

Hooked On Recovery

October 18, 2010

"Encountering God"

"Man with toothache cannot love wife." ~ Chinese proverb.

"I'm pretty sure I have another drunk in me, just not sure about another recovery." ~ Heard in the rooms.

I am back at home after five days on the shores of Cape Cod supposedly fishing but in reality seeking God. Yeah, I had a fishing rod (8 of 'em to be exact), and I fished some, even caught some littler ones, but I was mostly determined to finish walking out of the valley I have been in. The valley of cancer.

A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to work with an executive coach named Carol Kardas. We found Carol after attending a series of workshops on human resources which were put on through the Hartford Foundation of Public Giving. It turns out that Carol's husband, Jerry, had the same cancer as me ten years prior, with the same protocol for treatment of chemo and radiation, and he is living well ten years later, throat still dry but doing OK. And what makes the "God-incidence" even more remarkable was that he was treated by the same 3 doctors. She had my attention. I talked to her about my restlessness, not being comfortable at home, not being comfortable at work, and then she asked me a question, "Phil, how do you recover?" (She knew something of my addiction recovery too). How do I recover? Thinking about it, I said, "I talk to people who I respect, admire in the program. People who demonstrate that they 'have something I want'. Then I listen to what they say, and then I wrestle with God." She said, "You need to *recover* from your bout with cancer. And your restlessness is a need for solitude." Oh.

I had a couple goals when I left with Shortcast - to wrestle with God (solitude) and to complete the taper off narcotic pain medication. As I write this, after a long taper period, I am in my 3rd day of abstinence from oxycodone. I have done it faster than the doctors would have liked. But I had to get off it. The addict in me was fascinated that such a tiny little pill could make me feel SO much better. And the person in recovery worried about that. So when the actual physical pain in my throat and mouth became manageable, it was time to get off the medication. The combination of actively seeking God and withdrawing left me vulnerable. I cried a lot, probably more than I ever have. I am coming to terms with the cancer and the aggressive treatment for that cancer. I am coming to terms with the idea that I was dealt a much larger blow than I wanted to admit. Anyone remember the knight in Monty Python and the Holy Grail protecting the bridge? That is me. A severed arm lying on the ground is not a "flesh wound". This valley I am walking through is deep and long.

So on the beautiful shores of Cape Cod, did I find God? Oh yeah. Did He speak to me? Oh yeah, many times in many ways. Did He wrestle with me? Yes, and He won easily. He didn't hurt me; He just poured His love into me and let me cry. I think I needed a good long cry. And as I type this, I feel His love and cry some more. I am a mess. A kind of mess that He can use. I returned a changed man, changed for the better. My priorities became solidified. I'll talk a little about each one in reverse order.

5. Work. CCAR and recovery advocacy: God got me sober for a reason and my purpose in life is to serve the recovery community. I can think of no greater honor.

4. The newcomer: This is closely aligned with number 5. In the Preamble to Alcoholics Anonymous it says what my primary purpose should be - to stay sober and help other alcoholics achieve sobriety. I have resolved on a personal level to get more involved with my program of recovery. And maybe, just maybe, He may have plans for my recovery from cancer as well.

3. Family. Withdrawing from narcotic pain medication often results in anxiety. This is certainly the case with me. A friend told me on facebook that walks and showers help relieve the anxiety. I had my last dose while on the Cape (and to Arno and Russ, I am forever grateful). We were staying in Arno's house in Wellfleet, a place where my family had vacationed for 12 years, and I decided to take a walk to Duck Pond. This was ambitious. When I hit the tiny little parking lot on top of the hill, memories came flooding in. I saw little Joshua and Samantha, followed by their big sister Colleen, all carrying boogie boards and running down the hill. I was transported to a time 8 years earlier. I realized that I have been given a tremendous gift, 5 incredible children and being their dad has been an amazing blessing. I sat by the pond, tears streaming, thanking God and listening to His prompting. "Love them as I have loved you." Time with your children

is so short, isn't it? It also reinforced the idea that I speak about – there is no such thing as “quality time” with your kids, there is only quantity. It was a long walk back.

2. My wife, Sandy. I scribbled this down while taking a break from fishing. *“October 14, 2010. It's about 5 pm, sitting at the Mission Bell (fishing spot on the Back Beach) listening to Michael Buble's “Crazy Love”. The sun was behind the clouds and I was in prayer, just trying to feel His spirit, His answer. And I was surprised. He surprises me a lot. I was thinking of you, Sandy, and how much you love me. And I love you. The sun burst into an opening, lit up the beach and warmed my face. And it was simple. The answer (or one of the answers) is you. And the more I thought of it, thought of you, the more I cried. Tears of joy, of happiness, of love. God has granted me many things and blessed me beyond reason or merit. And the greatest of these is you and our marriage. I resolve to cherish our relationship even more. To know you, to serve you, to love you and to celebrate you has been a gift of a lifetime. Thank you for being my wife. I love you.”*

1. God and my recovery. Without God as the first priority, I run a high risk of losing everything else. This concept is nothing new in recovery circles. At one point when Arno and Russ were battling 50 mile an hour winds, and I was recuperating in the truck, the question that I had been afraid to ask finally, clearly, surfaced. The cancer treatment has worked exactly the way it is supposed to. No signs of any tumors. The chemo and radiation got it all. Yet, I wanted to know - God, are you going to make me go through cancer treatment again? Or in another words, is the cancer going to come back? Because God, if it does, I'm pretty sure I can't go through the treatment again. It's too hard. I can't do it. I cannot do it...

I am still crying as I write this, in the truck I sobbed. I know God loves me so much. I have put my life into His care. I love Him so much too. And my faith took another giant step forward as I tearfully came to the only conclusion for me...

I will, if You ask me to.

Hooked on Recovery is a monthly message from CCAR Executive Director Phillip Valentine, person in recovery since 12/28/87, devoted husband, father of five and just another surf fisherman. These thoughts, views and opinions reflect on his personal recovery and are not meant in any way to speak for the entire recovery community. He welcomes all your comments and suggestions on this column, email him at phillip@ccar.us. Visit the website at www.ccar.us to read the entire series.