could get some help.

For months, I had been sleeping two or three hours a night, and I couldn't seem to stop crying. It all hurt so much. When I say hurt, my God, I mean hurt. At about the same time all this was going on, I pulled my back in the weight room. For the first time in my life I was in excruciating physical pain. I managed to ride the bike, but I couldn't run, and I couldn't lift weights; it seemed as though I was losing everything.

Before I knew it treatment was upon me. I can't even remember how I got to Kingston; I assume that Jane drove me. Now, you have to understand what it was like for me to go to Kingston for treatment. Kingston had been my first posting, and it had been where I got sober for the first time. Kingston was my favourite city in all of Canada, and I had a lot of friends in the phys-ed business there. And here I was, feeling like some deposed monarch (grandiose you say?) trying to slink into the kingdom through the back door. I wanted no one, but no one to know that I was in town. The shame was almost paralysing. Naturally, I am recognized the minute I walk through the door of the hospital. There would be no back door to recovery; I had to discover a way to deal with things head on.

The first day was fairly confusing. I remember that we were given a physical, and we were read the riot act as to what we could and could not do. I was only half listening because I knew that I would break whatever rules they put in place. I just had to find out where they were posted. I didn't mind the idea of getting better, but it was still going to be on my terms and not theirs. The second day we all met as a group, and it was a really big group. As I recall, the Winnipeg treatment facility had been closed down, so we had double the clientele (which put us at around 40). There was one woman in the entire group, Sandy.

We had a questionnaire to fill out and one of the questions asked what the most important thing in our lives was at that moment. Was it bills, work, family, friends etc., or was it our substance abuse problem? Even though I wasn't certain that booze was my main problem, I was intuitive enough to know that whatever was wrong superseded anything else on the list, so I checked substance abuse.

It was also around this time that we were told about antibuse, and we were given the option – the first group to ever have the option of saying no – of taking the drug or not. I asked the facilitator why everyone didn't just take the damn drug and just leave? After all 12-Steppers had been telling me that I had a disease, an illness just like diabetes. I thought insulin for diabetes and antibuse for alcoholism. He smiled at me and said "There's more to diabetes than insulin and there's a hell of a lot more to alcoholism than antibuse." 'Fine', I replied, 'keep your pill.'

Later that afternoon we were together again, and we were forced to watch some films. I was half paying attention to the first couple of offerings, but for some reason, I came awake and much more alert for the third one. In the next hour my life changed forever. It never fails. I still get rolling goose bumps when I talk about this. The movie was about me, pure and simple. The guy on the screen was doing all the things that I had been doing. His patterns were my patterns. I somehow knew, from that moment on, that my life would never be the same. It was so *fucking* simple, I wept. For years I had set a bottle of alcohol in the middle of the ring, and I had tried with every ounce of will to gain control of it. Looking back on my life I realized that I hadn't controlled alcohol in years; in fact, I may never have controlled it all. I used a simple analogy that saved my bacon. I asked myself if I would climb into a ring with Mike Tyson if I knew for certain that every time I did that he would beat the *shit* out of me? The answer was a no-brainer. Not on your, or rather my, life. Booze was my Mike Tyson; I couldn't win, so I wouldn't fight ever again.

It was also at that moment that I started to separate from A.A. All along I had been hearing people say *One Day at a Time*. One day at a time my ass! (I have learned to modify this saying to fit my present-day life). I would never drink another drop of alcohol or use any kind of mind-altering drug again. I can't tell you the freedom that gave me. By giving up control, I had taken control. The paradoxical nature of addiction became completely apparent to me. I know that this sounds a little unbelievable, but trust me I had a full-blown epiphany. It was so simple. I wasn't insane; I wasn't an evil reprobate; I was a human being who could not drink safely – ever.

Over the next 28 days, I broke most of the rules. I sneaked down to the gym in the hospital every night for a workout. After A.A. meetings everyone else rode the bus back to the hospital and I ran back. I also wrote in my journal like a demon possessed, and every spare minute, I talked with the other guys in treatment. We talked about how screwed up everything had become; we talked about sports; we talked about relationships; we talked. During the day it was education, and group therapy, and once a week I met with my private counsellor, Doreen, and we went over my journal and how I was feeling about being in treatment. She was the only person in the building who wasn't in recovery, and she provided me with grounding to the outside world.

This is really hard to explain, but during my time in treatment I was working really, really hard, but I wasn't doing it the way they seemed to want it done. People kept telling me that I needed to be humble, without pride, and that I was not special or unique. I was an alcoholic, and I would always be one, so I should get used to the fact that it was the people in A.A. or in treatment with whom I needed to identify. Without them, I was doomed to fail, and unless I followed the 12-Steps, I would go back to alcohol.

I couldn't buy it. I kept questioning everything. When I did that I was told that if I didn't believe it, I should just go back *out*. By that it was meant that I should go back to drinking and then I'd know the value of A.A. Well, *fuck*, I didn't need to go back drinking; I needed to live, and I needed to feel like a worthwhile human being who had some agency after years of having none.

I read everything I could get my hands on – can you tell that I use my head a fair bit? – and I discovered or rediscovered my incredible power of empathy that seemed to allow me to connect with people at some deep level that I hadn't thought possible (okay, so I used a lot more than my head).

About halfway through the program, I wrote in my journal that I was going to find a way to help others by giving back. See, it wasn't that I wasn't learning tons about substance abuse, and myself, and relationships, and life skills, and a myriad of other things because I was. I am forever

grateful to all my fellow patients (that was our actual title I think), and I would do anything for my group leader Tom. I just needed, and still need, to go my own way and live my own life. I had lived with society's *shoulds* all my life, and there was absolutely no way I was going to take on A.A.'s. I was finally free.

So, when did I know that I had *it*? When did I know that I was going to be okay? Well, it began with the epiphany, and it was cemented on the last day of treatment. On the final day our bosses were invited to join us and participate in our aftercare plan. Here we were, a room of about 70 people and the talk started to centre around what the bosses could do to help us the poor drunks to succeed when we got back to work. For some reason I took offence to that line of discussion and I remember standing up and saying 'All you need to do for me is open your heart to trusting me again. I will do the rest. You don't need to pamper me; you don't need to protect me; and you sure as hell don't need to pity me. Give me one more chance and I will never let you, and more importantly myself, down ever again.'

Actually, there was one other time when I reached a higher plane of getting *it*. I was out for a run about five years ago and a thought came to me in a flash. I imagined an alien ship landing in front of me and some cool little green guy getting out and walking over to me. He told me that all he had to do was wave his hand in front of my face, and I would be able to drink safely again. At that instant, I knew with a cellular certainty that I would tell him to please, please go find someone for whom that would be a blessing, a lifeline; because, frankly, I didn't need it. Drinking no longer mattered to me, but living did.

I had asked for a week's leave to get myself ready to stride into the real world, and Daphne told me that she was flying in from Halifax to spend the week with me. I wasn't sure where Daph and I would end up, but I was pretty convinced that I was in love with her, and I was willing to figure out a way to have a distance relationship. She got off the plane, and I looked into her eyes, and I knew something was wrong. Hurray for that old intuition. She had flown a few thousand kilometres to say goodbye. I walked all night that first night. I threw up and I shook. I went

back to my 8X4 room on the Base, and I laid my head on pillow and there it remained for three days. For the next 72 hours I cried, no I did more than cry, I wailed, I mourned. I didn't know it then, but I was mourning a lot more than the loss of Daphne. I mourned the loss of a 16-year marriage to a wonderful woman; and I mourned the loss of my daughter. I also, I believe, mourned the loss of alcohol. I had lost the most important thing in my life, and I could never take it up again. I was 35 years of age, and I was pretty much penniless, living in a shack, and I didn't have a single significant, viable relationship in my life.

Sometime during the third day of my agony, I looked up through swollen eyes, and I saw Daph standing in my doorway. Her face was so kind, her eyes so big and blue, and her voice was so soft. "Hey big guy," she whispered "I thought that I would find you at the bar. I went to all the old spots, but no one had seen you." I sat up, and I walked towards the door. 'Daph' I said 'it never crossed my mind. There's nothing and no-one worth that – ever.' I wished her well and closed the door. That was April 3rd 1990, and I haven't seen her since. I have looked back on that time in my life, though, and I have thanked her often. Her break from me allowed me to test my sobriety hard and early, and it was never an issue, not for a second.

All through treatment I had told Jane that I was not coming home and that we needed to get a divorce. She didn't believe me; my counsellor didn't believe me; the head of the program didn't believe me; the people in A.A. didn't believe me – I had to attend A.A. as part of an aftercare plan that I signed – and yet I kept saying it's over, trust me. The jury's verdict was that I was still emotionally unstable and that all I needed was some time to get my head together, and I would recognize how much I loved her. I agreed to attend a civilian counsellor in Trenton, and when he noticed me crying during sessions he said that it was obvious that I still loved her (a point with which I have never debated, in fact, I still love her, I am not, nor was I then, *in love* with her). In fact, he told me the whole thing was silly and that I should just go home. What an asshole! And so home I went.

I'm not sure why I seem to be stuck on this point except that I felt set-up in a way. If I could have made the break when I knew I needed to I wouldn't have given Jane a couple of years of hope that everything would be okay. It was the fall of 1993, and I was getting ready to go on a course in Borden. I was very unhappy at home again, and I wasn't sleeping, I was spending more and more time away from home, and I felt like things were coming to a head.

I walked through the door one night after work, and I felt like the whole world sat on my shoulders. Jane said something fairly innocuous and I recognized my dilemma. Actually come to think of it, it was much like that time in treatment in that I just knew what it was that had been driving me crazy. In order to survive, I needed to rewrite my history, and I couldn't do that with someone whom I had known, and more importantly who had known me since the age of three. She knew what this new shining emperor looked like covered in shit, and I felt that try as I might I would never be able to wash away the stench.

I was introduced early on to another of the paradoxes in recovery. Recovery, I was told, is an exceptionally selfish process. I remember thinking at the time that it couldn't be nearly as selfish as addiction but I was wrong. I wasn't in love and I couldn't start my life in recovery pretending that I was. No, it was more than that, much more. I never shook the feeling that I was still a drunk in Jane's eyes. Now I know that's grossly unfair, but it's the truth. I felt that the woman who had supported me through everything couldn't understand that I didn't need, nor could I tolerate, the support anymore. When I walked through the door, I felt helpless and completely unsure of myself, and it made me so angry. I was nasty to my daughter, and I couldn't talk to Jane for more than a few minutes without panicking and wanting to run. I had no idea how to tell either my daughter or my wife any of this so I ran first and talked later. I never went back.

I have been accused many times – just recently in fact – of painting Jane as some long-suffering Joan of Arc who should be nominated for sainthood. Well that's fine. Of course Jane had human frailties like everyone else, and of course there must have been some reward in staying married to me for so many years.

The thing is that without Jane's compassion, common sense and incredible strength, I wouldn't have made it. I would be dead now. It was Jane who reminded me that we had a daughter at home that needed both of us. It was Jane who tried everyway she knew how to get me to love myself and feel worthwhile. It was Jane who always told me that I was a good man, a smart man. Looking back, if I hadn't married Jane at age 17, I would have followed through with my plans of moving in with a couple of heroin addicts and who knows how long I would have lived. Jane is still a fabulous mom and grandmother. She always understood the relationship thing way better than me, and I suspect that she still does.

I am not sure why I keep going off on these tangents, but it somehow seems important to tell the story of early recovery, and it was a very confusing time. I had started school in the fall of 91 by taking a first year university English course; in fact, Jane and I took that course together, and it was right before the midterm that my dad died. Anyway, I had always bragged that I was the smartest Grade 11 dropout on the planet, and that I didn't need university to learn. What life couldn't teach me really didn't matter that much. Of course, by saying that I proved just how little I knew, and I really wasn't being all that honest with myself because I was always reading, always trying to learn more traditional academic content through hit and miss exploration.

For instance, I would buy a Penguin Classic book, and then I would just read the other Penguin books listed on the back cover. Anyway, I picked up Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* one time, and I did what I had always done, I started reading. Except this time something went wrong. I didn't understand the book, and it wasn't like now when I read Joyce and I don't get him. There are a couple of writer's whose style completely puts me off any message that might be held in the novel, but Faulkner I loved. Hence, the English course, though come to think of it I never did study Faulkner. I guess it's time to do a little re-read.

Well, one course led to another, and I absolutely loved the chance to go to school. I was still working fulltime in the military, but I studied nights, weekends, and summers, and I always took two courses at a time. I remember the first time that I walked on the campus at the University of

Manitoba. I stood in awe in front of the architecture, and I thought to myself 'what a long road, but it's okay, you're here.'

I got out of the military in 95, and I graduated with my BA the same year. I had done my degree, part time from 91-95, and I have to be honest, it was easy. Education continues to be extremely important to me. I finished my BSW in 97, and I am currently completing my Master's degree. None of this would have happened if I'd been drinking. Not only would I never have had the money, I would never in a million years have had the drive to complete a single course, let alone three degrees.

So, yes, one of the most important and cherished parts of my recovery is that fact that I have been able to regain my mind. I am able, once again, to think critically; a twenty-year fog has been lifted. All along it has been that critical thinking that has kept me from getting complacent. Early on I saw that one of my options would be to adopt the A.A. model and take a bunch of disease-model training so that I could work in the field.

I'll admit that it has taken me almost twelve years to adjust from the early disease-model indoctrination. See even though I knew that I needed something other the A.A. to be successful, I still thought that I needed to adapt the traditional model to suit my own needs. I always introduced myself to new company as a drunk; I put the diagnosis ahead of the person in other words. While I wasn't buying the notion that I suffered from some kind of inherent character defect, I also wasn't able to see myself as a person with problem instead of a problem with a person.

Again, like addiction itself this thing is like one of those Russian dolls, identical on the outside, but with each one being more paradoxical than the other. I am not willing to accept a disease-model into which I fit like a tee. You pull out the old Jellinek chart and you will see my path clearly defined. I was listening to a friend give a presentation on the disease of alcoholism just last week, and I was bristling at the fact that his information was at least three decades old. I

have met dozens of men and women who don't fit into the popular disease box, but I am not one of them.

Add to that the fact that I made a pact with myself long ago: there are no second chances. Not for a moment do I doubt that I have crossed some kind of invisible, magical line that prevents me from ever touching another psychoactive substance. I know that at an instinctual level. I have also learned, however, that just because that happens to be my reality that I have no right to impose that reality on someone else. There are many roads to addiction and there are at least as many roads to recovery. For some, harm reduction (particularly teens who see their future health as someone else's problem) *may be* the best answer. For others, complete abstinence maybe *the only way* they can stay alive.

You know I have gone over this one a million times, and I think that sometimes people just get too entwined in the whole *why me*? Or how did I end up becoming addicted? Was it hereditary? Was it the way I was raised? Was it because I had low self-esteem? Was it because the dog ate my homework when I was twelve? Who gives a *fuck* why? If booze or drugs have become a problem in your life then stop using them. Hey, I just cured millions of people suffering from addiction. **Stop it! Don't do it anymore! It's killing you!**

Of course, I say this tongue in cheek, but it has merit. I am always amazed when I am working with someone who seems hell-bent on, *yet again*, trying some kind of controlled use. What's the point even if you're successful? Do you think that people who don't have a problem lie awake at night figuring out how to stop after four drinks? Madness. It reminds me of a couple of *insanity tags* that I still carry with me. You know when you go to a nice restaurant and you wait in the bar for them to get your table ready? Well, people often have a cocktail while they are waiting. I always used to have two or three Black Russians while I was in the holding pattern, and I can remember to this day that there were people who *left a half a drink* behind when they went to their table. It used to just amaze me.

I also used to go into a tavern at 11 A.M. for a beer and a bite, and I swear to you that by noon I was thinking about what I would do when the placed closed at two in the morning. Would I be able to find a party? Should I get off sales to put in the car? I can feel the panic just talking about it.

Where was I? Oh the stop it thing. Anyway, the people in treatment would have me believe that everything that was wrong in my life was because I was an alcoholic and I had some built in defect. I couldn't agree more with the defect part except that I have the same built in defects as anyone else. I am human being and vitiations come with the territory. I didn't and I don't need to know why I became an alcoholic, or why I drank alcoholically, or why I am a person with an alcohol problem. What I needed to know, and what I still need to know is how to live.

Naturally, there is another side to this coin. I realize that when I had my epiphany that my addiction to alcohol disappeared. I wasn't left with a physical craving, nor was I burdened with a lasting psychological addiction. I have heard so many stories of men and women who years after they have cleaned up still think obsessively about drinking or using. Some wake up night after night with the taste of alcohol on their breath even though they haven't had a drink in ten years.

I still get the drinking dreams, though, and they are very disturbing at times. I have often awakened with my pillowcase soaked from the tears I have cried when I thought that I had started drinking again. I have never taken these dreams as a negative, though, rather. I use them as confirmation that I am supposed to be sober. I have often said that the real shame would have been if I had failed and kept using because once I knew what was wrong, I had everything at my fingertips for a successful recovery. I had my brain, my health, and I was a white male in a society designed by other white males.

It's a little ironic, I suppose, that I harbour so much personal animosity towards A.A. when some of the finest people I have ever met continue to work the program. I'm not a fool. I can easily recognize that for many people A.A **is recovery**, and that they believe without it that they would be dead. I would not presume to tell anyone else what they should or shouldn't do to get

well. I just never found much room for a critical thinker within the confines of those rooms, and for me to not think critically is to not live my life to its fullest.

I spent twenty years of my life in a relationship with *something* that could not give me one ounce of genuine comfort. I fractured friendships; I betrayed trusts; I put myself in physical, emotional, mental and spiritual or transcendental peril, and now I need to address all of those things every day in order to function as an emergent being. See, that's one of the keys. When I drank everything stood still. I didn't have to worry about the trouble I was in at work; I didn't have to worry about how to ask a girl to dance or a partner to leave my life; I didn't have to **become** anyone. All I needed to do was check out, poison my body, and tell myself and everyone around me how great I used to be, or how fabulous I would be . . . set me up again bartender. There was never a consequence that couldn't be washed away with another drink. Even hangovers, and I didn't suffer that much from them, particularly early on, could be held in abeyance. The present never had to leave. I needed to learn how to be **responsible.** Responsibility doesn't mean that I am never an *asshole*, or that I live a perfect life. It just means that I have choices in my life, glorious, fabulous choices, choices unfettered by the pollution of booze.

One of the most difficult things for me to understand is just how **free** I am without alcohol. I had set a number of parameters and expectations (albeit narrow and low) that I am kind of gently expanding. After all, I am a guy who expected to be working security somewhere nipping from a flask, and now I have an opportunity to help others on their path of change. I have people for whom I hold a tremendous respect ask me for advice. I mean these are people that without my recovery I would never have met.

I guess it's time to hit that part of it. Well, I mean the feeling that I have been blessed – remember this comes from an atheist – by relationship. For me, that is absolutely huge. As you may recall, I am the alien, I am the empathic watcher who **never** belonged, and yet here I am starting to be a part of so many people's lives. I have gone from a lonely, isolated, misplaced

mess to someone who participates as a board member in my community; as a guardianship social worker for children; as a counsellor for those trying to live more complete lives; as a friend and a lover; as a colleague and mentor. And when I look into the eyes of the people with whom I am privileged to be in relationship, I know I am okay. I know that they aren't faking their love and their care, so I don't have to either. It's genuine, and so am I.

There is so much more to do, and so much more that I can do. I still struggle with the belief that I am not a very good dad or grandpa. Learning to love and accept love is very difficult for someone who has oft imagined himself to be a vampire. There are still moments when I am working with someone when I manage to stay connected and yet above and apart, and there are instances when I feel guilty hearing another's pain because their suffering somehow affirms my life.

There are times when my first reaction is to shrink into myself and expect the worst. No one will believe how shy and insecure I am; they think it's a joke. I have heard people say that I am arrogant, capable, unflappable, and sure-footed, and I can only say that I haven't yet escaped the impostor syndrome. There are still nights when I feel eight years old and alone. There are also times when I get incredibly scared, existentially scared. I can't stare at the maw for very long or my knees shake. I can get lost in the void and see nothing. I get angry with the fact that I am responsible for creating and co-creating my own meaning.

Sometimes, I would love to just rest and have absolute faith in something. I wish that I could see a soft, pale light in the Abyss. On occasion I pine for my existence to have some extrinsic worth, and I cry for a pure transcendence above the pain and suffering of the human condition. Alas, humanity is part of a continuum, and all I can do is situate myself within that continuum in a way that supports my image of who I can become. I can give more than I take. I can do my best to not add to the suffering, and even better, I can be a person who can help others alleviate it.

If I were to use one word to describe my true self through addiction and recovery it would be resilient. I am incredibly resilient. My resolve to get back up and take on the fight is formidable.

That resiliency and resolve (some have said stubbornness, obstinacy, and stupidity) allowed me to try to control my use of alcohol when it should have been clear that I was in a no-win situation by the time I was 17. On the other hand, that resilience kept me alive long enough to hear the message of recovery, a message once heard that could never go unnoticed again.

The point is, I guess, that once I knew I had turned the corner, I also knew that I would make an absolutely redoubtable opponent to my addicted self. That self has been unmasked; it holds no secrets and it has been stripped of its power. Listen, I know that I am intelligent; it's actually the one thing that I've never questioned. I finally got wise, however, and I put my intelligence aside for a while. For years I did everything in my power to outsmart everyone around me. If I could keep you in knots you would never get inside me. If I could keep myself in knots, I would never have to deal with the basic business of living. So, I boiled it all down. *You drink and you die.* 'Can you imagine,' I asked myself 'how taking a drink would make this or any other situation better?' Once I had made the decision to live the answer had to be no under absolutely all circumstances.

So what does all this mean? After all, the question is the meaning of recovery in my life. Recovery is my life; they are synonymous. Without recovery I would be dead, if not physically, then transcendentally. Without recovery my life would be a meaningless pursuit of deceit in a tasteless present. Without recovery I would not have the relationships I have, and I would not have the humbling experience of walking with others on their road to a meaningful life. I am, without a doubt, the luckiest man alive.

Towards a Dialectical Analysis of the Existential Meaning of Recovery: Bridging the Chasm

Out of such abysses, from such severe sickness one returns newborn, having shed one's skin, more ticklish and malicious, with a more delicate taste for joy, with a more tender tongue for all good things, with merrier senses, with a second dangerous innocence in joy, more childlike and yet a hundred times more subtler than one has ever seen before. (Nietzsche, 1976)

And so I stand at a fork in the road, or I have approached a twist in the plot. Discussing interpretive methodologies, Hoskins (2001) emphasizes, "(E)pistemological and ontological congruence, then, becomes the overarching framework that shapes the rule or action and directs the researcher" (p. 661). Murdoch (1997), writing of Sartre's man (sic) reminds me that I inhabit a universe that holds absolutely no transcendent objective truth. **Truth, then, depends solely on me.** Sartre claims that we should focus, "attention on the individual consciousness, and its immediate mental behaviour," and recognize that what emerges is "a non-historical, non-social, and non-determined individual. A solipsistic picture" (p. 134).

According to Barrett (1958) even Heidegger, who could never be taken for solipsistic or dualistic in his thinking, advises us that "we do not know the object by conquering and subduing it but rather by letting it be what it is and, in letting it be, allowing it to reveal itself as what it is . . . it will reveal itself to us . . . only if we do not attempt to coerce it into one of our ready-made conceptual strait jackets" (p. 191). By editing the narratives from over eighty pages of single spaced text to thirty-odd pages of double spaced text, I have attempted to bring forward, or shine a light on, these descriptive stories in a way that gives the reader access to the essence of the phenomena of meaningful recovery. The success or failure of the endeavour rests, as Macquarrie (1972) emphasizes, when we understand that "(T)he test is to compare the description offered with our own first-hand understanding of existence, i.e., to confront the phenomenological account with the phenomena themselves as we have access to them" (p. 26).

Therefore, in order to remain epistemologically and ontologically congruent, as a responsible being-in-the-world, I am willing to speak to my truths, but I am unwilling to take my analysis of Marge, Sue, and Hank's life stories of the meaning of addiction and recovery any further. I am wary of putting my words into their mouths. They have told me clearly what meaningful recovery means to them, and I must honour the telling of those tales by letting their words speak for themselves. At the same time, however, I see the possibility of using their words to deepen the understanding of the meaning of my own recovery and its accompanying narrative. If I am successful, I trust that I will inspire, "readers to reflect critically upon their own life experience, their constructions of self, and their interactions with others" (Spry, 2001, p. 711).

Throughout this text I have emphasized the notion that I see the world dialectically, but what does that really mean in the context of how I will analyse and explain my own recovery? Put simply, I call it a dialectical method because I begin by examining the situation – in this case my recovery – I analyse the contradictions, and I look for a way to resolve those contradictions. Again, this is by no means a one-time affair. Each time a thesis is forwarded, an antithesis will conflict with it resulting in a new synthesis, which becomes a new thesis, and so on.

Naturally, there is a caveat that accompanies the proposed analysis. Much has happened since I sat to write my story in November of 2001. It is now late March of 2002 and that reality, while representative of meaningful recovery at the time, has changed in more ways than I can say. To go back and analyze that text as some kind of reified truth would do a disservice to an essential existential tenet. After all, we are always becoming, and I am not the man I was three short months ago. As Lewis (2001) remarks, "(T)he subject is not a static, unchanging entity but rather some kind of a forming, reforming, enlarging, and extending being possessed of a desire for self-knowledge vis-à-vis itself in and of the world" (p. 125). What follows incorporates all four stories and months of reflection.

EXPLAINING MY RECOVERY

In many ways the explanation of my story of recovery begins with the paradox of negation and affirmation. Sartre maintained that the crucial difference between humans and non-humans could be found in our ability to say no, to recognize the possibility of achieving our freedom by expressing the negative. He also wondered under what exceptional conditions a human being could really experience freedom? According to Barrett (1958), he answered this question by stating that, "freedom is understood only as the resolute project of the conscious ego" (p. 232). Ultimate freedom, then, according to Sartre, is the *conscious* recognition that one **always** has the ability to say no.

Before I could say no, however, I needed to say yes. I needed to affirm the meaning of my absurd existence. Again this seems paradoxical. How does one affirm absurdity? I made the affirmation based on the realization that I would rather Be than not Be. The possibility of not existing was an incredibly powerful image, and one that I was not prepared to accept at that time. I suppose that I could have said no without saying yes. In other words, I could have said no to suicide without embracing a corresponding affirmation of a meaningful life. I could have continued to exist in a 'tasteless present', but what would have been the point? It was the very insipidness of my existence that had become untenable, and in order to alter that reality I had to find a way of incorporating meaning into my life. Once again, the integration of meaning into what had become an arid wasteland of intoxication meant that I was given the opportunity to affirm by negating. By saying no to psychoactive substances, I put myself in a position to be able to say yes to the creation of an authentic, meaningful project.

To this point, I have walked a very Sartrian path, but I wonder what Heidegger has to offer by way of explanation for the little voice that whispered in my ear, 'but what if you are wrong,' as I was about to take my life? Sartre would argue that that little voice was nothing more than my conscious mind making itself heard; for if it were not drawn from conscious thought then it could not exist. Heidegger, however, might offer a different explanation. For Heidegger,

Being has more at hand than a pure Cartesian consciousness from which to draw. Being, as both subject and object, can authorize itself to be revealed through an understanding that according to Barrett (1958) "lies underneath and at the basis of our ordinary conceptual understanding" (p. 197). The world around us opens up before our eyes and allows us to stand beyond ourselves as existents. What was it that permitted me to transcend myself while simultaneously opening up an inner, basic truth of existence? How was I, at just the right moment, able to see a heretofore-concealed element of what it meant to Be?

Heidegger might well assure me, and I would agree with him, that for the first time, I understood the authentic meaning of *my* death. Death was no longer a possibility for someone else, or for that matter even an *eventual* possibility for me. No, death had become a very real, very internal, very immediate possibility. After all, what is more intimate and personal than one's own death? Once I had realized the earthy, visceral reality of my own finitude, and I made the choice to negate the possibility of taking my life by my own hand, I opened up the possibility of creating an authentic existence. Of course, making the choice to not end my life in no way presents me with immortality. I am still intimately aware of the fact that I will die, and not only will I die, but also it, my death, *could* happen before I finish typing this sentence. Again Barrett (1958) illustrates the importance of this recognition. "(T)ouched by this interior angel of death, I cease to be the impersonal and social One among many. . . and I am free to become myself" (p. 201). I have chosen the project of meaningful recovery as a way of becoming myself.

This is a crucial point in the journey because at this stage some may be tempted to say, "*Oh those poor people, what pain they have endured.*" Or perhaps, "*It must be terrible to be an addict.*" Or my favourite, "*They made some pretty terrible choices and hurt a lot of people; they deserved what they got.*"

I recognize a subtle danger in the way in which we have presented our stories of *addiction to recovery*. I am sure that there will be readers who say, "Why tell us all this and expect us to feel a kind of kindred spirit with *these* people? Hell, I have never done anything like

that, and even if I had I wouldn't be telling the whole world about it." And so, for some, there is an inherent danger that our stories will speak in a language that is simply too foreign, too different. And that would be a shame because regardless of method, I believe that we must all divine a way of addressing the anxiety of existence.

We tell our tales in the way we do for many, many reasons. It is our remembered truth; it is a way of recalling a dangerous, malignant self; to give voice to the pain and the horror takes away the fear and the power of addiction. I tell my tale in the fashion I do to take responsibility for my actions while addicted. If I were to shrug the whole thing off as symptomatic of some kind of medical misfortune, I think that I would be in danger of stagnating, of crying plaintively, "I had a disease, I couldn't help it." Drunk or not I am responsible for every action, every pain I ever inflicted. I can never remember anyone forcing alcohol down my throat.

More than twelve years ago, I emerged from the pit of hell, my flesh raw and bubbling, not sure of what was in front of me, but resolved to never go backwards without Ariadne's thread to guide me home. In order to stay clean and sober, to remain in meaningful recovery there are times when I have to revisit my past transgressions, honestly and without fear. The analogy that I use for myself and that I have presented to others is that there are still occasions when it is absolutely crucial for me to step back down into the pit and cover myself with the detritus accumulated over years of addiction. It is painful and it can be a dangerous place, but before I go down, I always make sure I bring a ladder to which I am securely tethered. When I have had enough, when the memories are once again alive, the flesh soiled, I sit up, climb the ladder, and emerge into a cleansing light, my life of recovery. I have remembered.

Little did I know at the time how strongly I had been fired in the kiln of addiction. The void sits patiently waiting to be filled by alcohol and ignorance, but even before the abyss the sirens call gently at the entrance, "Hateful is the dark blue sky, Vaulted o'er the dark blue sea. Death is the end of life; ah, why should life all labor be?" (Tennyson,1987, p. 1948). Rather than straining to hear their soft, false songs, or drowning them with meaningless activity, I choose to

openly defy those demons of yesterday that left me trembling in fear. "Go ahead, speak, I know you for what you are. Your voice is always welcome here, in front of me, engaging me as my mortal enemy. Get thee behind me Satan, my ass, get thee in front of me so I can watch you, hear you, smell you, taste you, touch you, anticipate you." The past only possesses the power that I allow it. I choose to story my past in such a way as to empower me to make healthier, wiser choices in the moment, and that is what heals my bones and smoothes my skin. Our narratives reveal a transformation – from there to here – and speak to a possible future through an ever-present past. It is, in a very real way, our attempt at mediating our non-historical present reality as emergent selves aspiring toward being. In many ways it is a simple heuristic employed to avoid destructive repetitive patterns.

A crucial point to address here is that addiction and the abyss are not in anyway synonymous. Addiction may well have been a response to the anxiety of Being, but it was not the source of the anxiety. The void is not hell; it is nothing. Ariadne's thread, or my ladder for that matter, would be of no benefit whatsoever in a dimensionless, timeless emptiness; there is no point of reference; there is nothing.

If the reader remains convinced that people who have lived addiction and recovery are entities unto themselves and that they offer no resonance of the essential human condition, I have failed. There is no *them, or those people*, there is only an *us*, a *we*, a *human condition*. It has been my contention all along that as human beings we are all, each one of us, struggling to make sense of this world. I have joined theorists from the existential camp in insisting that in order to live life well we need a purpose, we need projects in which we can invest meaningfully. We have all suffered; as free agents, we are all responsible for the choices we make; we all act upon this world and are acted upon by this world. At some time in our lives, if even for just a moment, we have all looked into the nothingness of the abyss; and we all, at one time or another, must find a way to wrestle with existential guilt when we look around and see how far we are from where we

hoped we would be. I suppose that in a sense, we are all *recovering*, each in his or her unique way, from the existential pain of Being.

I end my narrative with the line, "I am, without a doubt, the luckiest man alive." Do I believe that statement to be true simply because I survived almost two decades of addiction? Not for a moment. To feel as fortunate as I do for my absurd existence requires that I do more than just survive; I must do more than trudge along with my head down and shoulders slumped. I must somehow make a gift of this life and embrace the fact that I am condemned to freedom and personal choice.

I am faced, then, with what amounts to an epistemological question: *How do I know this? How do I know that I am responsible for creating the meaning of my existence?* It is only through the temporal nature of addiction and recovery that I am able to make this determination, and that is why it is absolutely paramount that I included complete narratives from my participants. Meaningful recovery is contradicted or invalidated without an understanding of the past. It is *because* I have allowed the four of us to tell our stories, from beginning to end, that our lives in recovery hold any significance at all. It is *because* of the pain and suffering of my existence in a life of addiction that I am able to recognize a meaningful recovery. In some strange, twisted way addiction has become the impetus for my drive to create an authentic, heroic self. I do not have to look into the jaws of addiction to discover a way of being, but it offers itself as a marvellous example of non-being, of a non-heroic existence.

Of course, it is not quite that simple. Had the narratives in this project reported only the negative experiences of addiction and the positive aspects of recovery, one might be tempted to take the easy way out and say merely, 'addiction bad, recovery good.' After all, the narrators that I have chosen for this story were able to provide fairly coherent interviews, and these interviews followed an expected conversion model where the participants seemed to be able to tell a tale of suffering, emergence, and a kind of celebrated survival (Jarvinen, 2000). Each story, however, also speaks of memories that precede substance use. Each story offers evidence that there were

many enjoyable times during intoxication, and many painful times during abstinence. So when I attempt to synthesize my thesis of addiction and my antithesis of meaningful recovery, I should not be surprised if I give birth to a new series of contradictions that will, I hope, entice me to seek further resolution. That is after all the very nature of the dialectic. Once the tension between the antithesis and the thesis creates a synthesis, the process begins anew.

Berlin's quote, to which I referred earlier, "I wish, above all, to be conscious of myself as a thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility for my choices and able to explain them by reference to my own ideas and purposes" has become my maxim for living. How can I describe the depths of my ignorance during my addiction? As I ponder that question, I wonder if I need belabour the point any further. Suffice it to say that my comrades and I lived lives steeped in bad faith or inauthentic existence. Sartre's (1992) words mean more to me than any medical-based description of denial:

> The situation can not be the same for bad faith if this, as we have said is a lie to oneself. To be sure, the one who practices bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth. Bad faith then has in appearance the structure of falsehood. Only what changes everything is the fact that in bad faith it is from myself that I am hiding the truth. Thus the duality of the deceiver and the deceived does not exist here. Bad faith on the contrary implies in essence the unity of a *single* consciousness. (p. 89)

A very large part of meaningful recovery, one might say a central component, then, is to choose my project, to live an authentic life in good faith. And I equate choice with action not mere thought. As Barrett (1958) writes:

> And so any man (sic) who chooses or is forced to choose decisively – for a lifetime, and therefore for eternity since only one life is given us – experiences his own existence as something beyond the mirror of thought. He encounters the Self that he is, not in the *detachment* of thought, but in the *involvement* and pathos of choice. (p. 145)

I liken my recovery to having cataracts removed from my eyes. Twelve years ago, at the exact moment of my epiphany, I *began* to see the world and my place in it as an active participant clearly for the first time. Again, this is a common theme throughout our narratives.

I have often conjectured about the aetiology of my epiphany. What, I wonder, would an existential theorist from the absurd camp call such an event? I know, for instance that Prochaska, Norcross, and DiClemente (1994) refer to the cathartic moment of the epiphany as an *emotional arousal*. They describe a "sudden emotional experience related to the problem at hand. It is an extremely powerful process" (p. 28). Therapists often attempt to create a setting that promotes this arousal in order to "increase awareness and depth of feeling and to move individuals toward action" (p. 29). But, frankly, this description hardly does justice to that moment in my life when everything changed, when everything became possible. Dr. Kenyon, in offering feedback for this project referred to the epiphany as, "the Storying Moment, when my life becomes present to me as a story . . . a spiritual event in the sense of meaning." In many ways this explanation makes more sense or holds more validity for me because it was from that moment on that I began to think of my life as a story that *I could rewrite*. Of course, in order to do so, I needed to accept the responsibility for more than three decades of idle doodling. Once I had done that I felt empowered to begin an authentic self-creative project.

But what was the epiphany itself? Pragmatically, I am aware that it does not really matter that much. Much like the fact that I need no explanation for the cause of my addiction, I suppose that I really do not require any one answer for the epiphany. If I were a man of faith, I could certainly say without hesitation that I was touched by the hand of God, but alas, I am not a man of faith. Imagine the difficulty of writing about an experience that defies all description. It was as if all my pain, all my doubt, all the poison in my body just drained away, and I felt clean and pure. A part of me blossomed at that moment, and I **knew** that I would be okay. I knew that I wanted to live, and that in order to live I could not drink or use any psychoactive substance ever again; and I wept with joy.

The dialectic is at work here. I am not convinced that the cathartic moment is a discrete event even though it felt like a lightning bolt thrown by Zeus from on high. Rather, I expect it was more like the constant battering of Poseidon's sea upon the wall. At times the attack of the waves was subtle and gentle but constant, and at other the times, the crests hammered against my psyche with the force of a jackhammer. And finally, given the right emotional state, given the right circumstances, the wall collapsed and the cleansing sea water cascaded through my system leaving in its wake the understanding, the absolute certainty that from that moment on, I could change the way I had always been. I could begin the journey of becoming.

Marge and Hank feel that their project has been chosen for them, and *all they have to do* (I do not suggest that this is easy) is show up with an open mind and heart and God will use them like a conduit. His energy, strength and love will pass through them and be offered up to those who seek help. For them, nothing about life is absurd; there is a purpose and meaning to be mined. His hand can be found everywhere in their lives. They both give their life over to their higher power with the absolute faith that if they take care of their sobriety that he will take care of everything else.

Both Sue and I need a hell of a lot more control than that. As Sue stated in reference to AA, "It's like you go in there, and you'd admit that you were powerless over your addiction, and your life had become unmanageable. I'm powerless over everything. When in my life did I ever have power? I've never had power. I'm trying to get power; I'm trying to empower myself." Whereas I always had access to power, but instead, I gave it away.

During my early recovery there were many opportunities for me to take the easy road and accept, at face value, the received knowledge that AA had to proffer. Yet, the harder they tried to force *the answer* down my throat, the more I gagged. Paradoxically, the easy way out would have led me down a blind alley, and I might well have spent years, or even a lifetime existing in the shadow of someone else's project. As Caputo (1987) points out, I was determined to, "avoid the illusion that our institutions and practices, that our reason and our faith, that we ourselves

have dropped from the sky" (p. 273). If I accept the theory that an ultimate answer exists, I must also accept that in order to live life fully I will need to bow down before some ultimate authority and be in service to what amounts to nothing more than a prescription for existence. As I have said repeatedly, I would prefer to imagine that we are both acted upon by this world, and *we act upon it*. When I sobered up, I wanted my turn at centre stage for I had lived life in the wings far too long. Turn up the lights and throw away the scripts; it is time to improvise; it's time to create.

My life in recovery is one of awareness. I no longer have to wonder to whom I have spoken or what I might have said. I don't have to worry whether or not I killed somebody while driving in a blackout. Meaningful recovery means that I do not have to lie to myself, nor do I have the capacity to any longer even if I wanted. Lethe, the river of intoxication, has been successfully crossed with nary a draught taken or desired, and I find myself enervated by the possibility of creating a project in which I can be a responsible, authentic participant.

As I mentioned earlier, however, resolving the dialectic is an ongoing process. I tell myself that I am motivated to help ease suffering because I feel privileged to be in recovery and capable. I think for the most part that is true, but I also believe that I am weighed down by an existential guilt that creates a penitent situation. Yalom (1980) describes existential guilt as a "broadening of the scope of accountability. Most simply put: one is guilty not only through transgressions against another or against some moral or social code, but *one may be guilty of transgression against oneself*" (p. 277). Heidegger (1962) maintains that guilt is intimately related to possibility or potentiality. We are guilty to the extent that we have failed to fulfill our authentic possibility. Of course, for me, penance is self-imposed, and I think it is reflected in an almost obsessive drive to succeed, to do things beyond reproach.

It is as almost as though I feel so guilty for my personal failure – two decades in addiction – that I am unable to rest, to allow myself even the smallest self-transgression. I think I stay as busy as I do, in what I consider to be meaningful projects, to make up for past crimes – real and imagined – and I think I keep this frenetic pace because I am afraid if I stop long enough

to stare back into the abyss for a moment that I will go mad, and I fear this madness more than anything. If I gaze a moment too long, I can feel the anxiety build. You see, when one looks deeply into the void there is no yellow-eyed Stephen King creation hiding, waiting to pounce. It would be so much easier if there was something or someone with whom I could do battle. But there is nothing. There is only the essential nullity and nothingness of my own life.

And I never know where and when it will strike, this emptiness, this vision of the eternal void. It is actually easier when I look towards the abyss of my own free will. I seem to gain some control over the fear and the nausea. It is when it comes unbidden that I tremble. While I am walking, or reading, or just before I sleep, or as soon as I awaken, I catch a fleeting glimpse of the possibility of non-existence, of the immediate possibility of nothing. Even as I stride forward into a life of meaningful recovery and authentic projects, I move ever closer to my own death.

Kierkegaard (2000) reminds us that innocence is ignorance and that, "in this state there is peace and repose, but there is simultaneously something else that is not contention and strife, for there is indeed nothing against which to strive. What, then, is it? Nothing. But what effect does nothing have? It begets anxiety" (p. 139). Nothing begets anxiety. What else creates anxiety, according to Kierkegaard? Freedom. To realize the possibility of personal agency creates a kind of vertigo of possibility. Anxiety is also reflected in the unique nature of humanity. Macquarrie (1972) says that, "(T)he human task is to accomplish the synthesis of body and soul, and this task is from the beginning anxiety-laden . . . man, conjoining sense and reason, body and soul, lives in the shadow of anxiety" (p. 167).

What is it about anxiety that makes it so revelatory of the human condition? After all, I still get "incredibly scared, existentially scared. I can't stare at the maw for very long or my knees shake. I can get lost in the void and see nothing." What am I afraid of? What are you afraid of? Do we fear the same things, you and I? Are my fears somehow qualitatively different because of my experience in addiction and recovery?

Even after more than a dozen years in recovery, I cannot say with any *real* certainty that I drank and drugged to quell anxiety, although I expect it played a large part. Existentially, of course, anxiety is not something at which I can point a finger. It is *no thing* and it comes from *nowhere*. Perhaps my feelings of isolation and loneliness contributed to it. Perhaps the social and familial rejection that I experienced made me uneasy. But, rather, I expect that at a very early age I recognized something in my innocence that many *in the herd* will never truly see: *I am different* than everyone else in this world. As much as I may want to, I will never belong. The stark reality is that as a *being-in-the-world* I am, by nature, at odds with this world.

For some, the unexamined life, the life embedded in the group will create *illusion enough* to carry on. Perhaps they will embrace the faith and ready-made answer of AA or any one of a dozen religions; perhaps they will bury themselves in work, or play, or family, or politics. Maybe the feeling of being different that Hank, Marge, Sue and I describe in our narratives is an instinctive recognition of an existential truth. We are different. Not different from the rest of humanity, but different in that we are able to *feel* the separateness, and unable to escape that feeling, we disappear in haze of addiction. Remember my earlier words as I described what it was like the first time I drank, "I discovered the solution to all my isolation and loneliness." Perhaps what I actually discovered was a way to temporarily mediate my anxious existence.

Truthfully, recovery has replaced addiction as the mediator. I have maintained, to this point, that one needs an authentic project for life to be meaningful. At the beginning of this thesis, I posed the questions, "What is that gives my life meaning? What is the single most important thing in my life?" My response was reflexive, "recovery, everything starts and ends with recovery." But what does that mean? What value have I assigned to the project of meaningful recovery? I claim to be a critical thinker, someone who will not accept a ready-made answer. I have decided, I suppose, that if I am going to live a life in illusion that I will at least take the time and effort to create one of my own.

Without a doubt my narrative of recovery has given me a venue for establishing a star billing as someone who has been *there and back*. I am always slightly amused and more than a little proud when someone finds out for the first time that I am in recovery. "You, no way, you're pulling my leg. I would never have guessed in a million years." And another opportunity to regale someone with my heroic myth presents itself. I have a tremendous investment in that myth, and Becker (1971) reminds me why I have made it so important, "man's (sic) meaning hangs by a ludicrously fragile thread" (p. 108). I have rebuilt myself based on the necessary invention of a character that I have defined as being in meaningful recovery. What would happen, I wonder, if I pulled that rug out from under myself? What would my authentic project be if I were not in recovery? Would it all collapse like a house of cards? Would I fall back into the black hole of the abyss, never to be heard from again, and would it matter?

As I recall, Kierkegaard maintained that the truth of religion is one that must penetrate personal existence, or it is nothing, and that it requires that one struggle every day of one's life to renew it. Recovery is much the same; it must be renewed with both vigour and rigour each and every day or it becomes mundane and taken for granted. Part of that renewal process means that I must take inventory of more than the heroic self that has become so much of my *causa sui* project. As I attempt to transcend myself by engaging in a meaningful and heroic enterprise of recovery, I do well to remind myself that I strive not to become *more than human*, but rather *as human* as I can possibly be.

So, if the only character that I take forward on this journey is the hero, I am leaving half of whom I am behind, thereby condemning myself to a life of imitation and inauthenticity. In order to answer the question that I have outlined above, namely what would happen if I were to pull the rug out from under myself? I must ensure the ridiculously fragile thread that holds my existence together is at the very least attached to both ends of who I am. Addiction came before recovery; one is not possible without the other. All that I have done is part of who I have, and who I will, become. To paraphrase Nietzsche, I am willing to acknowledge *the heaviest and*

blackest in myself and by doing so I concede my human frailty candidly, transparently. By understanding all that I am as a Being in recovery, the good, the bad, and the indifferent, I am better equipped to accept my anxious existence as a worthy choice, to hold Being as more meaningful than non-Being.

All of that begs the question, "What has recovery given me that I did not have prior to my entry into addiction?" After all, my life has no more *inherent* meaning now than it did then. I expect that, in part, I am better able to respond to Yalom's earlier rhetorical question, "How does a being who needs meaning find meaning in a universe that has no meaning?" And I can answer Magee (1997) who explains a point by Schopenhauer who "contends that anyone who has *really* absorbed his philosophy, not just intellectually but with his whole personality, will be undeceived thereby about the true nature of the world, and will also understand that his own being in this world of phenomena is no different from that of all the other empty ephemera that constitute it" (p. 221).

The difference, of course, between you and I as human beings and empty ephemera is that we can create our own meaning (and of course we know that we are ephemera). Fortunately for us, as the only beings for whom Being matters, we have developed the capacity to fill the entrance to the void and maintain the *necessary illusion* that our lives count for something. My illusion is no more real than Marge, Hank or Sue's, but at least it is mine. I have woven my own mythical cloak of heroism, and I am proud to fling it over my shoulders with a certain majesty. As Kazantzakis rejoices, "if any priest comes to confess me and give me communion, tell him to make himself scarce, and may he give me his curse! . . . Men like me should live a thousand years" (in Yalom, 1998: p. 214).

Meaning and suffering are inextricably woven in a tapestry that is laid out across the world. I am a fan of Schopenhauer (1996), but I truly think that he completely missed the point when he wrote:

> If suffering is not the first and immediate object of our life, then our existence is the most inexpedient and inappropriate thing in the world. For it is absurd to assume that the infinite pain, which everywhere abounds in the world and springs from the want and misery essential to life, could be purposeless and purely accidental. (p.27)

Well, Arthur, that is the crux of the matter. It is the absurdity and purposelessness of life that creates the existential angst, and subsequently lays the fertile ground for an orthodox answer. God, I suppose, had a purpose for putting Sue into the dysfunctional hell of her childhood? He had a reason for Marge to be so savagely beaten by her first husband? And Hank. What is God's plan for Hank? Why did he put him in a wheelchair after everything he had already suffered? What was the purpose behind that? What of your own suffering? Was there a purpose to it, or did you assign one? Is not suffering a universal factor in the human condition? And do you turn away from suffering, or face it head on?

Hank and Marge are incredible human beings. As a matter of fact, so are Sue and I. We have all created meaning out of our suffering. I doubt that anyone who reads any of these narratives would argue that we have not suffered. Some may be quick to point out that we were the creators of our own pain; we chose addiction after all. Even if that is true, we each suffered long before addiction. But for Hank and Marge, I cannot ever *fully understand* how their faith remains so strong, though, in part, one can find the reasons in their narratives. Both of them found, in the program, a place to belong, and a place that guaranteed that everything would be okay if they were rigorous enough in their pursuit of sobriety. Of course that pursuit meant following the 12-Steps and obeying the Big Book.

And this is where I get lost. This is a crucial tension in my dialectical reasoning. Were not the steps and the book *created* by the same *people* that gave us Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Judaism? Were they not created by the same *people* who wrote the American Constitution? Or demanded that all women become circumcised? Or to this day organize death camps? Is it not all a *human* invention designed to try and make sense of that

which is insensible beyond comprehension? Is it not just another example of how humans *create* guidelines to ease their own fear of death? A way of validating *human* existence?

I have been aware, for as long as I can remember, that the world is a brutal, unforgiving arena and perhaps faced with the choice of the bleak nothingness of the abyss and living amidst the too loud screams of this world, I chose to remain on this earth, but only if I could mute it with intoxication. I have finally come to the realization, in great part thanks to this project that it is *because* our suffering is absurd that I am able to go on. If I truly believed for a moment that the pain I see every day in person and on the news was a part of some omnipotent deity's great game plan, I am afraid that I would go back to the sidelines. Take me out coach. I don't wanna play anymore.

Instead, through my recovery and the critical thinking that has been awakened as a result, I can reconcile all of this with the absurdity of existence, and I can participate as someone who helps assuage more pain than he causes. Like the rest of my participants, I have made the decision to adopt Antonovsky's (1987) third measure in his *Sense of Coherence* project. I accept that life will be difficult, and I am more than willing to take on these demands as challenges worthy of both investment and engagement.

In order to fully engage in meaningful recovery, I have had to admit that my attempt to turn away from my suffering through drugs and alcohol only led to a further state of alienation. Once again, I am faced with an essential and common paradox of addiction. I drank and used drugs to belong, to feel like I fit in. I drank and used drugs to ease the pain of being in this world. For me, as it does for most, this proved to be an exercise in futility, an absolute folly. It did not work. At my lowest I sought the only release that I thought was left; I was willing to extinguish my own life to stop the pain.

And I will be frank. Suicide is still my ace-in-the-hole. Before I ever pick up another psychoactive substance, I will most assuredly take my own life. Strange as it may seem, I find this thought liberating. Like Hank, I can foresee no circumstance in which going back to

addiction would ever make things better. I wonder, though, if that also means that there are also **no** circumstances in which the pain would become too great for me to carry on? I suspect that I know the answer to that question, and that is why I can only look into the emptiness for a few moments at a time.

It seems that over the past few months, however, I have been building up a kind of immunity to this barrenness. I can look in for longer and longer before I feel the cold nausea creeping into my belly. Besides, I have no intention of abjuring the possibility of further insight; it is truly one of the things that make recovery so meaningful. I believe, once again it was Kierkegaard who said that life has to be lived forwards but understood backwards. The moment life stops, understanding stops.

In creating a synthesis of understanding as to suffering, I have set the dialectic in motion again. If I have learned so much from my travails why do I insist that a large part of my meaningful project should be designated to easing the suffering of others? Would they, too, not benefit from the wisdom gained from a life of suffering? I suppose that on this point I fall more toward the camp of Frankl, but not directly in it. By that I mean that there is much to be learned from imposed suffering, but there are also other ways in which we can gain life's wisdom; we do not need to be imprisoned and tortured, but we do need to be aware that such heinous, all too human acts are still occurring. As Sartre reminds us, evil is real and it is alive in this world.

Where I part from Frankl, however, is in his definition of the imposition of suffering. I would argue that for Being suffering is constitutive to the degree that Being is insightful enough to recognize his or her natural state and this brings me to the heart of my argument; we walk the same path regardless of gender, race or culture. For to oppose that idea is to set in place an *us and them* argument and plot a course for the privileged orthodoxy of the few. Being suffers as long as another Being is in pain.

I live a life of advantage, of that I have no doubt. On most days, now, my suffering is *limited* to the symbiotic pain I share as I work with others in the throes of any one of life's myriad

problems. Empathically, I ache when I read what some brute does to his dog, or when some twisted pedophile maims and kills a child. Like many, I was physically ill when the jetliners crashed into the World Trade Centre Buildings, and I am equally dismayed by a U.S. foreign policy that starves thousands of children in Iraq. But all of this is a kind of suffering *once removed* if you will. It is existentially painful, yes, but no one is harming my family; I sleep warm and safe each night. And herein lies the danger. If I were content to live my life as one of the privileged few, I would negate the essence of my Being. My ignorance would be tantamount to laziness or even worse, it would be nothing more than cowardice because as I have illustrated elsewhere, I understand at a cellular level what it means to suffer. In many ways I have known it all along. I tried to turn away from it once before only to disappear into a fog of addiction.

As I was tumbling in a free fall spiral, a few people extended their hands to me and told me in no uncertain terms that I was worth saving. In effect, they helped me to create a *false bottom*, a platform from which I could begin rebuilding my life. And that is what I try to do. I assist people in constructing a foundation from which they can learn to use the painful lessons of life to create a meaningful, considered existence. I am in a position to say with some authority that one does not have to end up in the East End of Vancouver to have *suffered enough* to change; we can turn our lives around at anytime in the process, but only if we have the courage to face our pain and that of our fellow Beings.

During the writing of this thesis, the *tether* came loose from my ladder for a short time. I became so mired in the stories of my participants and that of my own that I began to become disoriented. For perhaps two days, I was lost in the pain that I had inflicted on others and myself, and before I knew it, I was withdrawing from friends and family. I found myself crying for no reason that I could identify. There seemed to be no escape from the data and its impact on me. The painful memories visited me in my dreams, in my daydreams, while I was working out, watching television, reading a book, and working. My advisor pushed me to do yet another revision of my analysis, and I came within a hair's breadth of doing what I had done so many

times in my life: I muttered under my breath, alone in the darkness of my study, 'Fuck it. Who needs this horseshit? It doesn't *mean* anything anyway.'

I took a few days off from writing to give myself a little distance, and I could feel my energy returning little by little. I then picked up the stories that had been entrusted to me, and I read them as if for the first time, and I remembered why I was doing what I was doing. Hank, Marge, and Sue had something to say, and so did I. I had a commitment and responsibility to a process; it was not just about me. It was about carrying the message of meaningful recovery forward, and of course it was going to painful. Were it not, it would not be authentic.

One of the questions I asked of myself as I wallowed in the doldrums was, 'Why not just finish it? Why not state what I believe deep down? I am recovered. Recovery is no longer my project; I am okay. In fact, I have not been tempted to use drugs or alcohol for any reason for more than a decade.' The answer is at the very least threefold. First, if I am to be given a label, being in recovery is a pretty good one to carry. It beats the hell out of *drunken asshole, or that load.* It goes a long way to fulfilling my heroic project; it fosters self-esteem; it works.

Second, and I truly believe just as important is the fact that it succeeds for more than just me. There are times when I am working with a client that *they know I know.* I am not sure how else to say it. I might not have shared a thing because I often do not, nevertheless they can tell that my empathy is somehow deeper, somehow more exactly shared. There are also times when I share with a purpose. If I see that someone really has no belief in the possibility that they can change, I tell them how I changed. I tell them how there was a time in my life when I could not imagine ever doing anything different. I tell them that my dream was a bottle of bourbon and a deserted island. And sometimes I tell them how little I thought my life was worth and how close I came to taking it. Through my story, I model the possibility of change, and I think that is what all of my participants accomplish in the telling of their own narratives. If we four can make it, perhaps recovery is possible for anyone.

Third, I blur the boundaries between them and us. By that I mean there have been times when I have heard someone talk about some *drunken loser*, and I have challenged some primary assumptions. 'Do you know her story?' I might ask. 'Do you know her pain? How much different is she, that shrunken woman, how much different is she than you and I?' "What are you talking about?" the person with whom I have entered a dialogue may inquire. "She's a drunken slut, she's lost her kids, she's out on the street. What does *something* like that have to do with you or I?" 'Well she is human,' I say. 'Before I was fortunate enough to have my epiphany, I was one step away from where she is standing; I am but one drink away now.'

I would be remiss if I ignored what I referred to earlier as one of my greatest strengths, resilience. How does one explain resilience? Given my complete lack of knowledge about my natural parents, I cannot turn to temperament or heredity for my answer. Besides, we are governed more by the possibilities of the human condition – a Being condemned to freedom – than human nature. Perhaps I gained much from the example of my mom's incredible ability to get back up on every occasion but the last when cancer took her life, so environment may well play a part. But that does not explain the key to my resilience. Pure and simple, I find my absurd existence amusing. There has never been an instance, when given enough time, that I have not discovered humour or perhaps created humour in response to a painful situation. As Caputo (1987) reminds me:

> But all this seriousness needs an antidote, lest we perish from it. For none of it is any excuse for losing our sense of humour . . . always the abyss but always the laughter. Nothing undoes the metaphysics of presence better than laughter. Nothing is more unsettling than laughter. Nothing heals like laughter. Nothing keeps us open like laughter . . . the best and last resource for the tragic is laughter. The being which suffers the most, man (sic), has invented laughter for itself. It is the power to laugh at oneself, one's fears, one's beliefs that liberates and keeps the flux in play, keeps us in movement

> with the flux, and keeps the openness to the mystery from becoming nostalgia and melancholy, malingering and moping (pps. 290-292).

I choose to laugh. I choose to enjoy this often anguished and always absurd existence. It strikes me that there are dozens of theorists who have written hundreds of tomes explaining what it is about humans that separates us from the rest of the known world. We are symbolic; we create culture; we are temporal; the list goes on and on. I have discovered in my life that the thing that most elevates and ultimately liberates me, however, is the ability to see the absolute irony of my existence and forge ahead, not in spite of, but because of that irony. I am in on the joke.

Finally, as I attempt to reconcile this new, but always becoming synthesis of existence, I am left with the question of self-transcendence. I will not go over what by now must be very familiar ground. The reader is aware, I am sure that I hold no faith in anything outside of human kind. Like Camus (2000), "(I) don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms" (p. 175).

But does that, I wonder, mean that I hold no faith at all? Does it mean that there is only the meaning that I create and co-create as I act upon and am acted upon by this earth? What are the limits of my human understanding as they pertain to self-transcendence? What does my experience tell me of transcendence? And what pray tell does that have to do with meaningful recovery in the first place?

Well, for me, it means everything. I transcend myself, become more than myself, by becoming myself in relation to others. After all, being-with-others is an absolutely fundamental constituent of existence. A quick and dirty way to end this look at my life would be to mark its inevitable finitude, a finitude that results in death. No part of me, no body, no spirit, no consciousness will transcend the moment of my death. So why on earth would I bother considering self-transcendence in my personal recovery?

Because I will live on in the hearts and minds of those people whom I have touched, for whom my existence has been meaningful. Pause for a moment, and consider the memory of a loved one lost. Have they not transcended their existence by the manner in which they have meaningfully influenced your own? They are no longer here, and in my mind at least neither they nor we have any way of knowing that they live on or not in some other dimension. Nor does it matter. Life is for the living and to transcend this mortal existence we need but remain a part of the living memory of those who are left behind. Even when that memory fades, we will be part of an unseen and yet subtly influencing culture that continues to help others create and co-create their own life's meaning.

And perhaps that above all else is why I consider myself the luckiest man in the world. As a man living a meaningless life in the chains of addiction, I caused tremendous pain to those around me, pain that would have transcended my existence. As a man in meaningful recovery, I have embraced an opportunity to help ease suffering, if even just a tiny, tiny bit, long after I have left this earth. For me, that's meaningful.

General Discussion

Given the title of this thesis, *The Existential Meaning of Recovery*, I suppose the first question one might ask is whether or not I have established that our participants are engaged in living lives steeped in meaningful recovery, and have I presented a series of analyses that support that thesis? In other words, has this study stood the test of face and content validity? After all, I have given the reader no facts, no provable truths. Many in academe would, I am sure wonder what any of this has anything at all to do with science. For that matter, I do not have to go as far as positivist scholars to hear that question. My own wife shakes her head in wonder at what I call valid research. "Where's the proof? How can four people talking about their lives be research?" she wonders. Strangely enough, I do not understand the question. To me these narratives *describe*, and my dialectical analysis seeks to *explain*, not only what it is like to experience meaningful recovery, but to shed light on what it means to **BE**.

Each one of us described our lives in addiction as being bereft of meaning. Isolated, frightened, insane, out of control and emotionally and spiritually bankrupt are just some of the more prevalent themes. We used our addictions in an attempt, as Gregoire (1995) points out, "to give life meaning, to assuage existential dilemmas" (p. 339). As anticipated this attempt failed miserably. Whether it was me driving toward the concrete bridge, or Marge looking forlornly out the hotel window, or Hank wandering the ship's deck with his hammer, or Sue discovering that she was emotionally dead, we all eventually reached a point where our individual lives were meaningless, and as such, unliveable.

So, what changed? How is that I can affirm without hesitation that we all live our lives in meaningful recovery? Well, certainly as I read the narratives presented in this paper, I am struck by the memory of a contrast so powerful that it cannot be expressed adequately in words, even as

eloquent as the ones entrusted to us here. Part of the interview process that does not translate effectively off the page is the peaceful change in countenance, the tears of joy, or the absolute wonder of being in the presence of people living their lives so fully.

But even without that 'insider information' the words themselves are a powerful witness to meaningful recovery. For Sue it might be the absence of negative emotions, "And I don't have those feelings of shame, or hatred, self-hatred, like guilt," that contribute to a more meaningful existence. For Marge it may be that she can trust herself under all situations; she doesn't have to guess at who she is. Hank moved from a life story of abject emptiness and madness to a place in recovery where he can say of his time in treatment, "for the first time I belonged."

And for me, although there are abundant examples in my narrative and in my dialectical analysis as to how my life has become pregnant with meaning, I will use an illustration to which the reader may not be privy, and yet still falls well within the context of this study. It is so simple and so pure. As I sit here typing a light mist covers my eyes. I have been so incredibly fortunate to be able to be, in relation, with Marge, Sue, and Hank and have them share their lives with me. I have been so honoured by their trust and their generosity. Without my recovery, my meaningful recovery, none of this would have been possible.

My recovery, my voracious pursuit of my recovery, allows me to live my life responsibly and authentically. I am creating a hero of which I can be proud. I am creating a hero of which my parents would be proud. I have decided to create, in myself, an authentic project that allows me to ease more suffering than I cause. By embracing recovery, I have embraced life; it is the antithesis of addiction. And it is heroic *because* it is entirely fiction. I am not driven by a categorical imperative, but rather, I am motivated by the decision I made years ago. **I** decided to live, and live well in accordance with what **I** believed to be right.

As to analysis, I find the data fascinating. The narratives are thick and rich and lend themselves to manifold methods of interpretation. As I was preparing a dialectical analysis for

my narrative, I could not help but notice how easily I could have adopted a structural, systems, developmental, cultural or personality theory examination of any one or all of the other stories.

Fortunately for me, the narratives also fell beautifully under the existential lens. Each story contained themes of agency, freedom, identity, authenticity, transcendence, suffering, guilt, meaning, and anxiety. I hope that through our tales of addiction and recovery, our tales of living, that we have shed some small light on what it means **to be** human. After all, these existential dilemmas confront us all, or at least I hope they do. Each one of us is ultimately responsible for creating our own unique authentic project in this world. For to live one's life amongst the herd, is to really not live one's life at all.

Limitations

I think that I have been clear from the outset that, at least in part, the purpose of this work is one of description. In other words my participants have told the reader what meaningful recovery means to them. Notice, however, that I do not qualify that statement with a *merely*. My participants, or co-researchers if you will, have done their utmost to plumb the depths of their lived experience, and they have storied that experience so that you the reader can understand, through their rich descriptions, what it is to be engaged in meaningful recovery. And yet we have only scratched the surface.

By way of my dialectical analysis, I have attempted to go beneath the shiny veneer of my own heroic recovery story and *explain* how much meaningful recovery matters to me. I am one person, and my truth is no more or no less than that; it is my truth. And that truth, or better still, those truths will continue to undergo metamorphoses as I gain greater understanding of what it means for me to Be in this world. Perhaps my words remain a mystery to some. Ultimately this study is limited by my understanding of myself and my ability or inability to articulate that limited understanding to the reader. The reader will determine for herself if I have both described and explained meaningful recovery in a way that sheds light on the human condition.

This particular study is driven by my belief that an existential framework of meaningful recovery is both ontologically and epistemologically congruent with what it means to be human. There are others who would look at this very same data and see completely different results. Imagine how this data might be analysed by a cultural theorist, a systems theorist, or a feminist theorist.

Each of our participants described meaningful recovery at a particular point and time of their lives. Again, given the opportunity to respond to the very same question, after they have had an opportunity to read this document, they may well answer differently. I hope so. This study is limited by time and understanding, and in that respect it is no different than life.

Future Research

If I have indeed, *merely scratched the surface,* where do I go next? Given the paucity of interpretive methodological research applications to the topic of meaningful recovery, I would suggest that we continue this nascent exploration. There is a need to gather more narratives from those who have recovered successfully from addictions to psychoactive substances, so that we can better understand a number of fundamental existential questions like authenticity, guilt, freedom, and responsibility.

There are many men and women who right this moment are lamenting to themselves, "Why bother? What does it matter? Nothing will ever change. There is just no reason to stop using, to enter recovery." Perhaps if *we made available, understandable literature*, descriptions and explanations of meaningful recovery as narrated by those who have fought the battle and lived to tell the tale, we might be able to help alleviate someone else's anguish.

I do not for a moment mean to suggest that each narrative need be understood from the existential tenets presented here. We need a deeper understanding of how systems, culture, cognition, and personality, to name but a few, influence addiction and recovery. To that end, I maintain that our understanding will not come from ticking a box on a survey, but rather it will

come about as we ask the question, "Can you tell me about your life? What is that matters to you?" These questions are, of course, not limited to normative value in the field of addiction. Wherever there is suffering, wherever there is joy, there are people willing to share their experience through story. And within the context of these poignant narratives we can glean a greater understanding of what it means to be human, to exist authentically.

Again, why is that important and how can research help? A life informed by the storied existence of those people who embrace meaningful recovery will aid practitioners and lay folk alike in their quest to support friends, family and clients who are struggling with addiction. I would humbly suggest that between Hank, Marge, Sue and I we have assisted hundreds of people in their meaningful journeys of change. If each person who has received assistance offers guidance to just one other, and that person walks with another . . . I think you see the point. It reminds me of a favourite story. A little boy was walking along the beach littered with thousands of stranded starfish. As the lad walked, he would bend over and pick up a single starfish and walk knee-deep into the freezing ocean and gently release his colourful companion. A bystander watching him could not resist the urge to ask impatiently, "Little boy, why do you bother? There are more starfish on this beach than we can count. What's the difference if you pick up a few? You will never get to them all." The little boy squatted down, lifted a bright orange starfish, waded into the water and set it free. In a very matter-of-fact voice he said, "It matters to that one." Thank you.

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